Chapter 4

4 QUALITATIVE APPROACH

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will outline the qualitative data collection methods used, describe the analytic techniques employed as well as presenting the findings from this phase of the research study. The findings will be fully discussed with links to current literature identified in Chapter 1. The characteristics of the research participants have been outlined in Chapter 3 and therefore will not be repeated within this chapter.

4.2 DATA COLLECTION

I collected data from two cohorts over a period of three to four months for each cohort between 23rd April and 17th July 2009 (Cohort One) and 15th October 2009 and 5th February 2010 (Cohort Two). This exploratory qualitative study used two methods of data collection including semi-structured audio-taped interviews and a personal reflective diary. The semi-structured interviews were administered immediately pre training, post and following training at 12 weeks. The personal reflective diary was administered immediately after the training and then collected and used within the 12 week follow up interview.

These two methods of qualitative data collection were used to illuminate the experiences of foster carers, to gain a sense of change over time of each foster carer’s journey after receiving the training. The main method of qualitative data collection was that of semi-structured interviews and this was chosen in order to allow foster carers to tell their story in their own words and to uncover areas and ideas that were not anticipated at the beginning of the research (Pope & Mays, 2000). The diary method was also chosen to complement the data gathered in the final semi-structured interview and to capture foster carers’ reflections upon their
experiences since completing the training. This provided a more intimate record otherwise hidden, of a 12 week period of time, between the training and the final interview (Zimmerman & Weider, 1977). A detailed definition and description of both the personal reflective diaries and semi-structured interviews are explored below.

4.2.1 A DIARY INTERVIEW

A diary interview method complemented the data gathered within the interviews. Diaries are defined as records or logs of professional activities which enable people to record events thoughts feelings or observations as they go along acting as an aide memoir. There are many examples of studies that have used this method of data collection, for example, Burgess (1994) used food diaries within many of the research projects he conducted. Zimmerman and Weider (1977) in their study of cultures in America, used diaries as ‘an observational log’ which was maintained by participants and used as a basis for intensive interviewing; a similar approach was used within this research project. Diaries were given to foster carers at the end of the training programme to include both a free flow description sheet and a reflective section. The free flow description sheet was deliberately unstructured so they were free to write about events and feelings (identified by them) regarding their experience of this training and its impact, if any, on the child they care for. The reflective section was also unstructured and the foster carers were asked to reflect upon the knowledge, if any, they gained from the training. At the front of the diary a standard reminder informed each foster carer that the diaries would be collected prior to the final interview and used to explore their experiences further in the final interview. However, each foster carer was given the option of keeping the diary once the interview was completed. It was anticipated that the diaries would provide additional data by capturing foster carers’ reflections of experiences since completing training. The diaries also acted as an ‘aide memoire’ at the follow up interview and led to further exploration of any areas that seemed significant. This process converted the diary as a source of documentary data in its own right, into a question generating device.

There are ethical issues to be considered when using a diary interview method in
relation to the ‘extent of intrusion’ that is needed into a diary writer’s life in order to gain material that would otherwise be hidden (Burgess, 1994). Researchers have suggested that its completion can be a potentially ‘irritating process’ which takes considerable time and may lead to over-representativeness in that the very writing of the diary may modify the user’s behaviour (Oppenheim, 1992; Bell, 2005). Given such issues, I considered carefully the decision to use the diary method and felt that it was important to include diaries as a data collection method because of the importance of capturing the experiences of foster carers’ post training and in order to explore deeper meaning, particularly in the final interviews. To minimise intrusion, each foster carer was re-assured that the confidentiality of these diaries would be maintained. The disadvantages of the use of diaries were minimised as much as possible by ensuring the purpose of the diary was fully explained, reassuring participants that completion of the diary was optional as well as describing the purpose of the free flowing structure and the freedom to put in as much, or as little, as they were willing to share during the post training interview. Foster carers were also given the option of retaining the diary in order to retain ownership. A copy of the diary can be found in Appendix 15.

4.2.2 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

One-to-one interviews were chosen in preference to focus group interviews to maximise participation as foster carers lead very busy lives so it can be very difficult to bring groups of foster carers together. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at pre training, immediately post training and at follow up at 12 weeks. Semi structured interviews are defined as an interview within which the interviewer asks key questions and probes for further information (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003). Compared with unstructured interviews semi-structured interviews provided a more structured approach to interviewing to ensure the coverage of topics whilst allowing the foster carers the use of their own words in order to explore and discover new areas (French, 1993). The semi-structured interviews involved a number of broad questions around specific topic area giving me the opportunity to probe and clarify responses whilst encouraging each foster carer to take the lead and shape their own narrative (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).
4.2.2.1 INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The interviews were guided by the interview schedule, but were non-directive in order to allow the interviewee an opportunity to identify and explore issues. Key topic areas were based upon *a priori* knowledge that informed the aims and objectives of the study (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). An example of this was the desire to understand why the foster carers had chosen to attend the training.

An interview schedule was developed which guided the interview questions around the same topic areas and was used as an ‘aide memoire’ ensuring consistency in the collection of data. Arthur and Nazroo (2003) identify the importance of planning in order to explore key issues and subtopics. Inductive thinking occurred at different stages of this qualitative research process which related to foster carer’s experiences through the exploration of the motivations and expectations of foster carers as well as the reflections of the training upon the realities of being a foster carer. This gave me a deeper insight and better understanding of the foster carers’ feelings and reactions to the experience of receiving mental health training. I also had a sense of the topics from the review of recent literature and issues for foster carers having worked with many foster carers for a number of years. The aim was to enable the interview to be shaped by the interviewee and in order to gain original raw data from the carers, a ‘rivers and channel’ model was used (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This model encouraged me to use the schedule to identify the ‘river of themes’ within the responses and then to follow the ‘channels of connections’ wherever they led. I tried to maintain attention throughout all the interviews to ensure ‘active listening’ and encourage the sharing of stories. Three interview schedules were developed for the pre, post and follow up training interviews and are in Appendix 16.

4.2.2.2 PRE TRAINING INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The schedule contained an introduction which included instructions to the researcher as a reminder, to discuss: the aims of the project, ethical issues, what participation involved and to ensure I gained consent including permission to audiotape.
The interview schedule was divided into five main sections of the interview with the aim of exploring patterns and associations in order to understand the experiences of foster carers.

The first section focused upon the foster carer’s motivation to attend the training. It was hoped this would uncover a clearer understanding of their perception and enthusiasm for training as it currently remains voluntary. It was anticipated that exploring, through sensitive probing, might reveal a greater understanding of expectation, purpose and role of training. Section two covered the foster carer’s previous experience of training. It was hoped this might reveal an understanding of why they were motivated or unmotivated to attend and highlight previous experience or knowledge of training from the mental health services. Section three explored their individual needs and expectations from the group. It was hoped that this might reveal their current situation and how this related to their motivation to attend the group training. Section four probed further to explore any problems or anxieties about attending group training. Section five was an open section that was used to explore any other aspects of their experience that might be relevant to illuminate the experience. Finally a closure section was included, thanking the foster carer for their participation in the first stage and arranging a follow up appointment after the training.

4.2.2.3 POST TRAINING INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The schedule included further instructions for the researcher to outline the purpose of the post training interview and provide reassurance regarding the maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity. By this point in time, I felt a rapport was developing between us, as I had met the foster carers on two previous occasions during the pre-training interviews as well as throughout a two-day training programme and as a result they appeared more relaxed and willing to share personal stories.

The questions in this section were inductive, looking for patterns and associations, in order to collect information with the purpose of shedding new light upon the experience of training and covered five main sections as below:
Section one explored the foster carer’s experience of attending the group training. It was hoped this would provide information, in their own words, about the training, shed insight into the knowledge gained as well as how their perception or understanding, if any, of their child’s needs had changed. Section two focused upon how the group helped or supported the foster carers in any way. It was hoped to gain understanding of how the training might be helpful. Section three focused upon any difficulties the foster carers might have encountered and whether there would be anything that needed to change or be done differently. This related to the objective of gaining information about the strengths and weaknesses of the group and the areas that might need changing in order to shape the direction of future training. Section four aimed to explore whether their expectations of the training were met. It was hoped that this might reveal limitations in the training in terms of meeting the needs of foster carers. Section five further explored foster carer’s satisfaction with the whole training package. This was an open section within which further probing regarding content, environment, facilitation of the training might be revealed. A closure section thanking the foster carer for their involvement and setting a date for the 12 weeks follow up interview was included.

4.2.2.4 FOLLOW UP TRAINING INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Finally the follow up schedule for the twelve week follow up interview included an introduction, an assurance of confidentiality and a focus upon the purpose of the follow up interview. Throughout the data gathering, I reminded the foster carer of the support networks they could access throughout the process of this research project which included the learning development officer and their family placement social worker.

The topic guide was created with reference to the aims and objectives of the project, the questions were also inductive in nature and covered five main sections as below:

Section one focused upon whether attending the training had helped over the last twelve weeks. Again the question was open in order for the direction of the interview to come from the foster carer. It was hoped that a clearer understanding of their experiences over time would shed light upon their perception of how the group
had helped support the care, if at all, over the 12 weeks following training. Section two focused upon the ongoing support for foster carers from within the group. It was hoped this would reveal the amount of networking and peer support that was gained through the process of training. This would also help with the aim of focussing the direction of the foster carer in terms of support gained from attending a training group. Section three revisited the difficulties or changes that foster carers might recommend as a result of attending the training. It was hoped this might gain an understanding of their experience of this over time. Section four explored the foster carer’s expectations and satisfaction of the training. It was hoped that this might shed light on the strengths or limitations of the two-day training over time. Section five was an open question regarding any other issues the foster carer might have relevant to the research. Again the aim was to explore any additional issues they might want to discuss. A closure section included thanks to them for their participation and a reminder that reports would be sent out to each of them towards the end of 2011 to summarise the findings of the project. I informed the foster carers that academic supervisors may read a selection of the transcribed interviews to aid the thematic development and confirmation. I paid particular attention to leaving the foster carer in a positive frame of mind by valuing their contribution, time and commitment over the 12 week period.

4.2.2.5 VENUE

I carried out the interviews at a mutually convenient time and place for the foster carers. For the convenience of the foster carers, this included a combination of settings depending on their preference: either a training room within the local foster carers’ training centre, a clinic within the CAMHS setting or the foster carer’s home. Out of the 63 interviews that took place over the twelve week period 22 were in a clinic setting and 41 took place at home. Attention was paid to privacy when a clinic setting was chosen to avoid interruption with the use of a ‘do not disturb’ sign. To ensure a less formal atmosphere and encourage the foster carer to feel relaxed, I provided comfortable chairs and a small low coffee table to minimise the barrier between myself and the foster carer. I also offered a choice of seating so that they felt in control of where they sat in the room.
4.2.2.6 AUDIO RECORDING EQUIPMENT

A digital voice recording machine was used (Olympus VN5500) to record the interviews and aid the process of downloading the recording onto an encrypted Primary Care Trust (PCT) computer for transcription and analysis. This recording machine was selected because it had a built in microphone which was unobtrusive and which it was felt would minimise foster carers’ feeling self conscious and reduce their awareness of being recorded. I had spare batteries available at each interview to prevent the unnecessary loss of recorded data within the interview. Prior to commencing the interview, as a back-up, I tested the equipment by recording a short conversation and playing it back.

4.2.2.7 TRANSCRIPTIONS OF THE INTERVIEW RECORDINGS

The audio voice recordings were downloaded onto an encrypted computer system and were transcribed in full by an experienced audio typist using the Olympus DSS Player As2400 Transcription kit. I informed the foster carers that the interviews would be audio taped in order to accurately record what they were sharing and would be only listened to by myself and an administrative assistant. Transcription according to Pope and Mays (1996) and Bell (2005) is an immensely time consuming process and therefore due to time constraints, an administrative assistant was employed by the Primary Care Trust (PCT), to transcribe the digital recordings. The administrative assistant was bound by confidentiality within her every day practice and the data was stored within an encrypted file. The 63 transcripts were completed over a twelve month period between November 2009 and November 2010. Transcribing can be useful for the researcher to re-acquaint with the data (French, 1993), however, I felt that it was not practical for me to undertake this task due to time constraints. Instead, I tried to compensate for having missed this transcribing process by spending many hours listening to the recordings prior to receiving the transcribed interviews back in order to familiarise myself with the experience once again and begin to make sense of the data. Upon receiving the fully typed transcripts, I cross checked the original audio taped interviews and compared the recording with every transcript. I also added intonations and corrections, where possible, to the content which was lost due to poor sound and recording quality.
issues of some of the audio recordings. The text was then saved within a password protected word document file.

4.2.2.8 FIELD NOTES

Field notes are defined as a method of data collection which provides an opportunity to record what the researcher sees and hears through the process of interviewing including thoughts about the dynamics of the encounter and generation of ideas to inform future field work (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003). I used my field notes to capture my initial feelings and thoughts about the interview process and highlight interesting data and to inform thematic development (Ritchie & Lewis, 2009). My field notes were written in the form of rough notes and were typed up as soon as the interviews were completed. Again this information was stored securely, in a locked drawer and drawn upon to inform the development of initial themes and reflect on my feelings at the time of the interview.

