CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Individuals That Have Been in the Foster Care System and Their Perception of Academic Achievement and Attainment of Higher Education

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work

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in collaboration with Monic Johnson

May 2016
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Dr. Eli Bartle, Chair                Date

California State University, Northridge
# Table of Contents

Signature page ii
List of Figures v
Abstract vi
Section 1: Introduction 1
  Disproportionality in the Foster Care System and Educational Outcomes 3
  Lack of Educational Support 4
  Academic Achievement and Attainment of Higher Education 5
  Perceptions of Educational Attainment 6
Section 2: Methods 8
  Participants 8
Section 3: Data Collection and Analysis 10
Section 4: Findings 12
  Themes 21
  Family 21
    Parent or guardian support 21
    Family or other support outside of a parent or guardian 21
  School 22
    Supportive professionals 22
    Support from high school and college programs 22
  Community 23
    Child welfare Caseworkers or social workers 23
    Outreach resources for foster parents/guardians 24
  Self-reliance 24
    Resilience 24
Section 5: Discussion 25
Section 6: Conclusion 30
References 32
Appendix A: Research flyer 34
Appendix B: Email to agencies 35
Appendix C: Interview 36
Appendix D: Joint Project Form 38
List of Figures

Figure 1.1 – General Overview 13
Figure 1.2 – Demographics 14
Figure 1.3 – High School 15
Figure 1.4 – Higher Education 16
Figure 1.5 – Thoughts on Higher Education 17
Figure 1.6 – Parents/ Guardians Thoughts on Higher Education 18
Figure 1.7 – Support Systems 19
Figure 1.8 – Foster Care 20
Abstract

Individuals That Have Been in the Foster Care System and Their Perception of Academic Achievement and Attainment of Higher Education

By Monic Johnson

Master of Social Work

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore the perceptions of African American former and or current foster care youth and their perception of academic achievement and attainment of higher education. This study aims to find the educational experiences of individuals that have been in foster care and to learn how their experience contributed to their perception of higher education. The study included in-depth interviews of 8 participants, all of whom are current or were former foster youth. These in-depth interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The data was first coded by topics and then grouped into themes. Analysis of four main themes and eight subthemes emerged from the perceptions of the participants of this study in regards to higher educational attainment. The main themes were family, school, community, and self-reliance. The subthemes were: parent or guardian support, family or other support outside of a parent or guardian, supportive educational professionals, support from high school and college programs, child welfare caseworkers or social workers, outreach resources for foster parents/guardians, self-advocacy and resilience. This study uses qualitative interviews to add to existing research, in that the research strives for a holistic understanding of academic achievement and attainment of higher education amongst African Americans that have been in care. Early implementation programs for college readiness, financial literacy, and professional development is drawn from this data.
Section 1: Introduction

Foster care services usually come to an abrupt end for individuals that do not choose to remain in care past the age of 18. Unfortunately, “many youth later resurface on welfare roles, inside the walls of the criminal justice institutions, in mental health and drug rehabilitation facilities, and in homeless shelters” (Okpych p.1390). Therefore, obtaining post-secondary education creates an avenue for individuals aging out of the foster care system to have a healthy and stable life. According to Okpych, in 2012, about 30,000 youth age out of the foster care system annually; a third of these individuals enter college but only about a tenth earn a college degree (p.1390). Due to the economic change within the labor market, the number of jobs requiring more than a high school degree has increased tremendously, thus, “postsecondary education and training have become increasingly important for individuals entering the job market” (p1390). More importantly, earning a college degree improves the quality of life for youth exiting the care system; a college degree provides individuals with an opportunity to build economic self-sufficiency, hold occupations that pay more, and more employment opportunities. Furthermore, individuals that have attained higher education “report lower rates of unemployment” (Okpych, 2012).

African Americans are more likely to live in poverty than whites, by 24 percent and 8 percent, respectively. In 2007 it was estimated that 11 percent of the general African American population was enrolled in higher education. However, 49 percent of these students were first generation college students and 46 percent had taken remedial courses, which reinforced the need for academic and social support. When considering the African American children in care, it is essential to understand that the African American population as a whole is challenged in attaining higher education. African American youth in care are at even greater risk for under
achieving in the education system, considering the barriers and difficulties they experience, which puts them at greater risk of earning less while working harder.

