

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

AN EXAMINATION OF COLLEGE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES AMONG FOSTER YOUTH

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Doctor of Education Degree in Educational Leadership

By

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Dedication

First and foremost, I wanted to take the time to dedicate this dissertation to the foster youth who graciously agreed to be interviewed for this dissertation. It is my hope that this research can be used to help create a better understanding and help assist foster youth to greater success. I appreciate the candor that each of you provided. There can be no greater improvements without direct feedback from foster youth. Please understand I am forever grateful for your participation and feel honored that you provide such amazing feedback.

I am also dedicated this dissertation to my wife Meike and my daughter Nayeli. Without the love and support they have provided me I wouldn't have been able to get through this endeavor as gracefully as I have. You both have inspired me to push past the discomfort to continue each and every day. To my daughter Nayeli, from the day you were born you have inspired me to be a better person. I am forever grateful to my family for the love and inspiration you have provided.

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ABSTRACT

AN EXAMINATION OF COLLEGE TRANSITION EXPERIENCES AMONG FOSTER YOUTH

By

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Foster youth face many challenges in achieving success in higher education. These challenges significantly impair their ability to achieve their educational goals to the same extent as non-foster youth achieve. This study examined the transitional experiences of first-year, first-generation of foster youth. I conducted a grounded theory study to examine the first-year transitional experiences through the lens of social and family influences. I conducted interviews with foster youth students to identify common themes that students experience transitioning to and during the first year of college. Themes related to factors such as family, social, and program support affect foster youth, revealing how emotional support and internal motivation impact foster youth in their goal of achieving academic success.

CHAPTER 1

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Only two percent of foster youth who have exited the guardianship systems will graduate from college, despite the fact that foster youth have the same ambitions as those of the non-foster population, while 10 percent of eligible college age foster youth actually enroll in college (Davis, 2006). There is little doubt that former foster youth have tremendous challenges preventing many from attaining their educational goals. As of 2003, there were approximately 800,000 children in foster care (Davis, 2006). By definition, foster youth have either experienced abuse or neglect in their lives, which has created significant obstacles that affect their ability to achieve their educational goals (Wolanin, 2005). A study conducted in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois exploring foster youth outcomes after 18 years of age discovered the bleak outlook for foster youth after aging out of the system, with 33.8% of participants in the study reporting an arrest by the age of 19 (Courtney et al., 2011).

Despite the bleak picture, Courtney et al. (2011) discovered encouraging trends among foster youth. For example, in Illinois, foster youth were able to continue in foster care after the age 18 and this provided a measurable decrease in the rates of incarceration. Yet, former foster youth have some of the lowest levels of degree attainment and often are lacking the resources to overcome the obstacles that are often unique to this population (Davis, 2006). The need to examine these issues is vital, because many foster youth will have difficulties in transitioning into independent living (Leathers & Testa, 2006). The need to understand the uniquely challenging transition for foster youth is imperative for improving their outcomes in college.

Research Problem

With the documented low levels of educational achievement and limited insight into the challenges facing foster youth, we know little of the lived experiences facing college-age foster youth in higher education. Researchers have sought to understand how and why these students succeed in college and how the first-year transition experiences affect their overall achievement, (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005; Barrat & Berliner, 2013). We have a basic understanding of the challenges that foster youth experiences have on students, but we need to understand more about their experiences to help staff, faculty, and administrators assist foster youth overcome the obstacles that prevent them from achieving their educational goals. The lack of comprehensive research on foster youth in higher education has left these youth from being identified, which has caused many college and university faculty and staff to ignore this population (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Davis, 2006). This lack of research has prevented not only the population from being identified but also prevented services from being provided to these students, which has prevented foster youth from receiving the services needed to improve their outcomes.

Most studies have focused their research on K-12 issues, physical, and mental health challenges and the conditions leading up to higher education, but little has been recorded during their time in college (Wolanin, 2005). While there exists today a renewed push for further research on foster youth in higher education, there has been little data to explain the low retention rates we see from foster youth in their first-year in higher education. Locally, many foster youth programs in California report up to 50% of their foster youth drop out during the first year, despite intensive support services. To create a deeper understanding and to help us further examine the low retention rates of first-year foster youth in higher education we must attempt to identify the specific phenomena that influence student success, especially during the

first-year transition, thus allowing foster youth programs the ability to tailor and target programs to assist the foster youth community more effectively.

Research Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to explore the transitional experiences of foster youth in college. I examined how transitional experiences impact foster youth through the lens of family and social settings that these students experience. By interviewing foster youth in these environments, I am working to generate an explanatory model, based on a grounded theory approach. My overall aim is to explore these first-year experiences and to identify how familial and social influences have an impact on the students and how that could impact our understanding of these transitional periods. While not all foster youth experience multiple placements, most foster youth will experience multiple placements in their lifetime (Davis, 2006). For many foster youth, these transitions become experiences that define their early childhood (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). Transitions become a part of who they are, and this is what is driving the direction of the study.

Research Questions

The problem that this research study addresses is the lack of information related to challenges facing foster youth entering higher education. While there is limited research identifying the factors associated with the decreased level of achievement, there exists a gap in our understanding of the challenges facing foster youth based on current research. We are also starting to develop a picture of what barriers exists, but once a student is currently enrolled in the university, that is where the research is still currently developing. Accordingly, the following questions guided this study:

1. What factors shape the transition experiences of first-year, first-generation foster youth in comprehensive regional public universities?
2. How do family and social backgrounds influence college transition of first-year, first-generation foster youth?