4.2.2.9 REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Prior to audio taping foster carers at each interview, I started by verbally explaining the aims and objectives of each interview within the study. The results of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire were discussed as a ‘simple card technique’ with the foster carers after administration and prior to the first and last interview in order to provide a simple, reproducible and comprehensive way of talking about sensitive topics highlighted in the standardised questionnaires (Munroe et al, 1989). This technique enabled me to explore the unique difficulties for foster carers and appeared to prompt more detailed accounts of situations they encountered. I conducted all the interviews myself and used Whyte’s Directiveness Scale (Whyte, 1982) for analysing my interview technique on the first two interviews by listening to the interview and reflecting upon my style. It confirmed my use of open non-leading questions and also helped me to gain awareness of how I sometimes rushed ahead and as a result may have missed some areas within which to probe further. I tried to address this at subsequent interviews. I believe my interview approach was sensitive and open and foster carers appeared to be comfortable sharing and exploring their unique experiences (Edwards & Talbot, 1994).
4.2.2.10 PARTICIPANT VALIDATION OF THE INTERVIEWS

According to Lewis and Ritchie (2003) the validity of findings is traditionally understood to refer to the correctness or precision of the research reading. The validity in this context refers to validity of representation, understanding and interpretation. I felt it was important to accurately reflect the views of the foster carers and therefore I wanted to clarify with the foster carers that the verbatim transcripts reflected their views in full. As I did not receive the written verbatim transcripts of the interviews until November 2009 due to a three month delay in transcribing post initial interviews (lack of administration support and resource constraints on purchasing transcription equipment), I began a preliminary thematic analysis using the audio recordings and read a summary of this through with the foster carers prior to the subsequent interview. The foster carers were given the option of receiving the full written verbatim transcripts once transcribed which could be made available up to November 2010 in order to have the opportunity to add, delete or change anything. In addition, each foster carer was offered the option of a visit from me to clarify the transcripts at any time, however nobody requested such a visit. Many of the foster carers reported that they were very busy and already felt overloaded with record keeping within their profession and opted for a verbal discussion of previous interviews prior to the next one. All the foster carers accepted the summary outlines and did not request a copy of the verbatim transcripts but instead requested an executive summary or full version of the final research report.

4.2.2.11 VALIDITY

An additional step was undertaken to ensure transparency of the data analysis process. I conducted all of the interviews and the subsequent independent analysis, however, each of my academic supervisors used the initial coding framework to independently code two foster carers’ complete data sets of pre, post and follow up interviews. A critical discussion followed regarding the coding category for the ‘motivation to attend’ theme in order to account for and separate the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and the ‘previous personal experience’ and ‘work experience’ sub-categories. The coding framework was discussed alongside transcripts and
differences were debated until final agreement was decided upon. I took account of
the suggested changes, re-visited the framework and then recoded the remaining
interviews (Bell, 2005). Involving more than one researcher in the coding stage
addressed reliability issues of the coding categories and aided the transparency of
decisions made.

4.3 DATA ANALYSIS

4.3.1 DIARY INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

All 21 foster carers agreed to fill in a diary however, only six completed them. This
consisted of four foster carers from Cohort One and two foster carers from Cohort
Two. An interpretive approach to analyzing the data was used based on thematic
content analysis with key themes that arose from the analysis explored and
discussed in the final interview with six foster carers. Thematic content analysis is a
descriptive presentation of qualitative data that identifies the frequency of themes
that emerged from the reflective section within the diary.

4.3.1.1 DIARY INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Data were collected across the 12 week period. The data captured was limited and
the diary entries minimal. However, the diaries did capture six foster carers’
reflections of experiences with their individual foster children following completion
of training. There were three common themes identified as follows: (1) five foster
carers felt they had gained more understanding of their foster child’s emotions,
(2) three foster carers had gained personal insights and (3) four foster carers gave
examples of putting new knowledge into practice following training.

The individual diaries were used as both a question generating devise in the follow
up interviews and acted as an ‘aide memoire’ at the follow up interviews to lead to
further exploration of any areas that seemed relevant to discuss in more detail.
4.3.2 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

4.3.2.1 FRAMEWORK APPROACH

An interpretive approach to analyzing the qualitative data was adopted using the *Framework Approach* to aid, thematic content analysis. The framework approach which “was developed during the 1980’s at the National Centre for Social Research” (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994, cited by Ritchie et al, 2003, p.220) was selected because it uses a matrix-based analytical method to provide a systematic way of managing the data which is considered rigorous. The framework approach to the analysis enabled me to both systematically describe, as well as interpret, significant units of meaning from a large body of data in order to illuminate and shed light upon the experiences of foster carers. The indexing process was useful in developing a coding system, which enabled key themes to emerge as well as providing a systematic approach to sorting codes into smaller interpretive units. I chose this method because, although I wanted to pursue an open minded and exploratory approach to uncover the uniqueness of the foster carer’s experience of mental health training, *framework method* is designed so that others as well as the primary researcher can view the analytical process and the ongoing interpretations. I found the ability to record as well as graphically display reduced and synthesised data (which could be traced back to its original source) was a particular strength of this approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 2004). However, it still allowed emergent ideas and concepts to be captured so that the analysis of the data remained grounded in the original text. It was important that I did not become blinded by the framework but that it enabled, rather than restricted, the sorting of and interpretation of the data.

This approach was also considered a more appropriate method to analyse the data as it also permits both deductive and inductive questions to be explored, unlike other more philosophical approaches to qualitative data (Richie et al, 2003). My analysis started deductively from the aims and objectives already identified for the study which were to explore the experiences of foster carers attending the training, to evaluate the knowledge gained, to identify strengths and weaknesses of the training whilst allowing inductive questioning to arise from the data. This study will
contribute to policy relevant research and therefore suits an applied qualitative method, as thorough evidence of the analysis would be useful. This would also cover issues such as the rigour, openness, reliability and validity of the decisions made within this analytical process.

4.3.2.2 STAGES OF DATA ANALYSIS

The key features of the framework approach when analyzing qualitative data involve five stages which are outlined below and presented within Table 15.

Table 15: Five Stages of Data Analysis adapted from Pope & Mays 2000 (p.86)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><strong>Familiarization process</strong>: The researcher immerses themselves in the raw data by listening to tapes, reading transcripts and studying reflective notes. Initial notes are made following the interview regarding the topics discussed (to act as a record and reminder of emerging ideas and hypothesis). Individual transcripts from interviews are read through (immerses the researcher in the data to aid integrity and validity of process). Thematic summaries of the content of the interviews are noted and a list key ideas and recurrent themes are created.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td><strong>Identifying a thematic framework</strong>: The researcher identifies all the key issues, concepts and themes. The emerging themes from the data are selected and linked, such as issues raised by the respondents and experiences and views that recur in the data, with the overall aims and objectives of the study. A detailed index of data which labels the data into manageable sections can be retrieved from the data and explored.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td><strong>Indexing/Refining the data</strong>: A categorisation of the data as themes are sorted and labelled. A hierarchy of themes and sub themes from the text is important. Cross sectional codes in which a system of categories can be applied. This may enable comparisons and connections. Use the audit trail to note the process of the refinements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td><strong>Charting/Retaining data in context</strong>: Each main theme is displayed in a chart allocating a row to each respondent and a column denoting a separate subtopic. This rearranges the data using a matrix format and retains the links to the original data which is important when revisiting the original data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td><strong>Mapping and interpretation</strong>: Data from each case is synthesised into the framework. Associations between themes are used to explain findings. Links to literature and actual quotes aid an actual reflection and interpretation of data collected. It is important that the researcher is explicit in how their views are developed through an audit-trail.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These stages of analysis provided guidance and a thorough way of analysing the data. During the qualitative data analysis I needed to be very patient and pay attention to the data whilst having a clear mind. My aim was to find themes and patterns amongst the endless detail and therefore what follows is a description of how I dealt with the rich voluminous data in practice.

4.3.2.3 STAGE ONE: FAMILIARISATION

This is the stage that involves reading the transcriptions and re-experiencing the interviews. My first task was to manage the mass of material I had gathered in the form of field notes, hours of digital recordings and pages of interview transcripts. Firstly, I listened to the recordings as soon as I could after the interviews took place and this allowed me to immediately re-experience the interviews. The tapes were re-run and listened to in order to identify core ideas and concepts, stories and themes within the data; at the same time asking questions and comparing statements within the data (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This aided the process of familiarisation giving me time to immerse myself in the data.

I also re-read the proposal and the objectives of the study which included exploring the experiences of the foster carers attending the training and gaining an understanding of the knowledge gained by the participants. In addition, I re-examined the sample population in order to have a broader understanding of the richness of the data in terms of foster carers’ individual circumstances and characteristics. This foundation was crucial in order to ensure integrity and validity of the process. I had intended to review the transcripts as soon as possible after the interviews however, the initial full transcripts of the interviews were not completed for three months after the first interview and therefore field notes made at the time of the interviews were useful in enabling me to clarify some statements of meaning within the interview. The process of re-listening and eventually reading the transcripts led to the identification of recurring themes (Table 12). Memos were used to record my ideas about emergent themes, understand the questions that connected the data and make a note of what to explore further. Straus and Corbin (1990) suggest using labels to code notes and this was useful when reading transcripts later and preparing the data for analysis. I included simple terms to
describe the codes with notes on their meaning in order to understand why I had chosen each code when I re-read the transcript in the future. I also recorded the date I created each code. This process of labelling, sorting and synthesising, brought yet deeper familiarisation with the available data (Ritchie et al, 2003).

4.3.2.4 STAGE TWO: IDENTIFYING A THEMATIC FRAMEWORK

This stage involved identifying recurring themes and ideas and linking these to a conceptual framework. The concepts of the framework approach drew upon issues introduced from a priori knowledge of the aims of the study in the topic guide and a review of the literature. This led to the beginnings of categories and sub categories when developing a framework. The eventual reading of the transcripts enabled further development of ideas and recurrent themes and codes were placed in the text. Corrections and explanatory notes were made separately and cross references between initial themes were made.

An analysis of the field notes which were set out as an observational and reflective diary also enabled me to develop an initial list of themes and concepts from the first pre training interviews. Table 16 provides an example of this which is also noted in the audit trail (see Appendix 22)

Table 16: Observational and Reflective field notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observational/ Reflective field notes:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Field notes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal Chat:</strong> Thanked X for agreeing to take part, introduction, aims of project, role as researcher and trainer, discussed involvement and confirmed consent and ethical issues. Aware a little nervous about first interview. Read over notes made in practice runs with colleague. Reminded myself to leave ample time for participants to feed back and slow down questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initial Thoughts:</strong> Aware that foster carer is nervous. Gave reassurance and used humour. Self motivated to improve knowledge and positive attitude to seeking out training. No previous training. Spoke about own experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflection on initial recurring themes:</strong> Knowledge, learning the steps. Expecting benefits. Communication with children. High expectations of support needed. Interested in topic area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Links to wider issues:</strong> Guidance from learning and development led through skills to foster programme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role of Nurse Facilitator:</strong> No previous contact with this foster carer. No questions related to my role.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key themes such as ‘motivation’ and ‘expectations’ were indexed and allocated codes which were tagged to the data in the transcripts; for example, code 2.1 was tagged to any interview where by what was said reflected the sub theme ‘advised by other’ and included subcategories such as ‘family members’. Key ideas and initial themes were identified and combinations of lists of possible indexes were explored. Table 17 shows an initial example of the chronological log relating to the types of themes developed within the pre-training interviews. This process was repeated for all ten themes and details of this are in the audit trail. The initial index of first theme ‘Motivation’ was altered to include the CWDC training portfolio as a separate subcategory.

Table 17: Initial index of themes for pre-intervies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
<th>Associations/ Clustering</th>
<th>Explanations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Advised by others.</td>
<td>CWDC folder, Carers Family placement.</td>
<td>Extrinsic motivations clustered together.</td>
<td>Beginning of journey. Care Standards act. Peer Group pressure. Supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Self motivated</td>
<td>Attended training before.</td>
<td>Intrinsic motivations clustered together.</td>
<td>Previous experience. Updates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Reflection Experiences from own family or children or Carers with and without experience.</td>
<td>Need for more training. Promote advocacy. Importance of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Awareness of own history.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>---------</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Update on research. Refresh recall prior knowledge.</td>
<td>Professional carers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Previous support</td>
<td>Percentage of good and bad experiences. Learn from other carers.</td>
<td>Carers with experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Labels were used to translate the transcripts into manageable chunks for exploration (Pope & Mays, 2000). ‘Post it’ notes were used to sort and re-sort the themes and sub themes until the index was created. Each interview was analysed in turn to enable me to compare and contrast the text responses. When I felt all data had been accounted for and there were no new themes emerging, text strings were identified which encapsulated meaning (Van Manen, 1997).