Over the course of one’s life span, a Bachelor’s degree is worth $2.8 million on average. At all levels of educational attainment, persons of color earn less than whites. Individuals within the general population who obtain a four-year degree earn about $17,500 more than someone with a high school diploma or its equivalent. College graduates are also more likely to be employed full time, and experience unemployment at significantly lower rates, 3.8 percent compared to 12.2 percent, respectively (Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011). On the contrary, foster youth graduate from college at lower rates than other populations, which is currently at 4 percent (Kirk et al., 2011).

When characteristics of this population is combined, for example, African American youth in care, are less likely to have the opportunity to achieve higher education due to lack of support, awareness of higher education, and knowledge regarding educational assistance. This in itself is setting up young Black youth in care to potentially work harder hours, have health complications earlier in life, and a lower life expectancy. For example, in 2008 the difference in life expectancy between people of color and whites varied depending on educational attainment. African Americans with more education than whites live longer than whites with less than a high school education. African Americans that have 16 years or more of higher education are expected to live four years less than whites with the comparable education. However, African Americans that have 12 years or less of higher education are expected to live 8 years longer than whites. This data suggests that with at least four years of higher education, African American youth have the opportunity to live longer healthier lives.
**Disproportionality in the Foster Care System and Educational Outcomes**

In 2014, approximately 415,129 children were in the foster care system (Children’s Bureau, 2016). Of the estimated 264,746 children who entered foster care during fiscal year of 2014, 22 percent were Black or African-American. Ten percent of these children were multiracial and 3 percent were unknown or unable to be determined. Racial and ethnic minorities represented a disproportionate amount of children in out-of-home placements (Dyce, 2015). Based on findings, “6% of all children in the U.S and 12% of African American children will experience out-of-home placement by the age of 18” (Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes, & Rios-Salas, 109). Research indicates a recent decline in the number of youth in care, yet systemic disproportionality continues to exist for African American children in the foster care system (Harris, Jackson, O’Brien & Pecora, 2009). African Americans make up 15% of the U.S. population, yet comprise 45% of the children in care and spend an average of 9.47 years in the foster care system (Dyce, 2015; Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013). Further, African American children stay in foster care an average of nine months longer than their white counterparts and are less likely to be adopted or returned to their biological families (McRoy, 2008). Thus, “few African American families meet the needs of African American youth in care and trans-racial adoption is often many children's only option for expedient permanency” (Anyon, 2011).

In addition to lengthy stays in the child welfare system, foster care youth tend to experience high mobility rates due to lack of stable placements (Morton, 2015). In a study done on barriers to academic achievement for foster youth, Morton (2015) found that while in care, 32.3% of participants experienced eight or more placements and 65% experienced seven or more school changes. A review of this literature suggests that, “each move a foster child makes results in a 4-6 month loss of academic achievement” (Morton, 2015). Ultimately, high rates of mobility
disrupt one’s educational process; school records are often lost or are not transferred in a timely manner, and the student faces the risk of a delay in enrollment (Burley & Halpern, 2001).

Individuals in care that experience high mobility rates seldom receive sufficient help to catch up on missed schooling, experience insensitive responses to behavioral difficulties due to traumatic experiences, and attend school sites that promote low-level occupation preparedness (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Even within mainstream schools, a higher proportion of foster care individuals are placed in special education units where the possibilities of academic achievement are limited (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Research indicates that African American males are disproportionately placed in special education when compared to their white counterparts (Dyce, 2015). In addition to this, it is common for foster care youth to bring emotional and behavioral challenges into the classroom setting; however, when this occurs, “the educational system may not be adequately prepared to meet those unique needs” (Morton, 477).

Lack of Educational Support

Generally, former and present foster youth enter adulthood less prepared, lacking adequate resources and support systems when compared to the general population (Salazar, 2013). Subsequently, the risk of disruption is extremely high for most individuals in foster care and the need to develop a network of supportive relationships becomes significant (Martin & Jackson, 2002). While foster youth who attend college are “expected to manage finances, health care, housing and transportation,” many of these individuals lack accessibility to permanent homes and are forced to return to the same environments in which they were once removed or they end up homeless as a result of not having anywhere to go (Morton, 480; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012). In addition to this, former and present foster care individuals who attend college also face the experience of having no place to go during university vacation (Martin & Jackson,
Consequently, once these youth age out of the foster care system, they are more likely to experience mental health problems and not receive mental health services, face an even greater risk of homelessness, or involvement with the criminal justice system (McRoy, 2008). Therefore, social support from friends and family is an important factor that can possibly contribute to the educational success of former and present foster care youth (Unrau et al., 2012).