Conceptual Framework

Foster youth represent a unique subset of the student population in higher education. This unique population come with challenges that obstruct their ability to be successful. While each challenge is not necessarily unique, the totality of the obstacles creates a complete picture of the lived experience of foster youth. This unique constellation is why I have chosen to use funds of knowledge to inform my study. Funds of knowledge has been defined as “the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, Gonzalez, 2001). As reported by Salazar, funds of knowledge is also important because foster alumni who graduated from college were identified as a uniquely identifiable population, exhibiting a constellation of behaviors that were common amongst this group. The outcomes for foster youth college graduates were significantly different in issues ranging from earning potential to mental health issues (Salazar, 2012).

This study recognizes the unique characteristics of this population and has utilized a design that accounts for foster youth being designated as a separate subgroup in higher education. The constellation of experiences foster youth face is truly unique and to fully understand the challenges these students face, we must first acknowledge foster youth as a uniquely challenged population. Only through a full exploration of the foster youth experience can we begin to understand how and why they perform at the levels they do and by isolating and

illustrating the challenges this population faces, we can begin to understand why their outcomes are significantly lower than non-foster youth. Funds of knowledge is a concept that helps define the experiences of foster youth. From either alternative familial placements or foster care placements, foster youth experience a unique set of circumstances that hinder their development and obstruct their ability to achieve academic success. Knowledge of this experience from a first-year transitional perspective will create a level of understanding that does not exist today.

Overview of the Methodology

I conducted a grounded based study on first year transitional programs and their effectiveness on foster youth retention. To capture the lived experiences of these students whom I have chosen to interview 8 students and conduct interviews to explore foster youth experiences. The interviews are the main instrumentation for data collection along with some supporting data from field notes. I collected data by conducting on-site interviews with college-enrolled foster youth participating in foster youth programs. The interviewees were chosen from existing foster youth programs. Students from two campuses in Southern California were contacted from existing foster youth programs were contacted and from that pool I randomly choose the 16 candidates. The data once collected was analyzed to search for common themes and experiences that might help to highlight the students' experiences and illuminate any common themes that may further guide research and program design.

Limitations

The major limitations identified in the study were access, mistrust, and adoption of institutional bias. These are some obstacles that created challenges in collecting data. These youths will often develop a profound sense of distrust in adults and authority figures because of the instability they have experienced in their lives (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). These issues can

often prevent the student from engaging with figures of authority because of past traumas, which may cause difficulties in recording the unique experiences of these students. Trust was an important element to consider when conducting the interviews. Developing an atmosphere where the student feels protected was vital to the creation of trust, in which the student feels confident that their identity will be respected and protected and if need be, they can withdrawal their participation from the study.

Students entering a foster youth program are exposed to the program goals and objectives that may influence their perspectives on how foster youth issues need to be addressed. This can create an institutional bias which can create a significant challenge in separating student opinions from the programs stated mission. As the students engage in the college environment and foster youth programs, there is the possibility they may adopt the program goals as their own personal values and learn to provide administrators and program staff with responses that echo the mission statement from the program. Working with and explaining the mission of the research project was important in creating an environment where the students can feel free to share candid experiences and insights without expectation. Not all students participated in foster youth programs at their colleges, but for those that did, separating the stated mission of the program from the opinions of the students participating in the program proved a challenge.

Another significant limitation in the study was access to these students. Foster youth can be guarded and difficult to contact when they are contacted. Working with this university to identify foster youth students provided an opportunity to overcome these obstacles, but there are significant protections to the status of these students' due to privacy laws and regulations. The use of third-party correspondence was important in contacting these students. These limitations

had a significant impact on the number of students I was able to contact and invite to participate in the study.

Delimitations

Limiting the size of the study and utilizing grounded theory were in response to the limited amount research on foster youth and were the main delimitations utilized. By restricting the number of participants in the study, I have chosen to focus on providing a more in-depth analysis of each participant. I interviewed 8 individuals to focus on an in-depth interview process to provide a data rich analysis of each of the interviewees to provide a maximum amount of data. There are many challenges that foster youth face, but the one topic that I am concerned about is the first-year experiences. This study is being limited, because the scope of the problems facing foster youth are immense and to maintain a narrow focus I need to limit the study to a specific time frame.

I chose grounded theory case study because we lack the proper understanding to extrapolate a clearer conclusion as to what is happening. The grounded theory limits the assumptions being made and allows the data to provide the proper hypothesis. This approach provides a strong theoretical foundation for an unbiased approach to the topic and allow credible conclusions based on data derived from student input.