4.3.2.5 STAGE THREE: INDEXING

This stage involved the categorisation of the data. Themes and topics emerging from the data were described in terms that stayed close to the language used in the data set. The index created a conceptual framework which was drawn up by reviewing each interview transcript and listing, then sorting the themes into clusters of higher order categories for example the initial category ‘the desire to gain knowledge’ from pre interviews, was sorted into the higher order category of ‘expectations’ as part of the audit trail. This enabled me to ‘hold’ an overall structure in my head and provided an initial structure for organising the data (Ritchie et al, 2003). Once the index had been constructed, numbers and textual terms were tagged and attached to the theme or sub theme for example ‘expectation’ now relabelled as a higher order category became the second theme to arise from the pre training interviews and was tagged 2.2. Under this higher order category, the subcategory was assigned a descriptive code, for example, ‘knowledge’ became the first sub theme and was tagged with a unique serial code such as 2.2.1. The second subcategory was assigned the description ‘support from network’ and was tagged 2.2.2. All of the themes were defined in a similar approach and the raw data was coded with the unique serial codes as described above. Short sentences or passages of the text could encompass many themes which had to be recorded in the margin of the text. I was able to make note of any interconnected themes when index numbers were repeated surfacing in the text. In addition I initiated a colour coding system for each descriptive term, for example ‘knowledge’ was coded purple and ‘support from the network’ was coded dark blue. This standardised referencing system was used to aid the cataloguing of data and led to the rigorous quality of the analysis. Figure 13 gives an example of how the indexing process of the numbers, colour coded textual terms led to the development of charts in the pre training interviews.
4.3.2.6 STAGE FOUR: CHARTING

This stage involved rearranging the data using a matrix format and retaining data in its original context. Charts, as described in Figure 13, were formed and data were placed in the section they related to. Each main theme and its related sub topics were identified in a separate chart. The unique coding system of the charts provided a link between the data and the original text as all the transcripts were re-visited and relevant quotes were cut and pasted into the charts ensuring they could be traced back to the original text. An example of the charts can be found in Appendix 18. Care was taken to follow guidelines outlined by Ritchie et al (2003) to ensure the delicate balance between under-condensing the data which could lead to providing so much data that the reader is unable to see clearly what the theme refers to, or conversely, over-condensing the data leading to a lack of richness in the data. For each excerpt of foster carer speech used, a page line reference was allocated from the verbatim transcription and was used for cross-referencing. Each foster carer was assigned a particular row on the chart which remained consistent on every chart and
provided a systematic approach, as it was necessary to go back to the original transcription on many occasions, for further investigation or refinement of the thematic analysis. Original verbatim excerpts provided the original language of each interview and were identified by the use of quotations. Once the whole data set had been indexed, each theme was revisited in order to identify relationships between the different themes and subtopics within the data, a process referred to by Ritchie and Lewis (2003) as ‘distilling the evidence’.

4.3.2.7 STAGE FIVE: MAPPING AND INTERPRETATION

The final stage involved mapping the range and nature of the phenomenon and identifying associations between views, in order to explain the findings (Pope & Mays, 2000). This was a combination of research aims and the themes that emerged from the data. According to Green (2004) the importance of using diagrams and tables to physically explore the relationships and associations between the concepts is paramount. Ritchie and Lewis (2004) refer to this as the ‘real’ task of analysis. I found the framework enabled an ordered approach to viewing the themes so that dimensions, features and categories were identified. In addition, the lateral dimension of the matrix helped me to identify patterns and associations within the data and I began to develop explanatory accounts by being able to look across a series of concepts over a range of cases. Appendix 19 provides a photograph of how the charts were placed together for cross-referencing.

MAPPING THE RANGE

Mind mapping was used as a technique in order to pull together associations and explanations for themes and provided a visual ‘viewing platform’ within which I could explore connections within the categories and themes through a trajectory of experience over time. Figure 14 demonstrates an example of theme one and Figure 15 shows a photograph of theme nine as originally drawn. Buzan (1995) describes this mind mapping technique as a way of using both the left and right side of the brain in short bursts in order to process information. I found this process enabled me to hold an overall structure in my mind of all the themes. A separate sheet of paper was used to categorise different elements of the phenomenon or theme which
enabled the similarities and differences to become clearer and I also considered the relevance of the data analysis with that of the research aims. Please refer to Appendix 20 for a copy of this process for all themes I discovered.

Figure 14: Mind Map of Theme 1: ASSOCIATIONS/EXPLANATIONS

Figure 15: Photograph of a Mind Map of Theme Nine in the original format
In addition, a central chart was used which displayed a mixture of demographic data and classifications developed in the descriptive stage of analysis. Figure 16 is a photograph which shows a section of the central chart. This chart was developed to record the journey that all foster carers appeared to have travelled through and also aided the process of reflection and interpretation of the data (see Appendix 21 for a photograph of the full central chart). This was shared with supervisors to aid transparency and although this was not part of the framework approach it was useful in providing a sense of the whole of the data set. This process of detection within a theme involved looking at the themes across all the cases and identifying broader associations within and between themes which helped in the presentation of the findings.

**Figure 16: Photograph of a section of the central chart**

**INTERPRETATION**

This broader investigation of the categories and themes led to identification of further associations. Once associations were identified it was then necessary to explore why they existed. The meaning of the associations was explored as some explanations given were of an implicit nature, for example, those that were derived from the data, not actually spoken, but from the ‘gist’ of what was said. Others were of an explicit nature those, for example, that were actual quotes from the foster
carers themselves. An example of this is the association regarding the high percentage of foster carers who were self motivated to attend the training through a combination of work experience and a desire to understand the child they were caring for. This was interesting as I wondered about the relationship between the extrinsic aspects of their motivation to attend training as a result of new legislation.

**AUDIT TRAIL**

A step by step audit trail was completed which provides an overview of the stages of data analysis together with the rationale and actions as part of a systematic and transparent audit trail (see Appendix 22).

The use of a mixed methodology was time consuming and needed administrative support and this delayed the interpretation of the data due the length of time needed to transcribe the 63 interviews. This however led to a slower process of analysing the data which may have had the added advantage within the familiarisation stage of the framework approach as there was a need for the researcher to listen and re-listen to the tapes. There was a risk that data overload could swamp the process and lead to difficulties in the analysis such as an oversimplification of participants’ views or a de-contextualising of the meaning within the data. The systematic use of the framework approach supported this process using a rigorous coding and labelling system which was made explicit. In addition, the methodology used has been described and illustrated clearly enabling the interpretation to be as transparent as possible through the audit trail.

**4.4 FINDINGS FROM THE QUALITATIVE DATA**

The themes that arose were the most dominant themes which also related to the aims and objectives of the study. Themes across the two cohorts were very similar and therefore they were combined for the purpose of exploring the themes in more detail. The themes presented follow a chronological sequence, in keeping with the longitudinal remit of this study and are illustrated with verbatim extracts from the interviews. The quotes used were those that were the best fit in relation to the theme they are representing. Definitions of all the themes are outlined in Table 18.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. 1 Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 2 Expectation of training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 3 Sharing experiences of other carers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 4 Knowledge gained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 5 Format</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 6 Personal Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 7 Understanding Emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 8 Personal Insights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 9 Parenting Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 10 Experience of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The intrinsic or extrinsic incentive that arouses the foster carer into action towards their desired goal of attending mental health training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The act of looking forward to an event that is about to happen. This may include the prospect of the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The exposure of the foster carers to the training and how the active participation of other carers in the training contributed to their reflection or interpretation of the training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The theoretical or practical understanding of the training and their ability to use this for a purpose. The expertise or skills acquired through the experience of education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The organisation of the training which includes the material, facilitation or layout of the training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounts of how the training led to subsequent reflection upon the foster carers own personal histories, levels of stress and social connectedness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers' comprehend the needs of children in care in relation to their psychological mood, temperament, personality and disposition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers’ private feelings about how the training has led to insight or understanding of children in their care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The process by which children are reared. Promoting the skills needed to help children become healthy adults.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the foster carers experienced attending specific</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advised to attend, self motivation, training portfolio, previous personal experience, previous work experience and desire to understand the child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge, support from network, understanding mental health, experienced and new carers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing the experiences of other carers, CAMHS support, and networking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased understanding, underpins practice, emotions behind behaviours and parenting skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content, atmosphere, handouts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing stress, personal histories and isolation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health issues, emotions behind the behaviours, knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support, insight/awareness, impact upon the home impact upon the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence, parenting in practice, activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health support and training needs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.4.1 DISCOVERY OF THEMES

The aim of the qualitative research was to explore what it was like for foster carers to attend mental health training. I was interested to know how they experienced coming together as a group to learn new knowledge. How did they perceive the needs of their child after the training? What could they share about the current and future training needs? In Figure 17 the findings from this exploration have been set within a conceptual framework I developed which portrays the interconnectedness of the experience of training and knowledge over time and represents the links with various theoretical perspectives regarding how adults learn (Knowles, 1998). This overarching journey of experience as portrayed in Figure 17 sets out the 10 themes gained from the qualitative data as foster carers ‘started out’ with a mixture of motivations, hopes and expectations, ‘travelled through’ the training process and shared their immediate reactions before finally ‘moving on’ over the 12 weeks to digest what they had experienced, reflect upon the skills they had gained and share a sense of self actualisation and a deeper understanding of these experiences (Knowles, 1973).
OVER-ARCHING JOURNEY FOR FOSTER CARERS EXPERIENCING MENTAL HEALTH TRAINING

10 THEMES AND CONNECTIONS, ASSOCIATIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

Figure 17: Conceptual framework
A copy of this framework in the original format is shown in the photograph in Figure 18.

Figure 18 Photograph: Mind Map of Conceptual Framework in Original Format

The ‘starting out’ phase refers to the beginning of the journey and reveals the first two themes, that of motivation and expectation. The ‘travelling through’ phase describes the immediate reactions expressed by foster carers after the training in the post training interviews. This includes the findings from themes three, four, five and six which were sharing experiences, knowledge, format and personal issues. Finally the ‘moving on’ phase refers to the findings that surfaced at the end of their journey and includes themes seven, eight, nine, and ten which were emotional needs, personal insights, parenting skills and CAMHS support.

Verbatim quotes have been selected that best illustrate and provide the richest examples of the theme or sub category described. For each theme, there is a description accompanied by illustrative quotes. However, in some instances, the quotes used have been reduced in content, indicated by dotted lines, to remove utterances or irrelevant content so as to best illustrate the theme described, whilst retaining its essence.
4.4.2 STARTING OUT: PRE TRAINING THEMES

Within theme one, four subcategories emerged which were later further broken down into six: self motivation, previous personal experience, advised to attend, training portfolio, previous work experience and desire to understand the child. Within theme two, five sub-categories emerged: knowledge, support from network, understanding mental health, experienced and new foster carers.

4.4.2.1 THEME ONE: Motivations

This theme describes the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that led foster carers to attend the group training. The theme of motivation was broken down into intrinsic motivations and extrinsic motivations and these are explored below:

Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivations can be defined as those features that come from within for example, our need for approval, our curiosity to learn, our need to feel safe (Reiss, 2000). These are referred to within the subcategories; ‘self motivated’ and ‘personal experiences’.

Self motivated

The majority of foster carers (18) perceived that training was voluntary and were self motivated to attend. This was a high percentage of the two cohorts (n=21). Three of those commented further regarding the need for training to be mandatory as they felt that it was difficult to understand the benefits of the training unless you had attended the course. However one experienced female foster carer who had facilitated training herself in a previous job expressed an awareness that the dynamics of the group may alter if the course was made compulsory, as at present, the majority of the foster carers wanted to be there.
In total 16 out of 21 foster carers had not attended the training before. All five of the foster carers who had attended before were very self-motivated and clear about their need to update and refresh their knowledge and understanding of the emotional needs of the children they care for. A female foster carer who had attended the course three years ago described how this experience had sparked a curiosity within her to learn more. She described feeling more confident as a result of sharing her knowledge with others and was excited and motivated to attend again in order to keep up to date with ‘what’s new’ in current research.

“…to update everything really, I did think from the original training I learnt so much….seeing if anything has changed with that would be a great insight for me.”
P14 Line 17-23

A total of 19 foster carers commented upon being self motivated due to a number of reasons. Many of the foster carers referred to becoming a better foster carer, wanting to improve their understanding. A female foster carer, who was new to fostering, but previously held a professional role in relation to children in care, described difficulties gaining mental health advice when a child in their care had depression. She spoke with sadness and frustration about the helplessness she felt at not knowing how to access help from CAMHS. As a result she was highly motivated by an intrinsic desire to understand more about attachment relationships and the quote below revealed her passionate desire to learn more.

“I have noticed that most people don’t understand attachment and if we lose that then nothing can be done! Because attachment to many people and to me means different things but if I can get the training now to help me with what I want to know about attachment and expand my knowledge it can be very helpful to me!”
P10 Line 13-17
Previous personal experience

Motivation varied with regard to previous personal experiences. In total seven foster carers came into the training hoping that they might understand various aspects of their own personal history. A male I interviewed who was training to become a foster carer had a real grasp of how easy it could be for children to enter care through no fault of their own. He spoke with a real sense of empathy for children in terms of their lack of control over people and events and described his own experiences: the loss of a significant attachment figure which had led to him moving from relative to relative as a child. This had led to a motivation to understand how to support other children.

“My own personal experience as a child, I can actually see how certain life patterns have emerged because of what happened to me as a kid.”
P24 Line 252-254

Another male foster carer whose family had fostered when he was a child was aware of his need to do things differently for children that were placed with him. Increased awareness of his own childhood and personal experiences had led to his desire to avoid repeating the patterns of parenting he had received. This intrinsic motivation to ‘make a difference’ was expressed throughout his pre training interview.

“I can avoid the situation I had as a child with my own children and also other children.”
P1 Line 75

Extrinsic motivation

Extrinsic motivations can be defined as those motivations that have an external feature for example: codes of practice, incentives in terms of financial gain,
qualifications. These are referred to as the subcategories; ‘advised by others’, ‘training portfolio’ and ‘desire to understand children’.