**Academic Achievement and Attainment of Higher Education**

According to Martin and Jackson (2002), attending school regularly is a prerequisite for academic success for foster care youth. Approximately 50% of all foster children will graduate from high school; of those that graduate from high school, about 33% will pursue post-secondary education (Morton, 2015). Further factors contributing to academic success for foster youth include: well informed caregivers, normalization of an individual's foster care experience, and positive encouragement from significant others, and good relationships with social workers who show genuine concern for their well-being (Martin & Jackson, 2002). One’s personal resiliency is also a contributing factor to academic success; however, this is negatively impacted by stereotypes and stigmatizations associated with being in the foster care system (Martin & Jackson, 2012). Nearly 32% of former and present foster youth stress the need to overcome negative stereotypes (Martin & Jackson, 2012).

The extent to which youth in care experience academic success varies across individuals. Those with better emotion regulation and impulse control have increased levels of academic success, demonstrated by positive academic engagement (Cheung, Lwin, & Jenkins, 2012). Self-perception has also been “connected to academic achievement in a reciprocal relationship with previous academic success predicting improved academic self-perception, which in turn predicts future academic achievement” (Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen & Colvin, 310, 2011).
Perceptions of Educational Attainment

Regarding the perceptions of African American former or present foster care youth and their insight on academic achievement and attainment of higher education, individuals aspired to attend college but various obstacles guided their personal educational path. While it is common knowledge that an education is beneficial in life, experiences of youth in care may not have this general perception of educational attainment. It was found that while youth in foster care report high educational aspirations, only about 10% of these individuals actually enroll in college, with as little as 4% graduating from college and earning a degree (Kirk et al., 2015).

Additionally, “youth in the foster care system often experience multiple disruptions across familial, academic, and social environments, which may further disrupt their future goals” (Kirk et al., 2011). Particularly, African Americans in care are more likely to have higher dropout rates than those who are not in the foster care system (McRoy, 2008). Therefore, in order to reduce the risk factors that affect academic achievement, further research suggests that it is essential for foster care youth and adolescents to have at least one stable adult in their life to promote positive academic outcomes (Dyce, 2015; Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013).

Generally, foster care youth lack healthy and stable relationships with others and “their lifetime experiences of loss and impermanence have decreased opportunities for them to form lasting and close relationships” (Singer et al., 2013). Other issues such as distrust and quick rejection also impede one’s ability to form and maintain healthy relationships with others (Singer et al., 2013). Based on findings by Cheung et al., (2012), caregiver involvement is a significant relationship to academic success and may also influence academic accomplishments for foster care individuals.
Researchers further suggest that caregiver level of education, educational expectations and involvement in the child’s education appear to have the strongest effect on academic achievement for foster care youth (Cheung et al., 2012). Cheung et al., (2012) define parental educational involvement as: association with school-related activities, accessibility to books and other educational resources, as well as expectations around the value of education. After reviewing previous studies, it is evident that there is a significant gap in research regarding the perceptions of academic achievement and attainment of higher education among African American individuals that have been in the foster care system. In the present literature, there was a lack of qualitative interviews specific to African American individuals which indeed make the present study unique.
Section 2: Method