Dissertation Organization

This study is organized in five chapters. Chapter one focuses on the introduction of the topic, which includes the theoretical foundation necessary for the research. It provides the research questions this study are founded on and also the conceptual framework that frames the study. Chapter two focuses on an in-depth exploration of the research that exists today in the field, which also includes gaps in the existing research today. Chapter 2 is organized in

chronological order, exploring the foster youth experience as they advance from the K-12 educational system to their experiences in college. Chapter 3 examines in depth the methodological approach and design being applied to the study and the specific details of the scope and tools used in the research study. Using the grounded theory case study approach, I explain the methodological approach taken to formulate the research design. Chapter 4 discusses the results/findings of the study. This chapter goes in-depth on what was found and measured in the study. Chapter 5 discusses and draws conclusions as to what the findings pointed to and also future questions for additional research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

General Overview

In the United States, there are over 800,000 foster youth in foster care each year, and approximately 300,000 of these youths are between the ages of 18 and 24 (Davis, 2006). Because foster youth earn degrees at significantly lower rates compared to their non-foster youth counterparts, there are significant differences in achievement between the two student populations (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005; Barrat & Berliner, 2013). It is estimated that in the United States, three to eleven percent of foster youth earn college degrees, compared with 28 percent of adults in the general population (Casey Family Programs, 2011). In addition to the achievement gap, there also exists a racial disparity with 59 percent of foster youth being children of color while only 44 percent of their non-foster youth counterparts are identified as children of color. Many foster youth are placed in non-familial foster homes, with 46 percent of foster youth placed by social services, while only 23 percent of foster youth are placed with family members in a guardianship (Wolanin, 2005).

On average, foster youth receive more financial aid and also attend college full-time at greater rates than the general population, yet despite the additional support and services these students receive, they are still unable to overcome the obstacles the foster care experience has presented them (Davis, 2006). Currently, many states have put a focus on ensuring former foster youth successfully transition to independent living, but Davis (2006) suggested there must also be a focus on a transition to post-secondary education. Former foster youth still face challenges if and when they receive a college degree. Yet, despite the existing researchers' efforts, there

has been a shortage of studies that provide insight into the phenomenon (Berzin, 2008; Hines, Merdinger and Wyatt, 2005).

With a recent increase in the attention given to foster youth, researchers are starting to study this population with more frequency. Common themes have emerged from the data to illustrate not just the challenges but also the qualities that these students possess to overcome adversity to achieve their goals. In the report, *Former Foster Youth Attending College: Resilience and the Transition to Young Adulthood*, researchers from San Jose State and UC Berkeley studied the concept of resilience in foster youth and their abilities to overcome adversity. They stated, “that factors at the individual, family and community levels and encompassing more than one system at a time were integral in understanding developmental pathways of these youth” (Hines, Merdinger and Wyatt, 2005). The authors acknowledge that while there are many studies related to the need for resilience among maltreated youth, there is a general lack of research on the concept of resilience within the foster youth community.

When analyzing studies on foster youth, the research has highlighted a contradiction in the literature. In the report *Higher Education Opportunities for Foster Youth*, Thomas Wolanin (2005) explains that foster youth have the same aspirations as their non-foster youth counterparts, but in a study from Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen and Colvin (2011), they explain that in their research they found the opposite, foster youth experience significantly lower expectations and aspirations compared with low-income youth. They go on to say that the inclusion of foster youth from rural settings may have skewed the results. As the research exists today, there is a significant need for additional resources to address the lack of research that exists today.

I structured this literature review to provide both a chronological—or life course—and conceptual account of the challenges and issues facing foster youth leading up to and during the

first-year transition experiences. Accordingly, the literature review is broken up into two distinct categories. The conditions, statistics, and data are provided to illustrate the conditions foster youth face which identifies them as a distinctly unique population. Second, I explored the issues facing foster youth, during the transition through college, while focusing on the social and familial support these students face. These issues as viewed through the lens of “funds of knowledge” which guides the research. Funds of knowledge refers to “the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

Precollege Experiences of Foster Youth

Personal Challenges Facing Foster Youth

Foster youth enter the system because they were either neglected, abused, or have been removed from the home of origin (Wolanin, 2005). Many of these students often face issues such as substance abuse, physical and mental health issues, changes in school placements, homelessness and poverty (Davis, 2006). In the study titled *College Access, Financial Aid, and College Success for Undergraduates from Foster Care*, Ryan Davis (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of existing data to compile a comprehensive list of challenges, conditions, financial aid and barriers that define the foster youth experience. This policy primer illustrates the challenges these students face, for example, by identifying ambiguity in the way the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) identifies foster youth. It illustrates the challenges to funding foster youth, and most importantly identifies ways postsecondary educational systems can reform their approach to foster youth.

A lack of parental support and lowered expectations from those who care for these students contribute to lower educational outcomes (Davis, 2006). The study also goes on to

explain that many foster youth find the idea of college mystifying because of the lack of discourse between foster youth and their caregivers (Davis, 2006). The report goes on to explain that working conditions for professionals working with foster youth and the turnover rate further reduce the chances these youth have to receive a consistent message from their support systems. Foster youth are not included in college preparatory courses and receive little to no information about college entrance (Davis, 2006). Ryan Davis's report highlights an issue that is not recorded through much of the research, which is progress through postsecondary education. Other reports such as *Higher Education Opportunities for Foster Youth* by Thomas R Wolanin (2005) reported foster youth enrollment data, but stops short of recording the progress of these students once they reach higher education. Ryan Davis worked to compile this data nationally to provide a more complete picture and help guide policymakers on making accurate decisions with significant data to guide the decision-making process.

The effects of mentorship and its impact on foster youth were examined in recent research (Taussig et al., 2010). In this study, they utilized a randomized controlled trial using a mixed methods approach to survey graduate students who participated in a mentorship program focusing on foster youth. Fifty mentors participated in the survey and the results mirrored what existing literature concluded, that mentors had a significant role in the success of foster youth. They go on to further state that "student mentors may be the optimal interventionists" to assist these youth in their educational endeavours (Taussig, et al., 2010).