**Advised by others**

A total of nine foster carers were motivated to attend the training through the advice they received from the Learning and Development Officer (LDO). The LDO co-ordinated their training through the process of the ‘skills to foster’ programme that was part of their induction and assessment. A female foster carer was advised to attend by another foster carer who had attended previously. Another foster carer who had many years experience found the support she gained from discussing the training with the training co-ordinator and family placement social worker had proved invaluable. She appeared to have a very informal and relaxed experience of contacting other professionals to advise and guide her. The role of the LDO was referred to as an important one by a further eight foster carers. In total three foster carers referred to the process of identifying potential training through the training calendar and three were contacted directly by the LDO describing her approach as very much ‘keeping in touch’ and ‘letting us know about useful training’.

“….so whenever something comes up I usually discuss it with our training co-ordinator (LDO) or she tells us things that are about it”
P16 Line 18-19

**Training Portfolio**

In total four foster carers mentioned that they were motivated by their desire to complete their Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) folder. This folder includes standards to support training and development of foster carers in England. In April 2008, changes regarding the measurement of competences were changed. All seven standards are now in place and the attachment training provides 19 competences to post training approval. A male foster carer appeared to feel strongly that evidence should be provided to prove your ability to become a foster carer. He was a highly skilled professional and stressed the importance of
developing the personal skills to ensure he could provide a child with a good chance of having a substitute family. This foster carer expressed his views firmly when speaking about the rules and regulations regarding being a foster carer and the requirement to meet the minimum standards required.

“\textit{I suppose it is similar to being a parent but there’s so much to it obviously with different rules and regulations. And yes you should have to do the relevant courses to meet the minimum standards that they require.}”

P22 Line 69-71

Another male foster carer referred to the portfolio as an incentive to attend training due to the time limitation imposed on completing the folder which was one year post fostering. He felt being time bound was useful as it gave him boundaries around which to complete the training and prompted him to take action sooner.

“\textit{…you have a book that you have to prove….you have got to tick them off, there are different elements of the book to become a foster carer. I know you’ve got a year to do it in ….}”

P23 Line 69-72

\textbf{Previous work experience}

In total 13 of the 21 foster carers referred to their previous work experiences as foster carers, residential workers and social workers, as being a key motivating factor for attending the training. Previous experience of this training course had helped one female foster carer maintain a placement of a young person who presented with attachment difficulties. She appeared to be very emotional when talking about the difficulties she had encountered and how the training had helped her to reflect upon how to parent him differently.
Foster carers also referred to their previous contact with CAMHS as supporting practice and giving them confidence. A female foster carer who had previously worked in a women’s refuge was motivated to attend in order to learn about how to access support from CAMHS. She felt this was important to be prepared and well informed due to previous experiences of waiting lists within CAMHS and help being offered too late.

“….Unfortunately there was always a long waiting list…then children needed help immediately but a six month waiting list was not much help.”

Desire to understand children

The majority of foster carers (17) interviewed in the pre training interview discussed their desire to understand their child’s behaviour as a key motivating factor for attended attachment training. Many expressed an enthusiasm and eagerness to learn more which opened my eyes as a trainer to the vast range of experiences they had and the importance of getting this training right for these foster carers.

“I feel as though I need to learn an awful lot more about different circumstances and illness and to make me more aware of things actually.”

“I think it’s quite important that children and young people form good attachments. So it’s getting the skills to do that.”
Foster carers wanted to learn new techniques or confirm existing ones in order to manage difficult behaviours presented by their children. They wanted tips on how to promote good attachment relationships and information about what is available in the community to support them in the future.

“Knowing what I can do to help and other professionals that I can point the children in the right direction.”
P 2 Line 44-45

Foster carers who had attended the training previously wanted to know whether there had been any changes since the last training.

“ It’s a refresher to keep up with the changes in policy and procedures and those sort of things which change quite often as new research comes out.”
P6 Line 33-35

In summary then, foster carers who attended attachment training, expressed a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motivational factors. Foster carers who expressed intrinsic incentives such as: a curiosity to learn, a desire to keep up to date with research, a commitment to address their own personal experiences of attachment, seemed to take ownership of their need for self development.

Foster carers who expressed extrinsic incentives such as advice and encouragement from their peers, completion of their training portfolio, guidance from their LDO, attendance on the skills to foster programme and a desire to understand their child’s needs, all seemed to have a desire to professionalise foster care, to raise standards of foster carers and expressed a need for mandatory training.

There were a core group of experienced foster carers in both cohorts who attended regular updates in order to keep abreast of national research. This group expressed
the desire to gain increased knowledge and understanding of mental health, of their children and of their own self awareness.

There was also a significant number of new foster carers in both groups who appeared motivated to attend the attachment training as a result of attending an introductory programme facilitated by the LDO called ‘Skills to Foster’. They were eager to fill in their portfolios and learn from others and use the group as a way of networking. Their enthusiasm for learning seemed to have been stimulated by the core training.

4.4.2.2 THEME TWO: Expectations

This theme refers to fosters carers’ thoughts and feelings regarding the planned training course on attachment. There were a wide range of different expectations depending upon the experience of the foster carers. In total five subcategories emerged which included; gaining knowledge, gaining support from the network through the training, an understanding of mental health issues for children in care. Specific expectations in relation to new or experienced foster carers were split into two cluster groups.

Gaining Knowledge

Just over half of the group, 13 foster carers referred to gaining knowledge as an important expectation of the group. This ranged from an expectation to increase their personal knowledge base in relation to: mental health, to gaining an understanding about different systems within social care, to understanding the unique experiences of the child they cared for.

“I mean I just wanna learn more really, I mean nobody can stop learning can they, more knowledge or the more every child has a different experience, you know a different experience to deal with”
P4 76-78
A female foster carer who had attended the training on two previous occasions referred to an expectation of developing a sense of ‘knowing’ an instinctive response, something that may become internalised and hopefully, leading to an almost ‘automatic’ response in parenting skills. She had cared for many children in the past and felt that the knowledge she had gained by repeating the training had helped her to develop a way of therapeutically parenting, which she felt had worked. She expected the training to include examples of therapeutic models of parenting and a discussion about what works for children with mental health difficulties.

“I want it to be natural to know this information, if you get enough of the information and get the information over and over again it builds up and becomes natural to you because you just know it rather than going back to look in a book all the time.”

P5 Line 70-73

Understanding the terminology regarding mental health issues was also raised by one new foster carer. He had an expectation that the training would define many of the mental health labels that had been written in reports regarding the children he cared for. He expressed frustration that diagnostic labels used were difficult to understand and as a result he was not sure how to help his foster child.

“To also know exactly terms that are used in attachment…..to give me the knowledge and skills that can be helpful”

P10 Line 66-69

Support from the network

Just under half of the foster carers (nine) commented upon the need for support from the network as one of their main expectations from the group training. Their expectations reflected a desire to build up a sense of peer relationships and support.
A female foster carer spoke about how isolating it can be when fostering. She had previously fostered a child with severe mental health difficulties and had found she had no network of support. She described how she had attended courses in the past and gained telephone numbers from other foster carers and this has helped in times of crisis. Another female foster carer described the loneliness she had felt in the past when she lacked adequate peer support.

New foster carers placed an importance and value in sharing experiences with more experienced foster carers. Many foster carers talked about a sense that it is good to ‘hear you are not the only one who has difficulties’. This sense of community among foster carers was reflected across all levels of carers, new and experienced carers. A need for a buddying system in training was also referred to.

**Understanding of Mental Health**

In total 13 out of 21 foster carers talked about expecting to receive information about mental health issues. They had read the training programme in the training calendar and expected to learn about how healthy and unhealthy attachment
relationships are formed and repaired and how to identify disruptions within attachment patterns. A female foster carer talked about how their attendance on the course had increased her confidence and ‘feel good factor’ and how this had previously helped them to know how to deal with the emotional and mental health difficulties of her child.

“*Well it helped me, obviously understand the children a bit more and the way they behaved and I got a lot out of that…… and I went away and felt better about myself, you know how to deal with children with mental health issues.*”

P4 Line 56-62

The training programme had also outlined that by the end of the course they would be able to devise strategies to repair and establish healthy attachments. Some foster carers wanted to broaden their awareness and expected to gain insight and understanding of extreme behaviours in children and challenges.

“*..expect help with young people sometimes we have with extreme learning difficulties and behavioural problems*”

P20 Line 60-61

Another female foster carer who was new to fostering was expecting the training to help her challenge her own prejudices about mental health. She spoke about her experiences raising a young girl who was severely traumatised in another country. She had dismissed advice regarding accessing mental health services in the past and she now reflected upon the mistakes she felt she had made. She wanted to change her own practice and expected to gain insight into different ways of helping support the mental health needs of children.

“*Now to be a foster carer will give me another experience and also it will contribute to my experiences and my prejudices.*”
New Foster Carers

For many of the eight new foster carers their current knowledge of mental health issues and attendance at previous training was limited and therefore their expectations of the group were less prominent.

“This is the first bit of help actually received.”

They expected to have answers to their questions regarding the attachment needs of children that they might care for. In addition, two foster carers expected to gain an understanding of how to access the mental health services in the future. A male foster carer who was new to fostering expected to have support through training and wanted to know what follow up support might come from CAMHS in the future. He expressed a view that once he had a child in placement he should also have the ‘back up’ from specialist services.

“…the back up afterwards as well, so it’s a continuation. It can’t be a two day course and then stop.”

Experienced Foster Carers

In total 10 out of the 13 experienced foster carers reflected on their previous experience of foster caring and how this led to a high expectation that this training would teach them something new. Many foster carers were eager for new research findings, to keep them updated and to learn through continuous training more knowledge and awareness of mental health issues.
“I keep going to the courses also updates because everything is always changing, they are always saying things, you know what you did last year we don’t do this year.”
P5 Line 74-76

Experienced foster carers hoped for an opportunity to actively share their experiences, to learn from others and explore how to resolve problems. A female foster carer with 15 years experience of fostering who had cared for 35 children during this time appeared to be very relaxed about training within a group setting. She had previously attended the training three times over the last seven years and had found her knowledge and understanding of this field had grown and with it her confidence in sharing her experiences and ideas.

“As a foster carer for 15 years I’ve come across quite a few different problems that have been resolved in various ways that I think I can bring to the group and share. I am also more than happy to pick other peoples brains as well from within the group.”
P6 Line 52-55

Previous experience of training appeared to give foster carers confidence to help others resolve problems. A 50 year old foster carer talked about her experience as a parent and carer and became very animated when she spoke about a sense of mastery of parenting skills developed after previous training. Some shared that they wanted to continue to do well with their existing child, but also wanted to take time to revisit and consider, with support and help, more deeply about their needs.

To summarise, many foster carers expected to gain increased knowledge regarding the mental health needs of children in care, knowledge about referral systems and awareness of up to date policy and guidance. There was a significant expectation that this training would lead to increased support from the network. Foster carers expected to meet other foster carers and develop buddying systems and peer support
in order to prevent social isolation. Also foster carers seemed to value the support they might get from meeting up with their peer group. Foster carers anticipated that gaining more understanding of their child’s mental health needs would aid their confidence in parenting, in order to help challenge prejudice and advocate for their child.

The two subgroups of experienced and new foster carers had different expectations depending upon how many years they had fostered and whether they had attended the attachment training before. New foster carers’ knowledge and awareness of mental health issues was more limited and therefore their expectations of the training were lower. Overall for experienced foster carers their expectations of training were high and they saw it as meeting a combination of needs that included gaining support from their peer group and reinforcing a sense of community; learning to challenge stigma and to gain knowledge and building awareness of good practice amongst foster carers.

4.4.3 TRAVELLING THROUGH: POST TRAINING THEMES

Within the post training interviews themes three, four, five and six emerged. These four major themes were identified as: sharing the experiences of the other foster carers, knowledge, format and personal issues. Within these main themes, the following 13 subcategories emerged: hearing the experiences of other foster carers, CAMHS support, networking, increased understanding, underpins practice, emotions behind behaviours and parenting skills, content, atmosphere, handouts, managing stress, personal histories and isolation.

4.4.3.1 THEME THREE: Sharing Experiences of Other Foster Carers

In the post training groups a recurring theme was that of the value of listening to the experiences of other foster carers. This was repeated for both experienced and inexperienced foster carers. A number of positive themes emerged from hearing stories from a mix of foster carers regarding how they cared for children with emotional health difficulties, how they had made use of CAMHS support and how the existing network of foster carers functioned.
Hearing the experiences of other foster carers

New foster carers emphasised how listening to the experiences of others gave them confidence in their ability as foster carers. This included having a different perspective on fostering, offering an expert view, talking through difficult times and finding others who were experiencing the same anxieties as themselves. Acknowledgement of the variety of knowledge within the room was a relevant and interesting point. Both male and female foster carers reported they valued the level of expertise within the group.

“…helpful to hear people’s experience of what, as we haven’t had a child in place yet so obviously to hear other foster carers talk about their experiences was good.”
P1 Line 20-22

“…there was such a nice mix of so many different people and …also there were some new foster carers there who were actually experts in their own fields but to do with people”
P5 Line 7-9

More experienced foster carers referred to the importance of hearing about attachment relationships from other foster carers. They felt this helped expand their knowledge of what works in practice. Hearing advice from a foster carer was acknowledged as different to hearing advice from social workers.

“When I first started attachment training it was not talked about so much and it's nice to know how far it has moved on and people’s opinions and I like the different levels of carers and experiences.”
P9 Line 12-13
“…foster carers are more neutral…..I am not saying they do but social workers tend to make themselves seem important and they say that everything’s rosy and lovely”
P24 Line 32-34

A foster carer who had previously worked as a professional in social care felt there were too many people sharing their stories and was ‘overwhelmed’ by this and preferred the discussion of theory. For some, the process of having been taught new information whilst listening to examples in practice had been overwhelming at times. Interestingly in the follow up training interviews and after a period of reflection and attendance at other training, she changed her mind and came to value the need to explore experiences within a group setting.