Method

Participants

The lived experiences of 8 former and present foster youth were explored through qualitative in-depth interviews. Participants for this study were only considered if the individual identified as African American, Black or of African descent that have been in the foster care system at least once in their life. All participants are over the age of 18, with the oldest participant being age 35 at the time of the interview. All research participants are residents of Los Angeles, California. To recruit former and present foster care youth for this study, researchers utilized the snowball sampling technique which encompassed flier recruitment via email and the social media platform, Facebook. Those seeing the flyer and wishing to participate in the study could contact the researchers by email which was listed on the flyer. When potential participants contacted the researcher, the researcher explained the study to him/her, arranged an interview time and location if the potential participant agreed to be interviewed, and assigned that individual an identification number. In addition, participants were asked to pass along fliers about the study to share with other former foster care youth that they knew of. For further recruitment, researchers drafted an email that was distributed throughout the California State University Northridge (CSUN) Masters of Social Work department, Resilient Scholars at CSUN, Guardian Scholars of Los Angeles Valley College, and Guardian Scholars at University California, Los Angeles. Interviews began after approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The purpose of the study was explained to the participant prior to the formal interview. An informed consent was provided and explained by the interviewer to insure that the participant
clearly understood confidentiality and the interview process. If the respondent agreed to continue with the interview, they were provided with the two copies of the consent form; one was for participant’s personal records and the other was signed and given to the researcher for the research purposes. In addition, each respondent was asked for permission to audiotape the interview. If a participant did not wish to be audio recorded, handwritten notes were taken by the researcher. When the interview was completed, each participant was compensated for their participation in the study.
Section 3: Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, via in-person or Skype. All interviews consisted of a standard set of questions prepared by the researchers. The questions began with basic background and demographic information, such as age and ethnicity. The interview then transitioned into open and close ended questions regarding educational attainment of high school, college, perception of higher education, followed by support systems in regards to educational attainment. Specifically, some of the questions on the interview schedule stated: What was your high school experience like?, Are you currently in any form of higher education?, Tell me about your thoughts on higher education., Do you think achieving higher education is important?, and Do you have any family members outside of your parent or guardian that received a degree?.

The researchers transcribed and coded data from the interview schedule into charts specified by categories. These categories included: demographics, high school, college, thoughts on higher education, support systems, and foster care. Researchers then used consensual coding to identify common themes across interviews. Both researchers coded individually and collaborated on commonalities of patterns and themes regarding participants perceptions of academic achievement and higher educational. Ethical issues were considered and monitored during data collection in efforts to decrease influences of social desirability, personal biases, and researcher’s agenda. Potential risk of this study was considered and every effort was made to reduce the risk. Confidentiality was maintained by coding any identifiable information of the participants in the study. All coding transcriptions were destroyed at the end of the study. Furthermore, through the interview process participants were given the opportunity through their
own words to share their truth about their experiences, therefore minimizing the power dynamic between the researcher and the interviewee.
Section 4: Findings

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample. Of the 8 participants, 5 identified as African American or Black, and 3 identified as Black but also acknowledged that they were multi-racial. None of the participants identified as being of African descent. Of the 8 participants, 3 were males, and 5 were female. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 35, with the mean age being 27. All of the participants received a high school diploma or a general equivalency diploma (GED). The highest form of education completed at the time of the interview was a master’s degree, which was completed by 2 out of 8 participants (25%). At the time of interview, 3 out of 8 participants (37%) were in some form of higher education, which included community college, a four year university, and graduate school. 1 participant (12%) had completed trade school and 1 participant (12%) did not attain higher education. Of the 8 participants, 2 indicated that they planned to seek higher education in the future.
Eight participants were included in this study. Figure 1.1 provides a visual display of the participants, complied from the background and demographic interview questions.

Figure 1.1. General Overview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Black/White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>African American/Puerto Rican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Black/Puerto Rican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1.2 lists the demographics of the population studied.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Findings:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age at interview</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/ Multiracial</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High school</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earned diploma or General Equivalency Diploma</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institution Attended or Attending</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade School</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community college</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4- year institution</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree or Higher</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1.3 list participants that earned a high school diploma or its equivalency, a general education diploma (GED).

Figure 1.3: High School.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Diploma</th>
<th>GED</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1.4 list participants who completed community a college, trade school, or university. The figure also lists educational completed and those who did not complete education.

Figure 1.4: Higher Education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Community College</th>
<th>Trade School</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Already completed</th>
<th>Did not complete</th>
<th>Plan to complete</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1.5 lists participant’s thoughts on higher education.

Figure 1.5: Thoughts on Higher Education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Higher education is important</th>
<th>Higher education is not important to me at this time</th>
<th>“I Felt I had the opportunity to attend college”</th>
<th>“I did not feel I had the opportunity to go to college”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>8</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1.6 lists parent/guardian’s thoughts on higher education and if their parent/guardian attained higher education.

Figure 1.6: Parent/Guardian’s Thoughts on Higher Education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>“Higher education is important to my parents/guardians”</th>
<th>“Higher education is not important to my parents/guardians”</th>
<th>“My parents/guardians attained a higher education degree”</th>
<th>“My parents/guardians did not attain a higher education degree”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>x</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1.7 lists participant’s support systems and family members that attained higher education. The figure also lists participants who pushed themselves to attain higher education.