Often these youth encounter institutional obstacles as well. Foster youth are placed significantly less into college preparatory courses than their counterparts (Davis, 2006). It is estimated that less than one third of foster youth possess the basic necessities to be successful, such as money or household supplies (Unrau, 2011). Needless to say, foster youth face

significant challenges entering college, which is reflected in their completion rates in higher education. Despite the low achievement levels foster youth still aspire to attend college at the same level as their non-foster youth peers (Wolanin, 2005). It is the challenges these students face that set the foster youth aside, not their aspirations. Yet, despite the aspirations of these students, without the proper mentorship and support they will continue to have a muted success even after graduation (Salazar, 2012).

In a study conducted by Batsche, et al. (2012), interviews with foster youth highlighted what challenges emerge from the foster youth experience and the practical concerns they faced to just live day to day. The students interviewed in the study were more concerned with where they were going to live, rather than what college they were going to attend (Batsche, et al., 2012). With multiple placements and subsequent school changes during their K-12 education, these students were often dealing with emotional issues that caused them to get side-tracked (Batsche, et al., 2012; Reilly, 2003). This study concludes that while foster youth share the same knowledge base as first-generation non-foster youth students, their experiences in foster care necessitate special considerations. After interviewing these students after they aged out of the system, the differences in behavior mirrored what you would see in the general population and being a student of color was not significantly important in the success of the student.

Identifying and Tracking Foster Youth

Foster youth are among the most disadvantaged populations, and they have yet to have their need for higher education recognized (Wolanin, 2005). While there are some efforts to recognize the struggles by foster youth in higher education, there is currently a lack of research in many areas of their challenges. Because there has been a lack of attention of foster youth in

higher education or in the K-12 system as well, the needs of foster youth have gone unmet (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). This has translated into the inability to identify foster youth.

There are significant challenges facing the foster youth population, and one of the most significant challenges is tracking and identifying foster youth progressing through the educational system (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). In California, we currently track statistics for many underperforming and underrepresented student groups, but because of structural deficiencies in how we report data we have been unable to effectively track foster youth and their progress. A study by The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning in California has started to bridge the information divide. They started to compile data on foster youth in California and found that there has been inadequate communication between child welfare and K-12 educational systems (Barrat & Berliner, 2013).

Using quantitative analysis and data linking, Barrat and Berliner were able to assess the outcomes of 43,140 students in California that had some history in the foster care system (2013). The study created a system in which data could link the two systems together. Before this study, there existed no way to track the transaction between social services and the K-12 system. Barrat and Berliner further go on to explain that because there are no unified markers to identify and track foster youth, their needs have gone unmet and there has been a general lack of recognition and understanding in the services needed to assist this population. The system has worked against these students preventing this population from being identified by programs that would improve their success. This study is significant because it illustrated the difficulties in managing the data to create a preliminary picture and document outcomes of students in the K-12 system. To date, this was the first attempt in any state to link the two systems together.

In California, there are significant discrepancies in the concentration of foster youth. The majority of foster youth are located in a small number of schools. Two thirds of the foster youth community resides in just 10 percent of the school districts within the state of California (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). The majority of foster youth who were attending school were attending low performing schools, which leads to the lower basic skill competencies for foster youth. This student subgroup has the highest dropout rates and the lowest graduation rates (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). When you take into consideration how many foster youth are in college you find that outcomes are significantly behind other historically disadvantaged populations and when you examine the history of foster youth concentrated in a small minority of schools, which are often under-performing, you can begin to understand the challenges facing higher education.

Mental Health Issues Facing Foster Youth

Current research suggests that foster youth will face many challenges such as drug use, incarceration, homelessness, victimization, and dependence on public aid during their lifetimes (Leathers & Testa, 2006). Leathers and Testa (2006) conducted a quantitative research project and provided participating social workers a 50-question survey, inquiring about subjects such as living conditions, emotional deficiencies, educational status and interpersonal issues related to foster youth in their case files. This study highlighted the need for preventative services to stem attrition in the foster youth community. The study also illustrates the need for significant adult interaction with these youth and the need for a holistic approach to retention, rather than just heavy academic resources to address mental health issues that impact school performance.

Ultimately, Leathers and Testa (2006) point to a direct connection between mental health and educational attainment. One such example highlighted the fact that foster youth who dropped out of high school had a higher rate of challenges such as substance abuse, parenting

issues or pregnancy. Foster youth will also become homeless for one day or more at a rate of 22 percent, while for the general population the rate ranges from 2.6 percent to 6.8 percent (Casey Family Programs, 2011). Leathers and Testa state that vulnerable youth are more likely to leave foster care at an earlier age and this lack of support reduces future success. One of the implications for this research project which has greatest bearing on the research conducted in this research project is that schools need to engagement with the foster youth on creating supportive relationships with adults that persist over long periods of time, rather than "discrete services" that may only take place on an individual basis (Leathers & Testa, 2006).

The experience that shape foster youth students' lives and create the strife that is common with foster youth, it is understandable that they achieve their educational goals at significantly lower rates. When you factor in the risk factors these students face and the mental health issues that affect them to a greater degree, we can begin to understand their challenges. Sunny Shin reported that while anxiety did not have a significant influence on reading levels, depression and loss of control did (Shin, 2003). He goes on to say that there are several factors that influence foster youth reading comprehension. Drug use had a negative impact on reading levels, while placement in relative foster care increased reading levels.