“…we lose the focus sometimes and so some of the things that are said are relevant but I think we need to minimise the input.”
P10 Line 19-20

“…after when you interviewed us afterwards, I thought there was a lot of talking and also maybe time was wasting on that…but on reflecting and attending other courses I’ve really felt that it was good….yes changed, because I felt that it does have a positive thing in a group situation if people are willing to speak…I admire that I was in a group like that.”
P10 line 476-488

**Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) support**

Within the sharing of experiences theme, six participants spoke about support services for children and young people with mental health needs. They spoke about their experience of being trained by CAMHS professionals. Sharing their experiences of using CAMHS for support was helpful. One experienced foster carer
expressed a desire to have a CAMHS worker for foster carers almost like a national service helpline for foster carers. She spoke passionately about how she envisioned CAMHS support in the future.

“\textit{I think that what has become evident is that we need support because of the complex nature of the work we do. The CAMHS team and the support we get …and the input is really important…you know if there was a CAMHS worker that was I don’t know our own that would be useful}.”

P6 Line 125-129

“\textit{…Tell me what you think and run it past them and get a bit of advice almost like an NHS helpline.”}”

P6 189-190

The skill of CAMHS trainers as facilitators was also highlighted as important. A female foster carer who was new to fostering described feeling ‘\textit{held}’ within the group. She spoke about how she experienced the facilitators using a variety of techniques to enable the sharing of experiences.

“You led things and then sat back and we heard about real experiences from other carers as well and I think that there was a difference and then you came back in and led and you sat back and let experiences speak for themselves.”

P16 Line 121-144

Another more experienced foster carer referred to the ‘\textit{neutrality}’ of health professionals. She referred to social services as painting a rosy image of what life as a foster carer would be. She did not find this helpful and wanted a more realistic discussion about the difficulties she faced and how to access support when needed.
Increased access to mental health services and the importance of this has been raised in many other evaluative studies. Training is not just about educating but rather provides a range of opportunities for foster families to gain support (DfES, 2005b). Statutory guidance on promoting health and wellbeing for LAC identified a big variation in terms of access to mental health provision. The CAMHS/LAC team are a dedicated service which has existed for 11 years through which time a considerable amount of knowledge and expertise in relation to the emotional and mental health needs of children in care can be shared through training and in order to strengthen the much needed links and relationships with foster carers and frontline professionals (Stanley, Riordan & Alaszewski, 2004). New foster carers commented upon the fact that many foster carers on the training had had direct experience with the CAMHS services which reassured foster carers that a service may be available to them if they have a child placed with them who has mental health needs.

**Networking**

As part of sharing experiences networks began to develop across the two cohorts. A total of six foster carers emphasised networking as a key outcome of receiving training. Some more experienced foster carers were linking in with other foster carers on the course to offer telephone support. It was likened to ‘an extended family’.

“...different procedures, different people, different contacts and support.”
“Just to be more aware and like I said, because there is now this extended network that you can draw on.”

A new male foster carer spoke of his fear of support not being available. Hearing the stories from other foster carers led to some anxiety as to the lack of support as foster carers disclosed in-depth descriptions of crisis situations.

“…there has to be a network……I think the only worrying thing for me was the fact that it was quite apparent that sometimes the network’s not there.”

Despite some worries about the lack of support raised from sharing experiences, the majority of foster carers felt this process of listening to each other was a major gain from attending the course. Foster carers referred to enjoying a mix of foster carers at all levels attending the group. Disclosing of experiences and real stories seemed to help foster carers to put theory into practice. A sense of networking and peer support was valued by foster carers who felt that attending the course had led to a reduction in their sense of isolation. They felt the facilitators were neutral and there was a sense of safety when sharing information in the group and an increased understanding of how to access mental health services. Herbert and Wookey (2007) also found that foster carers in their study appreciated the open debates and the freedom to express disagreement. They also referred to the role facilitators’ play in maintaining safety within the group particularly when, many of the foster carers within their study, were overwhelmed with behavioural problems presented by their child which were of a clinical nature and required intensive support that was not met through the training group (Herbert & Wookey, 2007). This evaluation immediately
after the training gave me a sense that many foster carers were still processing the experience, digesting the information and reflecting upon the personal implications.

4.4.3.2 THEME FOUR: Knowledge to ‘Complete the Jigsaw’

This theme arose in the post training interviews for 18 out of the 21 participants. The content of the course included modules on Attachment Theory, neuroscience and the effects of chronic trauma upon executive functioning. Within this theme which focused upon the knowledge gained, three subcategories were identified which included, understanding and insight into the behaviours presented by their foster children, how this knowledge had underpinned their day to day parenting, how identifying the emotions behind the behaviours had proved useful and a reflection upon parenting skills.

Understanding and Insight

Foster carers discussed how they had gained a greater understanding and knowledge of the mental health needs of children and young people. Also, more crucially, they spoke about the part this played in increased understanding and in promoting emotional health. They described a sense of empowerment they felt after having acquired new knowledge. They referred to a huge learning curve of understanding and a change in attitude. They began to reflect upon their lives and how they had acted. This process helped them to gain more insight and one foster carer likened this to finding the missing piece to ‘completing the jigsaw’.

“It certainly changed my understanding and my awareness and also you know my whole attitude changed after that course.”
P1 Line 49-50

“….made me realise perhaps with some of the children I’ve worked with in the past, why they acted in the way they did.”
P2 35-37

“I think it’s given me more, you know more insight now for the children of the
An increased level of insight into the ways of approaching behavioural difficulties was described by one foster carer who was taking a step back from the problematic behaviour, reflecting approaches discussed in the training, prior to addressing the specific problems. He described a calmer approach to the future challenges he faced.

This active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of past and present experience is one of the principles of Gestalt psychology of learning (Burns, 2002). Foster carers described many ‘aha’ moments within which their insight, awareness and realisation of their child’s emotional health needs was apparent. They reported a change in the way they felt about their foster child and wanted to repeat the training regularly. This reorganisation of experiences into systematic and meaningful patterns may lead to problem solving according to Burns (2002).

**Theory Underpins Practice**

Understanding the Attachment Theory outlined in the training was highlighted by many foster carers. They felt supported through knowledge of best practice within their day to day parenting. Many of the foster carers were also curious to learn more.

“…it’s the most educational course I’ve been on since starting any of the fostering courses and obviously I would like to learn more.”

P1 82-83
Learning about attachment theory appears to have changed the way they felt about a young person and gave them solutions regarding how to deal with the challenges they encountered. Understanding the theory regarding ‘executive functioning’ helped one foster carer advocate for their child at school.

“.....as well about the attachments, how you can form good ones and the reasons why some of them are good or bad.....about if the child misbehaves....it may because you got to look back at case histories and stuff like that.....not to automatically think oh yeah he’s just being naughty there might be a reason.....sitting down with a child and talking through.”

P3 Line 227-244

“it does change the way you feel about some of the children and how to deal with things better....knowing that I have a child and the executive functioning and all that lot helped me understand that a bit better.”

P4 Line 60-71

“..It goes into my subconscious and it stays there and I know when I am using it, I know it and I’m thinking oh I know what I am doing here and it’s actually very reassuring because you’ve got all that theory stuck in there and it does stay.”

P 5 Line 28-30

A male foster carer spoke about the need to repeat the training regularly and revisit to update the training. He had experienced a lot of apprehension about fostering and felt the training had helped him to consider why a child may regress emotionally. However he also felt further training was vital to prepare him for future placements.

“...you need to come back and remind yourself what you know otherwise you forget bits and sometimes you need to keep them at the forefront of your mind.”
“...without the course, I think it would have been almost impossible to put both pieces of the jigsaw together to see where things are coming from.”

There is a sense of empowerment beginning to surface from the data. The link between empowerment through new knowledge and increased confidence in the process of advocating for the child comes to light within this theme. The capacity to maintain a stable placement may increase as they find solutions to manage difficult behaviours. Feedback also led to foster carers challenging their perception of mental health.

“ When you think of mental health issues you think of somebody being quite thick maybe, your first impression of mental health……a lot of this you may not know….but they’ve been through a trauma and it’s learning to deal with that and what that means in terms of their mental health.”

Emotions behind Behaviours

Knowledge about emotions increased and 14 of the 21 participants commented upon this. The training seemed to answer some fundamental questions about children’s behaviour.

“…it kind of opened my eyes to why the child could be behaving like that where as before, you know I could have been blinkered in my thoughts and reactions.”

A male foster carer described his tendency to focus on the challenging non-compliant behaviours of his child without considering the connection they may have to emotional difficulties. He described how he had reflected upon his own behaviours as a result of the training which led him to ‘ease up’ on his own
children. He spoke about giving his children quick effective consequences after incidents involving challenging behaviour. Other foster carers also referred to ignoring behaviours and not taking them personally and the importance of being curious and talking out aloud about the behaviours.

“If I have a child who comes home all stroppy now I don’t think what have I done to upset you…I think what’s happened that’s upset you today?”

P5 Line 44-50

An understanding of the emotions behind the behaviour led to a sense of empowerment for some foster carers in relation to advocating for their child. They were becoming the experts in relation to understanding the behaviours of their child and their thirst for knowledge was clear.

Parenting Skills

In total 14 out of 21 foster carers referred to parenting skills which surfaced from knowledge. An understanding of similarities and differences with their own children and foster children was raised. Many foster carers seemed to learn from others how to deal with behaviours rather then to react to them. They expressed a sense of awareness of their existing skills and an affirmation that what they were doing was good. A female foster carer who had been fostering for twenty years and had fostered over 180 children felt she had become ‘stuck in her ways’ and welcomed the opportunity to explore her parenting style using a different approach. She spoke about being more proactive, providing more help to her foster children and becoming less chastising. This foster carer seemed to be recognising the need to do some things differently.
“All of the symptoms applied and it made me actually re-look and think how well we’ve done with him.”
P7 Line 179-181

“It’s much better to be properly prepared and to be fully aware ....I am under no illusion.”
P12 Line 292-294

Foster carers’ feedback suggested that they were well prepared and had gained from learning techniques that they could use to help young people express themselves.

In summary, foster carers referred to the ‘jigsaw effect’ of the training within which missing pieces of knowledge fell into place enabling a fuller understanding of their child. A high percentage of foster carers felt their expectations regarding gaining knowledge had been met and exceeded. Some of these foster carers were requesting a ‘next level’ in attachment training. It appeared that, with the jigsaw complete, the foster carer’s confidence in dealing with challenging behaviour appeared to have increased. It could be argued that these skills may lead to the prevention of placement breakdown as described by one foster carer.

“Well I have found it very useful and I’m convinced that it’s helped maintain a couple of placements that I’ve had.”
P6 Line 26-27

4.4.3.3 THEME FIVE: Format and content

This theme related to the way in which the training was set up and designed and the content and delivery of the training. A total of 17 out of 21 foster carers commented on both the content and format of the session in the post training interviews.
Format

In relation to the design and format of the training one foster carer felt the information could have been spread out more than conducted over two days.

“I sort of be tempted to sort of spread it out a bit more. But then I am also very aware of foster carers and them not having the space to do it sort of thing.”
P6 Line 60-62

The duration and system for delivery was raised by many foster carers who wanted to repeat the training again in order refresh their understanding. Both experienced and inexperienced foster carers requested that future training needs should include a follow up training day. However the reasons for this varied depending upon experience. The more inexperienced foster carers wanted another session in order to reflect upon the content delivered and to discuss further. The more experienced foster carers wanted an additional session to discuss new research.

“There’s always something you learn every time you come and that’s what I like to do keep myself up to date.”
P9 Line 83-84

“Too much interesting information which I wanted to assimilate everything.”
P10 Line 287-288

Content

Many of the foster carers provided positive feedback about the broad subject matter of the session and spoke about having gained a vast amount of information about mental health issues within a short time.
“You had health, mental health issues and stuff. So I learnt a lot.”
P5 Line 10

“I think that was perfect for the group. For me it was better than my first experience of that type of discussion and training....”
P11 Line 101-106

The majority of the feedback upon content was positive. A new foster carer insisted upon this training being offered to other professionals in contact with children, for example, schools.

“I also think the perhaps some of this training, well no I don’t think, I’m emphatic it should be delivered in schools, I think that especially for professionals.”
P20 Line 78-79.

Handouts contained a copy of the slides which acted as an ‘aide memoire’ and were considered by many foster carers as a useful refresher.

“The literacy that we took home is going to be so helpful as a refresher you can go back to or at any time.”
P1 Line 113-114

“All the handouts were really brilliant ‘cos obviously when you come away from the course you can keep looking over them and that's really good ‘cos it can refresh your brain and that.”
P4 Line 96-98

In total two male foster carers passed this on to their partners in order to update them and they found this very beneficial. A foster carer’s wife booked onto the
course as a result the following year. It appeared important for the male foster carers to share their experiences with their wives to aid similar parenting approaches.

“She’s been reading the paperwork as well to, she wasn’t able to come, so it’s a few bits between us.”
P3 Line 183-184

Relevant articles linked to the training were also given out and led to some foster carers reading more detailed research evidence. Many had ordered the books and given handouts to colleagues in their network. Again, foster carers felt the more research evidence they gained about attachment and mental health the more they felt prepared and informed to support future best practice.