**Figure 1.7: Support Systems.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>“Someone in my life encouraged my educational attainment”</th>
<th>Has a family member that attained a higher education degree</th>
<th>“I pushed myself to achieve higher education”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>x</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1.8 lists participants who were encouraged or discouraged by foster care, and participants whose decision to attain or not attain higher education was not altered by foster care.

Figure 1.8: Foster Care.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>“Foster care encouraged me to achieve higher education”</th>
<th>“Foster care discouraged me to achieve higher education”</th>
<th>“Foster care did not alter my decision to achieve or achieve higher education”</th>
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Themes

Analysis of four main themes and eight subthemes emerged from the perceptions of the participants of this study in regards to higher educational attainment. The main themes were family, school, community, and self-reliance. The subthemes were: parent or guardian support, family or other support outside of a parent or guardian, supportive educational professionals, support from high school and college programs, child welfare caseworkers or social workers, outreach resources for foster parents/guardians, self-advocacy and resilience.

Family

**Parent or guardian support**

4 out of 8 participants (50%) reported that their parent or guardian thought it was important to attain higher education. Equally, 4 participants (50%) reported that higher education was not important to their parent/guardian. All 8 participants reported that none of their parents/guardians obtained higher education. 3 participants (37%) specifically stated that their parents were not highly educated and that their successes they experienced came from foster families, guardians, and some professionals.

“My foster mom initially was kind of not helpful but once she realized I really wanted to go away to Northridge she was pretty supportive.” (African American, Female, 35 years old)

**Family or other support outside of a parent or guardian**

7 of the 8 (87%) participants identified at least one family members that had obtained higher education. All of the participants identified at least one family member that encouraged them to obtain some form of education. However, 2 participants (25%) reported that they were only encouraged to obtain a degree up to the community college level.
“I received encouragement from social workers and the informal programs they offered. But the people that watched me did not say anything about education.” (African American, Female, 24 years old)

School

Supportive professionals

While in care, 2 participants (25%) discussed having had some encouragement and support to attain higher education from professionals, such as social workers, teachers, and probation officers. On the other hand, 6 of the 8 participants (75%) reported that they felt that their social workers were not supportive in their educational attainment. 1 participant (12% ) reported feeling blatant discouragement from her social worker when she inquired about higher education.

“I had a really negative social worker that took me to educational seminars and told me really negative statistics (about foster care youth and college), she used that as a way to discourage me (from going to college).” (Black, Female, 21 years old)

Support from high school and college programs

A majority of participants discussed a lack of awareness around higher education. That being said, psychoeducation around higher education, discussions or programs that promote higher education for high school students was a common need across interviews and could very well benefit this population. Furthermore, while some participants received services of support, such as TILP (Transitional Independent Living Plan), these services were not provided long enough and or participants did not receive enough financial assistance to cover their educational expenses. John H. Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program - provides foster youth with funding for “financial, housing, counseling, employment, and other appropriate services...to complement their own efforts to achieving self-sufficiency” (p.81). Only 1 participant reported benefitting from this program due to awareness, others were not aware of the Chafee grant and therefore could not take advantage of this program. Other programs that were mentioned by
participants that was beneficial in their attainment of higher education was the Educational
Opportunity Program (EOP).

“When I got to CSUN, EOP supported me”. (Black, Female, 25 years old)

“I didn’t really think I had the opportunity until my social worker introduced grants and
things to me. I just didn’t think I could pay for it and I didn’t know about loans... I wasn’t aware
of the opportunities. I didn’t even take advantage of the 1999 Independence Act which I qualified
for, well I didn’t know about it. But, I mean my social worker did the best she could. She wasn’t
really aware of what was out there but she did her very best.” (African American, Female, 35
years old)

Community

Child welfare caseworkers or social workers

Child welfare workers and caseworkers were mentioned as supportive community members who
provided educational guidance. 3 of the 8 participants (37%) described vivid life altering
connections that they had with social workers and or case workers, which lead to participants
leading positive prosperous lives, regardless of educational attainment. However, for the
participants that did receive higher education; 1 participant reported that she did not receive
support from a social worker or caseworker in her attainment of higher education. On other hand,
some participant gave recognition to social workers and or case workers that encouraged them to
achieve higher education. Social workers lack of awareness of programs to support higher
education attainment for foster youth.