We know that foster youth face greater challenges than the general population. It is not because being a foster youth in itself is detrimental, but the series of shared experiences that help shape their lives that present the barriers and challenges for success. A stronger relationship and more stable placement, such as a guardianship provided a stronger foundation for these foster youth students, as opposed to students with foster parents. For those that didn't have a consistent home, outcomes were significantly reduced. Consistent relationships had a significant positive

impact on the students and their success, which supports the research that exists which states that mentorship can be a powerful tool to improving foster youth outcomes (Taussig et al., 2010).

Research of former students and scholarship recipients of the Casey Family Scholarship Program was conducted using quantitative analysis (Salazar, 2012). These students were surveyed to track their progress after attending a 4-year university. This study focused on post-graduation foster youth and explored the possibility of any lingering effects experienced as a result of having come from foster care. Based on the findings there was indeed a continued lingering effect from foster care with the participants of this study reporting more days of negative mental health and unhappiness (Salazar, 2012). The study goes on to suggest that areas of improvement may include working with local colleges and universities to ensure the students' needs are being met. Despite the availability of mental health service on the campus, it is suggested that the services provided are not sufficient to meet the needs of this particular population. The implications that more services are needed is a topic that must be looked at closer based on their findings.

Social and Family Backgrounds

Most people have preconceptions of what being a foster youth means, but foster youth come from a wide array of experiences and various living conditions (Courtney, Dworsky, 2006). For example, not all foster youth are disassociated from their families. In a study titled *Early outcomes for young adults transitioning from out-of-home care in the USA* by Mark E. Courtney and Amy Dworsky, they found that the majority of participants in their study had some close relationships with their family of origin (Courtney, Dworsky, 2006). In their study, 63% of the participants had close relationships with either a grandparent or sibling. Despite the preconceptions we have of foster youth and despite the type of placement these youth are

situated in, familial relations tend to be maintained despite the intervention by social services. These bonds are important, because as noted in the study many of the youth moved in with extended family after aging out of the system. While family provides emotional support for foster youth, it is this noted in a study by Loring Paul Jones of San Diego State University, in which he stated most foster youth will reconnect with their families of origin after being discharged from the system (Jones, 2014).

To further strengthen the argument that peer and familial support for foster youth have a significant impact on foster youth educational outcomes, a study titled *Support and Conflict in the Foster Family and Children's Well-Being: A Comparison Between Foster and Birth Children* conducted by Mieke Denuwelaere and Piet Bracke (2007), examining foster families who had both foster children as well as birth children, examined the resulting familial chemistry. The study examined the effect that being a foster youth had on self-esteem and also how conflict and social support affected the well-being of the child in foster care. This study examined 96 foster families and found that there was a stronger bond between the relationships of foster youth with their foster parents, than there was for children born into the family, in regards to educational outcomes (Denuwelaere & Bracke, 2007). The role of the parent took on a greater meaning, because the relationship was not deemed nominative. The foster children had no expectation that these relationships would be long lasting, while children born into the family took for granted the roll they played in the family. While there are many explanations possible it was suggested that the idea of permanence was significant factor in the behavior of these foster youth (Denuwelaere & Bracke, 2007). It was not all positive though.

In the study *Foster Care and College: The Educational Aspirations and Expectations of Youth in the Foster Care System*, researchers Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen and Colvin (2011) from

Wichita State University identified two factors in predicting both educational expectations and aspirations were influenced by both self-perception and parental support. They go on to state that foster youth who experience multiple placements will often experience lower levels of academic self-perception because of the instability in the relationship these students had with their foster parents. The instability in their lives prevented them from developing long lasting relationships that are vital to building self-esteem.

Unlike other studies, Hass and Graydon (2009) took a different perspective than previous researchers. They decided to approach the foster youth issue from a success perspective. They interviewed 44 young adults who had achieve some success in higher education and examine the factors that influenced their success. Hass and Graydon identified several relationships that were significant in these students' lives. They included mentors, teachers, and fellow students as being important. The respondents of the study consistently identified someone having been a significant influence in their success.

Recently research has focused on examining foster youth outcomes, to begin to provide data to explain what issues surround foster youth. A recent study from researchers at the University of Albany conducted research on foster youth outcomes (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). The study gathered data on 12 programs to explore the issues surrounding foster youth. One of the major finding of this study was discovering a link between a foster youth's biological families and their financial stability. Because of the complex nature of the relationships with the biological families, some of the students will suffer a "survivor's guilt" and this can cause some foster youth to put other relationships ahead of their educational goals (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2009). Hernandez and Naccarato go on to explain the importance of emotional support for these

students. It is not enough to provide practical support, but the students also need support that can counteract the instability that has defined their lives by being in the social services system.

College Transition Experiences of Foster Youth

Foster Youth Support

In a study exploring foster youth environments, Merdinger, Hines, Osterling and Wyatt (2005) conducted a research study on 216 emancipated foster youth students and followed them throughout college. They conducted a multimethod and multistage research project to further explore the conditions surrounding foster youth. One of the topics discussed is staff persistence and its effects on foster youth. One of the questions posed in this study is, do youth students possess certain traits that preclude them from the pitfalls that affect and hinder less successful foster youth? One of several influences is the effect of a persistent support staff assisting foster youth students (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). Up to 90% of all social services agencies report difficulty in hiring and maintaining adequate staffing (Chipungu & Bent-Goodly, 2004). Due to the difficulties inherent in the system it has created an environment that doesn't provide relief for foster youth and the system will often perpetuate instability in the student's life. Despite the presence of clear data indicated staff turnover affects foster youth, there is no quick fix that will solve this problem.

