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**The Foster Caregiving Relationship with Newborns who have Feeding
Difficulties**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the

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Pepeha

I te taha toku māma

I te taha toku pāpā

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Ko Putauaki te maunga

Tauiwi

Ko Rangitaiki te awa

Ko Mataatua te waka

Ko Nga Maihi te hapū

Ko Ngāti Awa te iwi

Ko Nari Elizabeth Hillary Hann toku ingoa

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Ehara taku toa, he takitahi, he toa takitini

My success should not be bestowed onto me alone, as it was not individual success but success of a collective

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to expand on foster care and attachment literature by investigating how the relationship is impacted between a foster caregiver and newborn who experiences feeding difficulties. The most common types of feeding difficulties experienced include reflux, allergies, colic, arousal to feed, and sucking problems, with prenatal methamphetamine exposure being the most frequently cited reason for causality. Newborns who have been prenatally exposed to methamphetamine are at higher risk of preterm births. Prematurity has been widely associated with developmental issues in newborns, such as poor sucking reflexes. All newborns discussed in this study were of Māori descent, highlighting a possible association between Māori children in care and feeding difficulties. This association is thought to be strengthened by the social determinants faced by many Māori, and the punitive neo-liberal nature of the welfare system. Phenomenological interpretive analysis was used to understand the experiences of seven foster caregivers who were highly skilled in caring for newborns with feeding difficulties, and how the feeding difficulties could impact the attachment relationship and contribute to placement breakdowns. Additionally, the strategies that foster caregivers used to minimise the impact of the difficulty and optimise attachment interactions were explored. The feeding difficulties of newborns were found to make attachment interactions more difficult to achieve, but due to the fortitude of the caregivers in providing the best opportunities for newborns in their care, attachment interactions were reportedly always accomplished. Although feeding difficulties placed extra demand on the caregiver role, the commitment and motivation of the caregivers, and the intervention strategies they used to reduce the impact, promoted bonding and stabilised placements. Therefore, feeding difficulties were not associated with placement breakdowns. Rather, unanticipated extended placement timeframes, which impacted the caregiver's ability to provide a consistent and stable environment, were found to be more detrimental to the placement stability.

Understanding feeding difficulties and their impact on attachment for babies in foster care is crucial when caring for the nation's most vulnerable citizens and ensuring that they have the greatest opportunities for healthy development from the start of their lives.

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