“My social worker did the best she could. She wasn’t really aware of what was out there
but she did her very best. (African American, Female, 35 years old).

“Umm... my social worker encouraged me, yes.” (African American, Female, 35 years
old).

Outreach resources for foster parents/guardians

In terms of community outreach and resources for foster parents/guardians, the majority of
participants reported having a lack of knowledge and accessibility to resources within the
community that might have helped guide them in their educational attainment. All of the participants also reported that their parents/guardians lacked knowledge of resources that would have been useful to better support their children in attaining higher education.

**Self-reliance**

**Resilience**

4 of the 8 participants (50%) stated that they encouraged themselves to obtain higher education. While some of the participants did not recognize their own strength in their life experiences, they could not identify a support system in their attainment of higher education, other participants reported that they pushed themselves to attain higher education.

“*I have five nieces and nephews that needed to see someone do it, and they know it’s possible*” (Black, Female, 21 years old).

*If I didn’t go to school I wouldn’t be making the money I am or have my own place*. “*I had to grab a hold of my own life*”. (Black/multi-racial, Female, 31)
Section 5: Discussion

The ethnographic in-depth interviews of 8 participants was captured through this study. This qualitative approach examines the perceptions of former and present African American/Black youth that have been in the foster care system and their attainment of higher education. From the data gathered during this study, several implications can be drawn. These conclusions are provisional based on the size of the population and the method of the sample. Although the sample is not without limitations, the results presented do support that educational attainment can be influenced through a variety of social support systems as well as the foster care system. Foster care youth who do not have social support are less likely to pursue higher education. Moreover, from this study, it was found that some parents were not highly educated, and for those participants that had achieved higher education, encouragement came from foster families, guardians, and professionals.

From the findings of the research, a lack of awareness around higher education was also a major issue for participants that wanted to attend college after exiting the care system. The credit for lack of awareness was given to parents, foster families, as well as workers and professionals. The solution to this lack would be psychoeducation around higher education. Additionally, while majority of the participants had other family members complete some form of higher education, it was rare that encouragement came from those family members. Furthermore, youth who do not attain higher education are at risk of a lower quality of life, self-sufficiency, and acquire occupations that pay less (Okpych, 2012). Without higher education, foster youth are at risk for unstable lives as reflected in emancipation preparation that can be linked to housing instability, education, work uncertainty, and family dysfunction (Inglehart and Becerra, 2002). Due to the disproportionality of African American/Black youth in care, this study is necessary because it
adds to existing literature. Emerging themes from this study served as a stepping stone to understanding cultural and diverse needs that are unique to this population. This study further suggest that life altering connections with social workers and caseworkers were found to increase positive life experiences and preeminent life security.

The intersectional reality of children in care is that they are faced with adult situation very early in life; situations such as, worrying about where they will sleep, where their next meal will come from, and being separated from parents and siblings. A combination of these factors interrupts what the main focus of what everyone's lives should be; living a healthy, prosperous lives. African Americans/Blacks in care face the possibility of being involved in a system that could potentially set them up for a life of hardship. These individuals are at risk of lacking an education and “general living skills to assist them to become self-sufficient” (Inglehart & Becerra p.102). However, not only will these individuals face difficult life situations, they may also fall victim to systemic and institutional racism. While there are established programs in place for youth that want to pursue higher education, such as AB12, these programs may only be a minimal incentive for young people exiting the foster care system. These programs are important because support services for foster youth transitioning into adulthood are allowed to reenter care until the age of 21 (Lightbourne, 2011). Furthermore, this program provides foster care youth with financial and housing support for those that are interesting in attaining higher education and or are employed for 40 hours a week. Moreover, these programs may not provide funds long enough or all educational expenses may not be covered by this program.

From this qualitative research study, it was found that encouragement, guidance, and support are potentially more valuable than solely having foster care to college programs. While the sample has limitations, the results presented here do support Inglehart and Becerra in that
“the relationships developed between the... [professional staff]...and program participants may support, encourage, and promote the participants’ growth and maturity” and their path to higher education (p.102). Furthermore, as stated above and should be reiterated, without an education, African American/Black youth “face the many obstacles that all youth of color encounter in the labor market”, which is stability within their financial and personal lives” (Inglehart & Becerra p.102).