A recent study by researchers from Howard University highlighted the need for an active and deliberate system to be put in place to effectively support foster youth (Chipungu & Bent-Goodly, 2004). This research article is presented as a meta-analysis of the current data and research and where it points to. It also provides very concrete suggestions as to how to develop and implement programs effect in their purpose of serving this population. This study is relevant for precisely this reason. Because foster youth come from unstable home environments, it is

important to engage students in consistent and stable environments, which improve outcomes for students. For students of color, faith may also be a significant factor that provides a stabilizing influence on their lives (Chipungu & Bent-Goodly, 2004). Chipungu and Bent-Goodley (2004) further go on to add that it is because of the sense of community which fosters a stabilizing force that can positively affect resilience. The act of connecting with individuals provides stability and a sense of pride (Chipungu & Bent-Goodly, 2004).

One important finding that was discovered in Denuwelaere and Bracke's (2007) study was the idea that support from adult caretakers affected emotional problems. Based on the research it was concluded that the presence of a supportive caretaker is a source of security for a foster youth. This relationship plays a role in reducing anxiety. Conversely, "insecure attachments" created an environment of negative internalization and an increase in depression symptoms (Denuwelaere & Bracke, 2007). The issue for foster youth is the negative expectations placed on them and the consequences these expectations have on their achievement had a negative effect on their performance.

First-Year Transitional Programs

The transition foster youth make to attend college is something that has been documented extensively, but these challenges become all the more apparent when transitional programs attempt to identify and help these foster youth students make the transition. In a study by Dworsky and Perez (2009), the challenges are spelled out. Some of the issues highlighted by interviews with administrators and foster youth participants were an inability to identify foster youth, lack of information of post-secondary education options, college admissions information, financial aid and campus support programs (Dworsky & Perez, 2009). They also go on to state that many foster youth are not encouraged to pursue a degree in a higher education institution.

These students will transition from home to home and the resulting instability will lead to a lack of exposure to the positive messages of students who are not in foster care.

To counteract the negative effect of the foster youth experiences many programs are designed to provide a holistic support to students. In a study by Rosalind Kirk and Angelique Day, researchers from Michigan State University, Kirk and Day (2011) study a small program on a campus that focused on providing a transitional experience for foster youth. By implementing a program that addressed the instability and also addressing the lack of knowledge sought to counteract the effects of these experiences to improve outcomes. One of the core elements of the program is a focus on peer-based mentoring. The foster youth had a positive experience and this element was introduced due to the protective factors this approach provides (Kirk & Day, 2010).

One element present in the research that was identified by many studies was the idea that policy makers are ignoring the research that exists and are not being proactive enough in assisting the foster youth population (Kirk & Day, 2010; Davis, 2006; Barrat & Berliner, 2013). By being complicit they are perpetuating the conditions these students experience on a daily basis. Without a clear understanding of foster youth experiences in college and what defines a typical experience once they enter a university, we cannot begin to provide solutions to the problems presented. Simply put, without a way to identify the range of experiences foster youth face and how these experiences define how they cope with the world, we cannot begin to provide an adequate explanation to formulate a plan to assist foster youth. Once we are able to define their experience, we can begin to develop programs that will effectively address their needs.

Higher education has for many decades acknowledged and developed best practices, assisting minority populations, gender groups, and other disadvantaged populations, but there has been a lack of coordinated efforts to improve foster youth students' outcomes (Barrat & Berliner,

2013). Barrat and Berliner go on to explain how the lack of institutional markers and identifiers hinder this effort, making it difficult to create programs that effectively target the uniqueness of this population. By identifying and studying this population we can work to create best practices informed from acknowledging this population as unique.

Conceptual Framework

Given the circumstances surrounding foster youth and their shared experiences, I adopted funds of knowledge to guide my study. Funds of knowledge is a concept that takes into consideration the cumulative knowledge of a group to function and thrive (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). A sizable percent of the literature acknowledges the uniqueness of the foster youth population, making use of this concept appropriate for the foster youth community. The demographic makeup of this population poses challenges that are displayed in the disproportionate representation of students of color. In foster care 58% of students are students of color, while only 33% of students are students of color in the general population (Davis, 2006).

While only a small percent of foster youth attend and further graduate college, we must look at what has made these foster youth successful. Funds of knowledge provides a conceptual framework to understanding the rich cultural qualities these students possess that facilitated their success. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) sought to create connections between the classroom and homes of the students they taught. By defining this concept they were able to create a foundation for the connection. This connection can be studied to understand how these cultural values can add a positive value to educational environments.

To fully understand how and why foster youth fail to achieve success in higher education, we must seek to examine the unique qualities of this population to fully understand their

challenges in higher education and how the range of experiences they have faced throughout their lives has affected their abilities to successfully complete degree programs. Many foster youth embody the quality of resilience and for those who have succeeded in college can provide a significant window into what must be present for this population to be successful in college. Funds of knowledge provides a framework for acknowledging the uniqueness of foster youth and allows for the foster youth in college an ability to provide the voice necessary to explore what was present that allowed them to persist through their first year of college.