“I thought that was useful and the references you could go away and study in your own time the bits that interested you.”
P6 Line 100-102

“So when you read up you’ve got all that there to back you up as well so your not just reading something you taking what came out from there as well.”
P16 Line 207-208

Atmosphere

Many foster carers commented upon the atmosphere they experienced during the training. This was not a topic area identified in the interview guides but arose spontaneously. They noted there was a relaxed atmosphere and everyone was able to talk about feelings and experiences.

“Very open and relaxed and everyone was able to talk about how they feel and different experiences within caring for children.”
P1 Line 65-67
“I thoroughly enjoyed it and I think that probably because I was familiar with most of it that it was a very comfortable place to be.”
P6 Line 49-51

Safety was mentioned as foster carers felt they could interrupt the training, ask questions and say what they wanted. A female foster carer, who had previously received very little training, surprised herself in that she felt very relaxed within a large group.

“I thought they were a nice group. I felt very safe there, I felt as if I could say anything that I wanted to say, if I had something to say.”
P12 Line 52-53

“When we first came in, it was a very big group and quite intimidating just the look of it but I think that’s probably one of the best ones I have been on.”
P16 Line 11-13

Another foster carer commented on the mixture of foster carers and the dynamics of the facilitators enabling a good rapport which, in turn, appeared to enable people to be more open.

“The dynamics between you and your colleague were really good and complimented each other the way it happened and made it not too much.”
P20 Line 160-162

“You had a good rapport with the other lady….and I think people tended to open up a little bit more because of that.”
P23 Line 120-121
In summary then, many foster carers were satisfied with the format of the training in relation to the delivery and requested a follow up training workshop to reflect upon new learning. The content of the session met their expectations and they found this new information interesting and supportive in their practice. Many shared the content with family and professional colleagues. The handouts had been a useful refresher and foster carers reported having a thirst for more evidence for their practice through further reading. The atmosphere enabled the disclosure of practical experiences and the importance of the facilitation within this process was highlighted. They felt it was useful to place this training in tandem with skills to foster. For some new foster carers, the return to the classroom environment was unfamiliar, yet they wanted to repeat this experience soon after. They liked the mixture of theory and practice. There were some areas to improve upon which were the amount of information one foster carer described as ‘overload’ and for another the amount of group interaction and the need for increased group activities was also raised. Although issues regarding content have been highlighted in the satisfaction questionnaire, the process of interviewing foster carers identified a desire by the foster carers for subsequent follow up sessions. This was not mentioned before and yet this was a key issue for many foster carers.

As found in many other studies, the level of satisfaction expressed by foster carers was high and many shared the content with family and professional colleagues. Foster carers talked about the usefulness of being able to share the information with their partners who had not attended the training. Laybourne et al (2008) also commented upon the role of partners and recommended that they attend the training too.

4.4.3.4 THEME SIX: Personal issues

Personal issues arose from the post training interviews. In total four of the 21 foster carers referred to a reflection process occurring during the training group. A foster carer commented upon not taking things so personally. She found that she was to ‘slow things down’ by taking time to reflect upon her child’s behaviour which enabled her to have a calmer home.
“It's getting better results and I have a calmer house now and because of this training and the training that you have given me.”

P5 Line 94-95

On reflection, one foster carer felt that if she had received this training prior to a breakdown of placement she might have felt more confident about carrying on caring for the young person. The foster carer felt the training had ‘grounded her’. One foster carer commented upon having the opportunity to reflect outside of the child’s world.

In total seven out of 21 foster carers reflected upon their own personal history. They were able to identify their own behaviours and understood their own history more. Another foster carer referred to their ‘brain ticking over during the course’.

“I dropped a pebble in the ocean to be honest within my own family.”

P22 Line 103-107

“ It's amazing how you blank stuff off ....you think only of the good times I think but the bad times you totally blank them out completely...and it in turn had a shocking effect upon me on the second day.”

P22 Line 214-219

This foster carer was also able to have understanding of how emotions can be locked away and surface at the most unexpected times. This understanding was also referred to by many other foster carers who disclosed that feelings were evoked regarding their own personal histories when attending the training. This is important in relation to secondary stress that can be experienced by foster carers when unexpected feelings are evoked by a child’s trauma. Secondary stress if undetected may lead to placement instability (Hughes, 1997).
To summarise, within the post training interviews, foster carers talked openly about their immediate reactions to the training. Personal issues regarding stress, foster carers’ own histories and coping within the system were discussed. An experience summed up by one foster carer succinctly as a ‘pebble in the ocean’ affecting them as foster carers in a multitude of ways in relation to their own histories. The pebble represented the training, the ocean represented their family and the ‘rippling effect’ represented an increased awareness and understanding of their own behaviours and those of their children. This foster carer found this experience helpful in that he felt closer to his family as a result however, it is important to note, that an experience such as this could equally lead to a stressful even distressing reaction. Therefore access to therapeutic services and support needs to be considered post training if required.

4.4.4 MOVING ON: FOLLOW UP TRAINING

The following themes seven, eight, nine and 10 which include an understanding of the emotional needs of children, personal insights, parenting skills and support from CAMHS were found in the follow up interviews that took place 12 weeks following the training. Within these main themes the following 12 subcategories emerged: Mental health issues, emotions behind the behaviours, knowledge, support, insight/awareness, impact upon the home impact upon the school, confidence, and parenting in practice, activities, CAMHS support and future training needs. They represent the final interviews gathered through this research study.

4.4.4.1 THEME SEVEN: Understanding the emotional needs of children in care

In the follow up interviews which took place approximately 12 weeks after the training, themes regarding understanding the emotional needs of the children were raised. The main areas discussed by foster carers were: gaining an understanding of emotions behind behaviours and increased knowledge.
Emotions behind behaviours:

A total of 16 out of 21 foster carers commented in detail about their increased understanding of the emotional needs of this group of children and through this greater understanding talked about observing and perceiving their child’s behaviours in a totally different way. This led to an increased ability to be more positive about their child, for example, understanding that there may be a reason why their child is extremely angry. They linked the feelings regarding their past to their present behaviours.

“…the way children behave and the reasons behind it. Where before I would have looked at it in a totally different way.”
P1 Line 48-50

“…its made me understand the sorts of behaviours that they’ve presented in the past….I can reason with them more.”
P2 Line 47-51

“…going on these all these courses you suddenly see it’s all clear….there is a reason for what they are doing and why they are doing it.”
P3 Line 137-142

Having reflected upon the training over 12 weeks many foster carers spoke about how important this explanation about emotions and behaviours helped in practice.

“There’s a reason behind all their behaviours and having it explained makes it clear.”
P9 Line 43-44

This helped the reflection process for foster carers and tolerance levels generally.
“I actually think what it has actually done is given me a more open mind on issues when you see them......you can see something that's on the news which can be quite disturbing and it raises lots of people’s anger however, just having done that little bit you can see that there may well be reasons as to why that might have happened.”

In addition, reasoning with children and helping them to make sense of what they were saying and doing helped foster carers understand and listen more. A foster carer referred to gaining more understanding of the child’s developmental needs and how a child may regress and for what reasons. She was able to talk about how her foster child had regressed when her brother was taken ill. The foster carer was able to understand the reasons for this regression and was able to support the child through it.

“Sometimes she needed to go back to being a baby and being a toddler...and when you deal with their emotional needs the rest seems to fall into place.”

As in the post training interviews, the issue regarding not taking things personally was also seen as important after twelve weeks.

“Some of the things I used to react quite badly sometimes like taking it to heart and being miserable and hurt and looking at a child and thinking ‘oh god she’s just doing it to hurt me’ and now I know she’s not doing it because she wants to hurt me there is something else.”

Self awareness of emotions and the interplay between these were highlighted.
“...because my young person finds it very difficult to express her feelings, I was expressing feelings for her to let her know that it was okay. I think the attachment theory really sort of brought that fresh into my mind”
P 14 Line 62-65

After 12 weeks many of the foster carers retained knowledge regarding children’s emotional needs. There seemed an openness of mind with a consistency over time of their perceptions of the children’s needs. A female foster carer summed this up well when stating it ‘all clicked into place’.

“It's helped me carrying on doing this skills to fostering thing because it's reiterated all the time about attachments and it’s helped me understand the behaviours.”
P12 Line 44-46

“I mean really, until I went on that training and things all clicked into place, that’s why her behaviour was like that”
P27 Line 34-35

“I think it’s made me calmer and more able to listen to her.”
P29 Line 178

Knowledge

Foster carers’ knowledge had been measured quantitatively pre, post and follow up training and the results indicated a significant retention of knowledge over time. Within the qualitative findings 16 out of 21 foster carers referred to a sense of gaining knowledge in the follow up training interviews. Some foster carers felt that the training had given them increased understanding about their children in placement.
“the best course I have been on for education…with your course it was learning every minute.”
P1 Line 265-266

“Knowledge that I have gained I can now respond differently in situations.”
P11 Line 41-42

Foster carers felt more empowered to advocate for their child, raising awareness of executive functioning skills with teachers at school.

“I did actually speak to the head of the year and explained to her that he does have executive functioning difficulties and it’s not that he is naughty…he just needs reminding all the time about things.”
P4 Line 28-31

Access to knowledge and further information was also an important issue for foster carers. Some foster carers commented on learning being a continuous process which required access to learning facilities.

“I like doing further reading, and they give you examples of further reading to do…I go to libraries and find the books and read up on them to find out the information and the extra knowledge.”
P9 Line 313-322

“Being able to do something to help them make attachments from now, even if you start making good and warm friendships and attachments…to notice how you react to somebody and being careful if they are feeling that you are somebody that they can relate to.”
P20 Line 59-79
Knowledge about other services and support was also reflected upon and is explored in a later theme.

“If it was to happen again I just think that just opened so many doors for me in knowing how to handle something like that.”
P27 Line 360-361

In summary, foster carers had retained their understanding of the emotions behind the behaviours displayed by their child over time. This had led to a change in attitude and an ability to reason with their child. They reflected upon the knowledge gained and reported an increase of empathy in relation to both the children in placement and their birth children. A sense of digesting information and wanting to repeat and reinforce training came through.

4.4.4.2 THEME EIGHT: Personal insights and the ‘Rippling Effect’

Another main theme was with regard to foster carers’ personal perceptions of their training needs. This theme also relates to their perception of how attending this training affected the young people in their home and school environment. In total four main subcategories surfaced which included: support needs, insight, awareness of impact on school and home environment.

Support

A large majority of foster carers reflected upon their support needs in the follow up interview at 12 weeks. Within the first cohort there were some very experienced foster carers who were offering contact numbers to some of the other foster carers. Other foster carers were proactive in the coffee and lunch breaks in seeking out those foster carers who had children expressing similar difficulties.
“We’ve all exchanged numbers plus with the extra courses now you’re getting to hear different carer’s stories…as a buddy.”
P3 Line 227-237

“I get support from all of them, actually there’s quite a few carers there that I still see on all the courses and we keep in contact which is really good”
P4 Line 213-216

“I think being part of the group I mean and listening to experiences of others and sharing my own experiences, you kind of get a feel for the whole that things aren’t just happening to you.”
P6 Line 19-22

“I think for carers its being able to get together and talk about different experiences, it’s good to know when you get together with carers that you are not the only ones”
P9 Line 411-41

Keeping in contact felt meaningful to foster carers so training brought foster carers together. A foster carer referred to the lack of a base for foster carers, where support could be on an ad hoc basis ‘as and when you need it’. Foster carers identified that a base would enable them to feel more supported and in turn valued. Without this base, training provides a virtual base, which fulfils a similar function in terms of their need for a place where foster carers can keep in touch and catch up.

“…there was a base there and we did use it, we would have coffee mornings…we chatted about the difficulties and picked up tips….there has to be a place, a venue ….we’re not recognised enough to have a designated venue.”
P6 Line 178-187

“There is supposed to be support and when I first became a foster carer, there
was a sort of a liaison group and it was run by foster carers and they would have meetings but that seemed to die a natural death.”

P27 Line 798-800

It appeared that some key foster carers made this ‘ad hoc’ support a reality by being proactive in encouraging contact.

“I have got good support I would say that you know if I needed any support there’s a number of carers I could phone and they would be at the end of a phone.”

P14 Line 219-222

“ A lot of support for instance I met up with a foster carer a lot of times going out for a cup of tea and then we would visit each other.”

P10 Line 636-637

In total three couples attended the training groups and spoke about having benefited from having their partners on the training. They felt they had gained the same knowledge and had a chance to discuss issues further.

“I was able to talk to my husband cos he was in the same group and we had discussed it….I have a better understanding and so does my partner and as we are going to look after the same young person it helps when we’ve got the same knowledge.”

P20 Line 150-152

Another foster carer expressed frustration as they felt more could be done for foster carers in order to increase internal support between foster carers more formally.

“There must be a way, I mean they’ve got the system, you should be able to go
into the system and sort of put in a keyword attachment and should be able to
give you a list of all those carers that have got children and have specialised
groups so that at least then you know we’ve all got the same problem.”
P27 Line 672-680

Insight

The majority of foster carers (19 out of 21) commented upon how the training had
led to insight and awareness about the difficulties a child has. Foster carers referred
to it changing their outlook and referred to it as an ’eye opener’. This was in relation
to both their own birth children and foster children.

“It was such an eye opener and made you understand more…it opened my eyes
to how I could make better attachments…simply because of looking at things in
different ways.”
P1 Line 50-66

“Certainly gave me a clearer view of maybe looking at things or a wider view
instead of just jumping on the bandwagon, you opened up awareness and it did
give you insight into thinking about things…..If she (foster child) was sat there
now she’d say to you I have changed completely.”
P 26 line 580-582

Some foster carers felt that they had approached problems differently and had an
increased awareness of their own behaviours. They reported a sense of not taking
issues personally and reflected more upon the circumstances that led to the
behaviours.