The goal of this paper is to inform readers on the realities of higher education and the foster care system that African American/Black individuals experience. Because enrollment and graduation rates are low (4%), it is important for professionals to understand ways in which to combat low entrance rates to community colleges and universities for foster youth (Kirk et al., 2011). Clearly, future research in this area is needed to further study the relational aspects of higher education and African American/Black individuals in care. A vital area to consider is the role of the worker and the race/ethnicity of the child and the development of the relationship. Strengthening of the worker - foster youth relationship is one that should be continuously polished. From this study, it was found that 75% of the research participants felt that their workers were not supportive of their educational attainment and 1 person felt she was blatantly discouraged from pursuing higher education.

Considering individuals may no longer be in foster care or have contact with social services, there may be some difficulty locating this population. “The social visibility of the target population is the first methodological problem that must be confronted in any research that uses snowball sampling methods to locate a study sample” (Faugier and Sargeant, 1997). Initially, the present researchers aimed for at least 20 participants to be included in the study, however the present study reflects a smaller population size of only 8 participants. Therefore, while it was
difficult to locate youth that have been in the foster care system, more and longer research projects of this kind are needed. Furthermore, a limitation to using snowball sampling is the likelihood of producing a homogenous sample (Luboviski 2004). Moreover, researchers were not guaranteed to locate subjects of a representative sample that is inclusive of both male and female respondents that have obtained higher education. In this study, majority of the participants were female and most had obtained some form of higher education. Lastly, due to the nature of this study and some of the topics discussed, several participants did not wish to participate in the study. While some participants reached out to the researcher to participate in this study, some did not follow through with scheduled interviews, and therefore was not able to be included in the study.

For the 8 participants in this study, common themes generated a clear understanding of the lack of support that African American/Black youth experience while in care, which ultimately altered their perception of attaining higher education, either negatively or positively. However, in spite of being in foster care, it was found across interviews that participants did not blame their experience of being in care as a reason to attain or not higher education. Across the themes, it was found that African American/Black, former or present foster youth, identified a parent/guardians or autonomy as a key role in the attainment of higher education. A majority of participants lacked familial and other supportive systems outside of a parent or guardian in regards to their educational attainment. Professionals and workers were commonly identified as influential people in their pursuit of higher education. While 2 participants (25%) in this study identified a mentor or role model within their family or foster family who supported their educational attainment, 3 participants (37%) mentioned a professional worker as someone that influenced their educational achievement. Participants mostly reported that they had other family
members outside of their parent or guardian who received higher education but did not encourage them to attend college or pursue any form of post-secondary education.
Section 6: Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of African American/Black present or former foster care youth in regard to academic achievement and attainment of higher education. Across studies, some of the common barriers found that alter African American/Black individual’s perception of academic achievement and attainment of higher education includes the following: disproportionality within the child welfare system, high rates of mobility, and lack of educational and social support. Overall, participants of this study felt that higher education was important but for some, higher education was not an option for their life.

Based on the insufficient amount of literature surfacing the present topic and target population, researchers of this study intend to add to the present literature with efforts to influence foster care programs and educational institutions to recognize that foster care individuals “are best qualified to provide advice to children who are currently in the foster care system as well as recommendations regarding how social service agencies can better understand and meet the needs of children in the foster care system” (Dyce, 2015, p. 88). Researchers of the present study argue that caregiver and professional support, along with information on early interventions among educational institutions can potentially strengthen positive perceptions of higher educational attainment for African American/Black former and present foster care individuals.

Implications from this study propose that social workers and other professional should be knowledgeable of existing programs that are tailored to serve foster care youth who are interested in attaining higher education. Likewise, social workers and other professionals who may encounter foster care youth should be resourceful and distribute information and support
regarding higher education. Furthermore, information should be presented to youth as early as possible so that foster youth are aware of the opportunities that are available to them.
References


Appendix A

ATTENTION: Present or Former Foster Care Youth:

- Are you between the ages of 18 and 32 years old?
- Do you identify as African American/ Black/ African Descent?
- Have you ever been in the foster care system?