Summary of the Literature

With a large population of foster youth in the system each year, there is a need to identify and guide foster youth toward positive educational outcomes. Without the proper resources foster youth face many challenges, such as mental illness, illicit drug use and homelessness (Davis, 2006; Barrat & Berliner, 2013). Foster youth receive support, but most of this support comes in the form of helping transition to independent living, while support for foster youth trying to achieve their post-secondary educational goals has largely gone unmet (Davis, 2006).

Precollege Experiences of Foster Youth

The perception that foster youth are deficient in the skills they need to achieve educational success is often perpetuated by parental figures (Davis, 2006). Foster youth find the college experiences problematic, because many of these students have lacked the support that non-foster youth experience to greater degrees. Foster youth are also not placed into college preparatory courses at the same rate as non-foster youth leading to decreased skills for a successful transition to college (Unrau, 2011). In addition to the lowered expectations, foster youth are often concentrated within a small number of school, usually in an urban setting. In

California, two-thirds of the high school aged foster youth are concentrated within a small number of school across the state (Barrat & Berliner, 2013).

Because of the conditions that qualify a foster youth to be admitted into the system, there is at a higher percentage, mental health issues (Leathers & Testa, 2006). In this study, conducted by Leathers and Testa, we see a direct connection between a student's mental health and their level of educational success. Issues such as depression can have a lasting impact on foster youth and also on their level of success in school (Shin, 2003). To stem the tide of lowered educational attainment universities and institutions servicing these students must directly address these issues in hopes they may affect outcomes. Despite placements that may remove the student from their home, many foster youth will maintain relationships with their parents, or families through the course of their placements in the system (Courtney, Dworsky, 2006; Jones, 2014).

Some foster youth, based on the number of foster care placements, will have decreased self-esteem due to the lack of permanency in their lives, which prevented them from developing normal long-term relationships (Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen and Colvin, 2011). To counteract the instability in their lives, it was suggested that not only are discrete services important to their success, but long-term relationship are vital to improving their outcomes, by improve the stability they lacked earlier on in their lives (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2009).

College Transition Experiences of Foster Youth

Acknowledging and identifying the challenges these students face is vital to developing programs that can help assist these students counteract the negative effects being a foster youth creates. One component identified is creating a program that provides an opportunity for stable relationships (Merding, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). Programs to address these issues and engage these students to create a sense of community, which can have a positive effect on

their resilience. Beyond the college environment, familial relationships can influence the performance of the students. Whether there is a positive or negative influence, these relationships can have either a positive or detrimental influence on their ability to achieve success in college.

Creating programs designed for college-aged foster youth can be one of the easier components during the initial phase of creation, but more significantly is the ability to identify students who are foster youth. There is also a need to assess and remediate the often lack of knowledge these students have entering college (Dworsky & Perez, 2009). Because there exists this significant lack of information about college, many transitional programs must focus their energy on a holistic approach. This holistic approach provides the students with the information they were lacking, because of the lack of exposure to college information sessions in high school. This approach can be exhaustive, because a holistic approach can stretch a program thin, but forcing a program to adopt ambitious agendas. The one positive element that has some foundation in the research is the use of peer mentors in the program design (Kirk & Day, 2010). By providing an element that introduces these students to close relationships, they were able to counteract some of the effects of the lasting instability they experienced in foster care.

Limitations

Many researchers acknowledge the challenges facing foster youth. While there are many discrepancies in the research, there are some areas of the research that are compelling. The experiences many foster youth face increase likelihood of behaviors that are detrimental to their educational achievement (Chipungu & Bent-Goodly, 2004; Denuwelaere & Bracke, 2007; Leathers & Testa, 2006). In turn, these manifested behaviors not only decrease the likelihood

these students will complete their educational goals, but these behaviors will continue into their adult lives and work to mute their future success (Salazar, 2012).

In the examination of the research, we see a significant amount of research that focused on the K-12 experiences of foster youth and the challenges these students faced during their time in foster care until their emancipation, but many studies acknowledged the limitations of the current state of the research (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005; Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). Most researchers acknowledge the limitation of the post-secondary perspective of foster youth. Research exists illuminating the early experiences and also of the career orientated paths foster youth take, but college based studies are infrequent. Davis (2006) talks about the need for federal, state and insitutional cooperation in dealing with foster youth issues.

Research Questions

Despite the challenging outlook there are transitional programs that are helping to define best practices for the foster youth populations, but these programs have little research guiding their program goals and efforts. The existing research also does not comprehensively examine foster youth in the higher education setting (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005). It is this gap that creates challenges for those seeking to improve foster youth outcomes. Which leads to the research questions being posed on this study.

1. What factors shape the transition experiences of first-year, first-generation foster youth in comprehensive regional public universities?
2. How do family and social background influence college transition of first-year, first-generation foster youth?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The foster youth experience is defined by instability and low expectations, which affect student performance. Less than one third of all foster youth possess the basic necessities necessary to be successful (Unrau, 2011). These challenges provide a significant impediment to the progress of foster youth to achieve their educational goals. Indeed, achievement rates for foster youth in higher education are significantly lower than any other population and yet there is disagreement as to what exactly the influences that affect foster youth are and how that affects their educational achievement.