“Take a step back and look at what is happening and why…it’s about looking at
it from a different angle or reminding you that there is another angle.”
P6 Line 34-55
Awareness seemed to lead to a sense of confidence to see things through during the 12 week follow up period.

“These young people need your help and that you can do it, you know sort of even if you don’t see the results that you know somewhere along, further down the line, you know they will.”

P6 Line 85-90

“Obviously I have been fostering for a long long time however, when doing this attachment course this time, I think that it’s really good because it makes you carry on. You look after children and you can come across difficult times and then you know when we did the attachment course it makes you sit back and think and help you to understand.”

P7 Line 97-101

The training seemed to help support foster carers through difficult times. Also foster carers referred to a sense of understanding that these behaviours were not deliberate but instead, useful in ‘telling us something’.

“It makes you think about your behaviours and your instincts and how you treat them. It isn’t deliberate and there’s actually a really good reason.”

P9 Line 28-29

A female foster carer reflected upon her care of a young girl many years ago. She acknowledged the terror this girl must have felt and spoke of an increased sense of empathy towards her following the training.

“Sometimes I used to think that I can’t handle her. But now when I look at some of the things I have been studying there I think I didn’t know then that it was terror to this child.”
Wider family also played a part, dynamics between extended families and awareness of different attachment styles. A female foster carer spoke about how her awareness of her own family increased and she acknowledged the good attachment relationships between them. She also spoke about awareness of her own attachment style in relation to being wary of forming close relationships with people too quickly.

“I didn’t know before but I obviously got quite strong attachments to my family in the past, so I don’t have many problems making attachments to people in fact come to think of it mine is not attaching to people too quickly.”

For one male foster carer the experience of attending the training triggered a sequence of events in his family. He recalled memories from his childhood that had been locked away. He began to contact his family over the next twelve weeks and he described a “rippling effect” within his family. He was able to gain a closer connection with his sisters and his wider family as a result of this.

“What that did to me was bring back memories and if someone asked me have you got something in your past that you could think about I would have said no as I didn’t think about it until we went on that course.”
Reflecting for some foster carers led to them experiencing a sense of failure that they did not get help for their child help sooner.

“I feel a bit of a failure because I didn’t get her any additional help….but then that was timing, but I should have pursued and ensured that she got some help.”
P26 Line 584-594

**Impact on school**

Immediately after the training two foster carers acted as advocates on behalf of their child in the school environment. A female foster carer reported back about how she now supports her child with lists, reminders, as well as praising them for good work and for not getting into battles.

“It has worked a bit in that he has changed and even his teacher will now remind him to make sure he has things in his back to come with and I’ll remind him too when going to school”
P4 Line 31-34

“School work is absolutely brilliant but would only pick up on the bit he wasn’t doing that well and not the masses he was doing well so we’ve swopped that around. We don’t mention the bit he is not doing so well but we help him with it.”
P9 Line 216-219

“To do some lists for him, just as gentle reminders so he doesn’t forget them. So that when he does go to school, you know he’s not excluded from things because he’s forgot them.”
P9 Line 96-100
Impact on home

In the home environment, foster carers shared what they felt had been the impact of the training upon their daily lives. Some foster carers described increased involvement in children’s activities. A foster carer described listening more carefully to her children at the end of a school day. She felt this was having an impact upon the quality of their relationship.

“I did actually work with them a bit more than what I would do normally. Baking cakes and things like that and I got a lovely card from them; they made me a special card.”
P13 Line 55-57

“We have got a good bond and we talk a lot and I think the main, the most important thing is to listen especially when she comes home from school.”
P29 Line 165-169

In summary, personal insights were gained which led to increased confidence in practice described by many foster carers. They reported an increased ability to access support and described changes in practice at home and school and expanded upon the personal insights they had gained and how they worked through this within their own family.

4.4.4.3 THEME NINE: Parenting Skills

In the post training interviews, ‘Parenting Skills’ was identified as a subcategory of the knowledge theme as foster carers reported that they gained an increased confidence when dealing with challenging behaviours, a sense of being more able to advocate for their child, and an increased awareness of their parenting skills. In the follow up interviews foster carers gave more detailed descriptions of increased parenting skills around three main subcategories: confidence, parenting in practice and parenting activities.
Confidence

There was a sense of growing confidence in foster carers which seemed to have been retained over time. Foster carers felt more equipped to care for children who presented with emotional health difficulties which also added to their sense of confidence. A foster carer described her ability to advocate for her child as empowering. Her success in advocating for her child in an education setting in the post training interviews had led to further meetings with professionals within which her knowledge of the research seemed to empower her.

“...it boosts your confidence to know that you can help these youngsters by coming in(to school) and doing things differently.”
P4 Line 234-236

“...more than anything I feel out of all the courses I have been on that’s the one that has changed me the most...I feel it has equipped me more because it’s changed me.”
P1 Line 239-399

This sense of increased knowledge and parenting backed up by evidence was helpful in giving foster carers a ‘morale boost’ as they began to see the results. It also helped one foster carer with their next child in placement.

“...does make you feel good about yourself because you know you are doing the right thing....a bit of a morale boost and then you do see results and that works really well.”
P5 Line 57-65

“It gives you a lot more confidence and I’d say when the second one first came here it gives you perspective on the individual child.”
P9 Line 294-295

“It gave me some confidence...only now I have seen my successes.”
One foster carer spoke about their sense of fairness confirming the foster carer’s rights in fighting for the child’s sake.

“It actually gave me the confidence that I wasn’t making things worse…I was going along the right lines and was right to try and keep fighting.”

Parenting in practice

In total 14 out of 21 foster carers commented on parenting issues in practice. The style of their parenting was perceived by five of the foster carers to be different. A calmer approach was often referred to and a change in their tone and volume of voice. A male foster carer in the post training interviews had spoken about offering more help to his child and being less chastising in his parenting. This foster carer went on to talk in more depth about his changing parenting style. He reflected upon his awareness of how emotionally overloaded children become and how their capacity to take on more demands is limited.

“..instead of going in all guns blazing thinking I knew the reason why…approaching it in a different manner so not so much shouting and getting rid of some of the aggressiveness in my voice and calming down a bit…..we don’t argue as much and they seem to think I am more understanding now.”

“I talk to him a lot more now to let him know I understand the things he is doing and he’s changed as well……. as I have done things quite differently since I have been doing all these new courses again.”
Foster carers reported a sense of achieving more in the home and strengthening the child’s role in the family. They spoke about praising their child and not getting into battles with them.

“When you do the attachment course it made me think and take a step back from things and maybe not get into disagreements too often”
P7 Line 121-123

“…it’s helped me cope with a situation that’s progressed over the last 12 weeks in the way that I needed to be strong but gentle at the same time…..you know having to protect her feelings but actually being quite strong and actually telling the truth.”
P14 Line 39-40

A female foster carer referred to responding to their ‘gut instincts’ alongside an understanding of attachment which led to confidence in making decisions and sticking to them.

“I decided to keep her with me so she lost a week from school, but it worked and it made her feel safer because we actually did exactly what we said we were going to do.”
P5 Line 170-174

Understanding a child’s history, as the context within which their behaviours developed, seemed more important for foster carers in the follow up interviews. Foster carers felt less frightened of talking to their children about their history and attempted to work out difficulties in the present together. Again, they described themselves as taking a step back and looking at it from the child’s point of view. They spoke about exploring a child’s needs through more sensitive parenting and
spending time to reflect upon the child’s behaviours which lead to increased understanding.

“To think about their history, of how she grew up and I always feel like maybe I should have done it differently…..I used to be frustrated about some of the things because I had children who are really in bad shape.”
P10 Line 36-37

“How’s fresh in your mind I think you start thinking about things and taking things on board. Some of the things that I’ve done, I’ve looked at them in a different way.”
P16 Line 19-21

Another two foster carers spoke about not overreacting to a child’s behaviour but rather approaching difficulties in a more relaxed way.

“It was one of our worries on the skills to fostering course, how would I react about smearing (of faeces)….and I am pretty sure that doesn’t happen often. Well probably would have exploded to be quite honest and now probably still wouldn’t be happy but whatever it was it wouldn’t quite be the end of the world for me that it would have been.”
P24 Line 519-527

“ You just need to be much more relaxed about everything, when she says I am not doing it we are just completely relaxed about it….It didn’t wind me up, I just said well I will just read the papers and then when you decide to do it I will help you and I do help her a lot.”
P29 Line 107-121.
Activities

Many foster carers introduced more fun activities into their routine which they found made a difference.

“He missed out on the fun parts of it, so I ran a bath and put bubble bath and a toy in the bath and it was an absolute joy…I could hear him playing in the bath and the gratitude for what I had done.”
P9 Line 257-262

“I did work with them a bit more than I would normally, baking cakes and things.”
P13 Line 55-57

Foster carers felt empowered by a sense of gaining parenting skills. Their confidence in their abilities increased after 12 weeks and they had implemented various strategies which had led to signs of success.

**4.4.4.4 THEME 10: Experience of CAMHS support and training**

There were two main subgroups highlighted within this theme by 19 foster carers and included future training needs from CAMHS and support needs generally.

**Training needs:**

Foster carers’ comments ranged from wanting more training in order to add to existing knowledge, to being content with repeating this training once every two years.

“I don’t think anything needs to be changed. I would like to go a step further now.”
“I think perhaps refreshers sort of once a year would probably be helpful because you don’t realise how much you forget.”

“It think that was enough with a lot of other courses that are going on as well, but I think you should keep doing them…every couple of years just to refresh themselves.”

“I think it has updated all the time and I think you have to be reminded.”

“What it does is you attend the course every few years and then go back to it and it’s really good to revisit and put into focus if what you are doing is the right thing and how you are doing it.”

“I found it very useful and I think it’s something that sort of in a couple of year’s time I would like to repeat again.”

Foster carers seemed to enjoy attending different courses and sharing knowledge, including research and began reading further around the issues raised in the training. The average time for repeating the training was two yearly. A foster carer who had attended previous training which was made up of a mix of professionals seemed to enjoy a group with foster carers only. She felt that there was no feeling of being judged and she felt foster carers relaxed and were more open about their experiences.
“I loved the group being just foster carers.”
P9 Line 389

“I think the attachment theory course was slightly different because from what I got and the people I met on the course in particular, it was very much people who wanted to be there.”
P24 Line 339-341

“You know if I had another child now that they said had an attachment problem, I would probably put myself back on the course.”
P27 Line 630-634

A female foster carer, who was critical in the post training interviews of the amount of time spent enabling foster carers to talk through issues, had changed her views after attending other training during the twelve week follow up period. The process of foster carers being willing to talk and interact was positive. Follow up refreshers which enabled foster carers to reflect upon their practice was seen as a useful way to assimilate the training.

“I think there should be a service there quarterly, I think every three months….one of the most valuable trainings I’ve been on in a long time and I am a training guru…like to go on training and put into practice what I learn with more people who can put this into practice.”
P20 Line204-212.

CAMHS Support

Foster carers wanted more workshops from CAMHS which could give practical strategies post the training groups. A foster carer spoke about getting ‘stuck’ and needing help from practitioners who had an understanding of the emotional health
needs of the children they care for. Many other foster carers also spoke about having more of a role in creating the kind of training follow up that is needed.

“Perhaps like workshops or something where you could give strategies to people and people have examples of behaviour and you can say well have you tried this because sometimes you know you get stuck with how to deal with things and if someone else has got another idea that’s worked for them, then that’s I think quite helpful.”

P2 Line 319-326

Newer foster carers found it hard to visualise what kind of services they might need in the future from CAMHS. Some foster carers wanted an NHS type of helpline which they could phone and get advice as training alone was considered not enough. Foster carers did not seem to want to be passive recipients of training but to participate in co-creating the support they need.

“there should be more training to discuss what’s going on.....just be informal over a cup of coffee or something.”

P26 Line 332-336

“I’d like to be able to do is say, can I talk to you about these ones, am I doing this right, is there anything further I could do?”

P27 Line 634-636

Another foster carer spoke about how he had accessed CAMHS since the training and had found this helpful.

“At first I didn’t really know that he needed extra help...I thought he was being a bit of a difficult child.......once I’d done the course and understood him a bit more it was brilliant...I now know that he does need extra help and he is slowly getting that help.”
In addition, another foster carer was shocked that the local CAMHS/LAC service was so small given the statistics nationally with regard to the mental health needs of children in care.

“45% of looked after children with mental health issues......so why isn’t there more of you? There obviously needs to be more access.”

To conclude, foster carers felt the training helped them to decide if they needed to seek CAMHS support and had raised awareness of local services.

4.5 DISCUSSION OF QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

4.5.1 JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY: 10 THEMES

The experience of the training groups for new and experienced foster carers was varied and rich in description and detail. The semi-structured interviews, together with the diaries and the observational notes kept by myself, led to the emergence of ten key findings which demonstrated a journey of learning, which was for some initially overwhelming, but for many eventually empowering. A mind-map was produced for each theme which demonstrated the connections and associations with wider aspects of foster care in practice. The importance of understanding the many forces that operate within the ‘field’ for foster carers helped me illuminate deeper meaning from the data (Lewin, 1951). This illuminative evaluative process was enlightening and paid attention to the complex interrelationships that occur for foster carers in relation to the wider administration and regulatory system, policy guidelines, regarding training, the pre and post approval arrangements, the creation of portfolios, the supportive role required from the learning and support development officer, the demands made upon foster carers in respect of meetings throughout the data gathering period. As in other studies, foster carers’ concerns
regarding their perceptions of the local authority and social workers varied from very positive to extremely negative.