If would like to participate in our research study, please contact Monic or Jazzminn at:

Monic Johnson
monic.johnson.354@my.csun.edu

Jazzminn Henry
jazzminn.henry.171.@my.csun.edu

Note: This flier is for the recruitment of African American/ Black/ African Descent, present or former foster care individuals that would like to participate in a research study that will inquire about individual perceptions of higher education. This study will be conducted as a capstone research assignment as part of a Masters of Social Work requirement and will be supervised by MSW capstone advisor, Dr. Eli Bartle: eli.e.bartle@csun.edu
Appendix B

Hi Dr. Levin,

My name is Jazzminn Henry and my capstone partner is Monic Johnson. We are currently conducting our Capstone research assignment, titled *Individuals that have been in the Foster Care System and Their Perception of Academic Achievement and Attainment of Higher Education*. Our Capstone advisor is Dr. Eli Bartle.

We are wondering if you may allow the social work department permission to send out an email to the MSW, 2-16 cohort with our flyer in our best efforts to enhance the recruitment process of our research study.

If so, attached to this email are IRB approval and our flyer.

Thank you
2 Attachments – IRB Approval and Capstone Flier
Appendix C

Interview Questions: African American Individuals that have been in the Foster Care System and Their Perception of Academic Achievement and Attainment of Higher Education

Please answer questions as best and as honest as possible. Feel free to skip any questions that do not apply to you or questions that you do not feel comfortable answering.

Demographics

1. How old are you? ___

2. How do you identify in regards to your race or ethnicity?

High School

3. Did you attend and complete high school? From an educational perspective, what was your high school experience like? [For example: Was it a good experience? Were you encouraged to go to college?]  

4. If you did not complete high school, do you plan on getting your high school diploma or GED?

5. Is there any particular reason why you did or did not get your high school diploma?

College

NOTE: Answer 6 or 7, NOT both.

6. Are you currently in any form of higher education (i.e. Vocational school, trade school, community college, university, etc.)? If yes, are you a full-time or part-time student? Please describe which school, what you are studying, and how long you have been attending.

7. Did you graduate from any form of higher education? If yes, what school did you graduate from? What degree did you earn? If no, please explain why you did not complete the schooling.
Thoughts on Higher Education

8. From your perspective, what are your parents/guardians thoughts on higher education? [For example: Was higher education important? Were you encouraged to go? Do your parents have any form of higher education?]

9. Tell me about your thoughts on higher education? Do you think achieving higher education is important? Why or why not?

10. Prior to going to college, did you feel like you had the opportunity to attain higher education? Why or why not? [If you did not go to college, skip to question 11.] [For example: In your household or community, was college an expectation or an option?]

Support Systems

11. Is there anyone in your life that has encouraged your educational achievement? If so, please explain your relation to them. In what ways have they influenced you?

12. Do you have any family members outside of your parent or guardian that received a degree? If so, have they influenced or encouraged you in regards to achieving higher education?

Foster Care

13. In what ways do you think foster care encouraged or discouraged you in regards to achieve or not achieve higher education?

14. Based on your experience of being in the foster care system, in what ways do you feel the child welfare system can improve to increase higher college rates for foster care youth?

15. What do you consider your main reason(s) for attending or not attending college?
Appendix D

Joint Project Form

The research project, titled Individuals That Have Been in the Foster Care System and their Perception of Academic Achievement and Higher Education is a joint graduate project between,

Monic Johnson and Jazzminn Henry

This document will explain the division of responsibilities between the two parties. Any additional information can be included in a separate document attached to this Addendum page.

Monic Johnson is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:
• Conducting individual research on the selected topic
• Assisting in the Human Subjects Processing for MSW Human Subject Approvals granted in Fall 2015
• Recruiting subjects through a snowball sampling technique
• Scheduling individual interviews with participants in person or via Skype
• Transcribing audio recordings or handwritten notes from individual interviews
• Purchase individual incentives and distribute to the participant after completion of the in-person interview

Jazzminn Henry is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:
• Conducting individual research on the selected topic
• Assist in Human Subjects Processing for MSW Human Subject Approvals granted in Fall 2015
• Recruiting subjects through a snowball sampling technique
• Scheduling individual interviews with participants in person or via Skype
• Transcribing audio recordings or handwritten notes from individual interviews
• Purchase individual incentives and distribute to the participant after completion of the in-person interview

Both parties shared responsibilities for the following tasks/document sections:
• Collaborating to consensually identify common themes across interviews and organized on a chart
• Participating in any revisions required for the final Capstone research paper
• Attending and actively participating during scheduled meetings with the Capstone advisor
• Graduate Capstone final paper was composed and edited as a group throughout the Fall 2015 and Spring 2016 semesters until completed.
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