Foster carers reported a journey which came alive through the ten themes that have been identified in detail in the findings. Figure 19 and 20 represent the stages of the journey for new and experienced foster carers and represents how many foster carers chose to repeat the experience in order to gain deeper awareness and understanding of the mental health needs of the children in care.

![Figure 19: Stages through training for new foster carers](image1)

![Figure 20: Stages through training for experienced foster carers](image2)
The first two themes will be discussed in more detail within this section due to the fact that they contribute new findings in light of the connections with other findings in the field of literature over the last 15 years. This does not mean to say that they are more important than the other eight themes however, there are limitations with regard to the word count within this thesis and therefore findings which have already received attention within the field will be discussed in less depth.

4.5.1.1 STARTING OUT: Motivation and Expectations

The ‘starting out’ phase led to new findings related to the pre training phase for foster carers within which they expressed a combination of their intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and their realistic expectations. The findings within the pre training interviews suggested that, in relation to motivational factors, foster carers within both cohorts who attended attachment training highlighted that a key motivating factor was the desire to understand their children and themselves and gain the skills to parent. Knowles (1998) refers to the idea that human beings seek personal adequacy in the process of learning and identified that adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that will be satisfied through learning. This highly motivational factor was confirmed in the findings as many intrinsic and extrinsic desires led to foster carers expressing the need to learn new techniques, reinforce existing skills and gain awareness of mental health issues. In addition many of the experienced foster carers who had attended the training before spoke about their experiences in practice and how the knowledge gained through the training had supported them through difficult times. This is referred to by Knowles (1998) as the process of learning that occurs when adults are orientated to learning through life experiences. Experienced foster carers had also been encouraged by the Learning and Development Officer (LDO) to take part in the process of training through an introductory programme for new foster carers within the ‘Skills to Foster’ process. In April 2008 the Training, Support and Development Standards for foster carers outlined seven standards of skills that every foster carer should evidence by completing a portfolio workbook of training they had attended. The experienced foster carers reported that their part in the co-facilitation of the ‘Skills
to Foster’ training areas also seemed to have led to a broader awareness of the benefits of training early on within the foster carers’ careers. In addition, there were also a significant number of new foster carers in both groups who appeared self motivated to attend as a result of attending the introductory programme themselves. They seemed eager to fill in their portfolios and learn from others and to use the group as a way of networking.

Foster carers, who expressed intrinsic incentives such as a curiosity to learn, a desire to keep up to date with research, a commitment to understanding their own personal experiences of attachment, seemed to be taking ownership of their need for self development. This process of self actualisation was an interesting one and seemed to have emerged as a result of the growing cultural shift and acceptance of the need for training (Knowles, 1988).

Foster carers who expressed extrinsic incentives such as advice and encouragement from their peers, completion of their training portfolio, guidance from their Learning and Development Officer (LDO), attendance on the skills to foster programme, seemed to have a desire to professionalise foster care, to raise standards of foster carers and expressed a need for mandatory training. There was a core group of experienced foster carers in both cohorts who attended regular updates in order to keep abreast of national research. Repeating training seemed to meet the needs of this group to gain increased knowledge and understanding of mental health, about their children and about their own self awareness.

Due to the fact that none of the other studies produced findings in relation to qualitative data gathered prior to the training there are few comparisons available regarding the motivational factors for foster carers attending mental health training. Delfabbro et al, (2002) studied foster carers’ intrinsic motivations to foster and found that the overriding drive was to provide a child with love and offering them a home. O’Brien and Sargent (2004) interviewed 10 foster carers to understand the experiences of carers’ access to mental health services and views regarding support from CAMHS. Foster carers seemed to value training in this area, particularly when the training included knowledge about the cause and effect of emotional and behavioural difficulties in children. They found that the three main difficulties that
seemed to threaten the stability of a placement for foster carers was when children present challenging behaviour which includes sexualised behaviour, violence and aggression, and risk taking and the impact on the family as a result. This knowledge of cause and effect of emotional and behavioural difficulties enabled the foster carers to plan strategies which may have reduced the risk of placement breakdown in the future. This qualitative study confirms these findings, reveals further information regarding parenting in practice and supports the need to meet with foster carers prior to training.

In terms of expectations, findings suggest that foster carers expected to gain increased knowledge regarding the mental health needs of children in care, increased knowledge of research, an understanding of how to access specialist support services such as CAMHS, an increased access to a larger peer group of foster carers and a venue within which to share their own experiences of good practice. In addition, they expected to gain opportunities to meet with other foster carers which they hoped would reduce their sense of isolation within the system of social care. Foster carers also expected to gain confidence in parenting, in order to help challenge prejudice and advocate for their child.

Foster carers hoped that the training would meet a combination of needs which were different depending upon their level of experience. New foster carers described a steep learning curve within their journey through the foster training programme. They were eager to gain awareness of how other foster carers functioned in the wider system of social care. Their desire for peer group support, a buddying system which could offer them a backup of support and a sense of community was high. Experienced foster carers wanted to share their experiences, to refresh their knowledge and keep abreast of new research in relation to the mental health needs of LAC, to develop their ability to respond to challenging behaviour by internalising the knowledge received so it becomes intuitive and develop their skills further in terms of dealing with challenging behaviour.

As very few studies have interviewed foster carers in depth prior to the training commencing, the findings in relation to the motivations and expectations of foster carers are a new addition to the body of research as most studies evaluated
satisfaction post training (Robson and Bryant, 2009). Within my reflective journal I considered the importance of having met foster carers prior to the training as this helped in terms of considering the whole context within which the training was offered. The recent charter for foster carers and the NICE/SCIE guidance (2010) suggests considering local needs of foster carers when training. Unless some discussion occurs with providers of mental health training then this may be missed along with an opportunity to co-create learning.

The role of the Learning and Development Officer is also an important one to consider in future research. The facilitation of the training programme for foster carers and the importance of mental health training as a core training for new foster carers is a significant one. There seemed to be an acknowledgement that this training was seen as having an important role to play in the development of core competencies and skills which require evidencing through the seven standards CWDC portfolio. Laybourne et al (2008) report that this was a shortcoming in their training and recommended that support officers (family placement workers) are able to attend the training as these practitioners are ideally placed to reinforce some of the important concepts.

There was also evidence that foster carers’ expectations seemed realistic and in line with the training programme’s aims and objectives, in relation to increasing knowledge regarding the mental health needs of LAC. There was a sense that foster carers expected to develop networks of support as a result of attending training. New foster carers regarded this training as meeting a myriad of needs which included reducing the fear of isolation and a lack of support. This need for support fits with the extensive findings gained by the CWDC (2005). The CWDC found that the process of training, in addition to completion of minimum standards, provides a structure for foster carers within which their educational and support needs will be met. Training of foster carers has now become and established part of fostering practice. Further National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) training is now provided by all agencies across the public independent and private sectors (Sinclair et al, 2004).
4.5.1.2 TRAVELLING THROUGH: Instant post training reactions

The ‘travelling through’ phase describes the immediate reactions expressed by foster carers post training which confirmed existing findings in the field and included an increased awareness of the emotional and behavioural needs of the children in their care, a process of personal reflection, increased knowledge and confidence in their skills in practice and satisfaction in relation to the format and content of the training.

This evaluation immediately after the training gave me a sense that many new foster carers were still processing the experience, digesting the information and reflecting upon the personal implications for them. The real stories based on the experiences of other foster carers seemed to reassure foster carers that they could manage to care for children with challenging behaviours in the future with the right support and helped many foster carers understand theory in practice through experience. For some more experienced foster carers, this sense of participation in contributing to the knowledge base seemed to empower them further and reduce isolation. This collaborative approach to learning through which foster carers learn from each other when sharing their experiences helps to build upon existing understanding, by connecting new information and skills to prior knowledge (Warman et al, 2006). The importance of making sense of what they know in practice and encouraging reflection on practice has been discussed in depth within other studies (Golding & Picken, 2004; Gurney-Smith et al, 2010) and fits with theories of learning which emphasise the self direction of learning (Knowles, 1973). Learning is a personal interpretation of the world and the key to training is to acknowledge the foster carers’ perceptions of their children before moving them forward to gain new insights (Burns, 2002).

A quarter of the foster carers linked the training to an increased awareness of their own personal history. There seemed to be an initial immediate response to the training which, for some foster carers, led to the beginning of a journey of reflection upon their own past. Foster carers highlighted they were feeling calmer, slowing down and not taking the behaviours of children personally. There seemed to be an
increased ability to tolerate stress. Personal issues regarding stress, foster carers’ own histories and coping within the system were discussed.

Foster carers described feeling more connected to their foster child and optimistic about the future for them. This change in the behaviour of foster carers may be as a result of the interplay of forces and is explained well in Lewin’s ‘Field Theory’ (1951) which discusses how learning occurs as a result of two changes which include (1) a change in the internal needs and motivation of individuals and (2) a change in cognitive structures in the field itself. Through the introduction of mental health training into the ‘field’ of foster carers it may be possible that a change in behaviour could occur as perception of increased parenting skills led to a sense of empowerment and knowledge regarding the emotions of children. Many foster carers perceived the training had led to increased stability for children in their home and empathy for the child.

This raised my awareness of the importance of a follow up training group to support this process and journey. An awareness of the complex nature of the combination of experiences was also interesting in that the foster carers were talking about how the training affected them on many levels in relation to the children they cared for, their own histories, awareness of the experiences of other foster carers and an understanding of the complexities of the system within which they work. In summary for many it was aptly described by a new foster carer as ‘eye opening’ and for an experienced foster carer as ‘completing the jigsaw’. Although an evaluation immediately after the training group gave a broad understanding of the experience of foster carers it was not the whole picture. The importance of follow up evaluation over time is significant in terms of our understanding of the experiences of foster carers in practice.

4.5.1.3 MOVING ON: Personal growth and reflective practice

Finally, the ‘moving on’ phase occurred, within which foster carers described experiencing a sense of personal growth, an increased confidence in their skills, an increase in their role as advocates and more in-depth understanding of the emotional needs of children. They also expressed a desire to design their training in terms of
mental health input and valued what Pritchard (2005) refers to as a collaborative approach to learning. This collaborative work with others may allow alternative perspectives to develop as through the learning process permanent change in mental associations occur as a result of the experience of the training (Burns, 2002). Issues relating to the personal growth of foster carers and how this affects their parenting permeated through the training process.

Understanding emotions behind the behaviours was a significant issue that was feedback by foster carers both in the reflective diaries and the interviews after the 12 week follow up period. Their perception of behaviours had altered and they found themselves more tolerant and understanding of the present in relation to the past. There was a reported increase in their knowledge and understanding of developmental delays which again led to a change in practice as they became more empowered to advocate on their child’s behalf within various settings and be more open minded (Gurney-Smith et al, 2010). Foster carers seemed to be finding a language for the emotions of their children which led to an increase of empathy and reflection on behaviours rather than a judgement or reaction. There was also a sense of digesting information gained from the training with many foster carers requesting follow up training. Many foster carers who had been struggling with their children’s behaviour and perceived them as difficult and challenging found the training supportive and helped them perceive their children differently considering them less disruptive after training. These findings were also reported by Holmes and Silver (2010) whose study indicated, that group interventions based upon attachment theory, social learning theory and principals of PACE as a model for parenting, can help to create an environment in which adult and child relationships are perceived in a more positive way (Holmes & Silver, 2010).

Finally, the role foster carers could play in co-creating and developing their future training was highlighted which addressed CAMHS support in the future. Foster carers wanted more workshops and training groups which could give practical strategies through follow up training. As in other studies, a more active role for foster carers is required (Robson& Bryant, 2009). There was a need to move away from foster carers being passive recipients of knowledge. Co-learning is a philosophy of teaching which is active in encouraging empowerment in teaching
which can lead to a community of practice (Brantmeier, 2011). This is an active view of learning for foster carers in which foster carers select, modify and create their own learning. The facilitator’s role within this would be as a ‘scaffold builder’ and critical reflection enhancer whereby a foster carer would extend their knowledge to a deeper and broader understanding within a group training setting (Brantmeier, 2011).

4.6 CONCLUSION

This research study has described the experiences of foster carers who have attended mental health training and who have valued inclusion and took advantage of the training they have been offered (Sargent & Obrien, 2004). The interviews and diaries and observational notes gave me informative and detailed data about the process of attending training over time which included an element of personal growth, an increase in perceived confidence and a reduction in isolation. Whilst previous studies evaluating training for foster carers have used quantitative measures of outcomes there has been little in depth qualitative studies describing the process of the experience of training (pre, post and follow up) (Laybourne et al, 2008).

Others have identified the need for a more in depth exploration of features of the training course (Warman et al, 2006). It has been recognised that objective measures directly linking changing behaviours in children and placement stability to the training, is fraught with methodological difficulties, however a qualitative enquiry can provide rich and detailed accounts of foster carers’ views, knowledge and experiences of attachment training and may illuminate changes in attitude, perception and the application of training in practice. This research study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodology in order to provide a comprehensive illuminative evaluation. A full discussion of the triangulation of these methods in relation to current literature will be outlined and discussed in Chapter 5 along with the limitations of this approach.