Purpose and Questions

The purpose of the study is to examine the transitional first-year experiences of foster youth in higher education. This study seeks to expand on an area of the literature that is lacking research about their first year in college. The research question is designed to provide the study a holistic look at foster youth during this transitional time in their lives. By formulating the question as it appears, I have provided the study the focus necessary to understand the influences that these students face.

1. What factors shape the transition experiences of first-year, first-generation foster youth in comprehensive regional public universities?
2. How do family and social backgrounds influence college transition of first-year, first-generation foster youth?

Chapter Organization

In this chapter, I introduce grounded theory tradition and provide a rationale for the design of the study. I will go into detail describing the research setting and providing a rationale for the site selection. I will also describe the data sources and sample narrative. An explanation of how the participants were selected will be explained and I will provide the data collection tools in this chapter. Data collection procedures will be described in detail and the analysis of the data will be explained in detail to provide a rationale for the design. Finally, I will discuss my role as the primary researcher in the planning and implementation of the study and the possible biases that could affect the study.

Research Tradition

The purpose of this grounded theory case study was to examine and analyze first-year transition experiences of foster youth in higher education. The college-bound years of foster youth are not well examined, and there are many gaps in the literature. For this reason, grounded theory provided this study an opportunity to allow the students a voice to generate the data that guided the theory in a way that is holistic and responsive to the students in the study (Creswell, 2012). Since little is known about the factors that influence foster youth in higher education, a grounded theory approach provided a methodological framework that informed the study and focused on the emerging design approach to grounded theory, which deemphasizes the rigid structure in the other grounded theory designs (Creswell, 2012). Accordingly, I conducted this study as a case study, due to the in-depth analysis within a bounded system (Creswell, 2012). I used a bounded system, because of the first-year transition experiences of foster youth. The focus was narrowed to provide the students an opportunity to explore a more focused exploration of this first-year. Ultimately, a grounded theory approach provided the framework to allow me to facilitate foster youth student voices in creating a unifying theory.

In the initial stages, grounded theory is a methodology that seeks to derive a theory from the data, thereby “grounding” the theory in the data (Creswell, 2012). Researchers Barney Glasser and Anselm Strauss developed this theory to generate theories from fields of study that otherwise lacked a strong theoretical foundation (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). In essence, the approach works in reverse. The theory typically uses interviews or observations to generate the data used for theory generation. Rather than enter the study with preconceived ideas, the information that emerged guided the direction of the study. By identifying common themes and applying the funds of knowledge framework we can explore the experiences of foster youth who experienced the first-year transitional college experience and begin to provide a narrative for this time period.

Low persistence rates are consistent and predictable within the foster youth community and across the nation. Grounded theory provides this study with the appropriate foundation to provide the best model for this study to progress allowing for a richly detailed and exhaustive examination of the data to provide the emerging data to guide theory creation. We must first provide a strong baseline, based on the foster youth’s perspective. As the experiences of foster youth occurs over long periods of time it is natural to use grounded theory. I used grounded theory to observe behaviors and provide appropriate labels to these behaviors. By grouping and labeling these phenomena I can start to create concepts that can further be used to generate categories. These categories allowed me to integrate ideas into a theory.

Research Setting

In this study, I used Alliance State College System (ASCS) as a pseudonym for the campus I conducted my research at. Allegiance school system is the pseudonym I used for the local K-12 system. I conducted my study on one campus within the Alliance State College

system located within a large urban community. The Alliance State College system consists of a multitude of campuses across the state which serves a significant population. Alliance West is a regional public four-year college that serves a large population of students in an urban settings. The campus offers certificate, bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees. The campus serves a significant population of commuter students and also serves a diverse campus community consisting of multiple racial and ethnic groups. Alliance East is a highly diverse campus with the largest group being Latino with a significant portion of Caucasian and Asian populations.

I selected this campus due to the high concentration of foster youth attending school in the surrounding urban K-12 school districts. After consideration of the Allegiance K-12 school district, which educates a significant number of college ready students, the district has over ten percent of the K-12 foster youth in California (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). I chose to use the criterion and snowball method for selecting the student population for the study. The presences of significant foster youth students as well as a diverse student body demographic, which represent the diversity of the foster youth community at large, were chosen to be included in the study. This site was also picked due to the significant presences of foster youth that exist on the campus. The campus has worked to identify and assist foster youth students making it easier to identify and communication with respective participants. Due to the focus on first-generation and first-year foster youth in higher education this campus provided me with the greatest opportunity to interview the number of students necessary for the study. While not all foster youth participate in these programs because of the limited funds these programs receive, the foster youth program provided me with sufficient information needed to identify and interview foster youth students for this study.

In addition to the amount of foster youth that are present in the local region, this campus was also ideal due to its demographic makeup, which approximate the demographics across the state. The campus is a designated Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), which means 25% or more of their total enrollments, are Hispanic students. While there is little tracking of foster youth at the college level, the K-12 system identified the largest ethnic group in the foster care system as Hispanic students with a total of 42% of the total foster youth population. This site provided me with a significant enough population of foster youth to interview as well as provided me with a diverse enough population to provide a representative population to interview.

Research Sample and Data Source

Data Source

I used interviews with foster youth who are currently active or have graduated college recently as my data source to examine the experiences of foster youth in their first year of college. The interviews were be structured in one interview with two components to generate enough data to clearly identify emerging themes. The first part of the interviews generated preliminary data, which then were evaluated and used to guide the second component of the interviews to further explore issues these students present.

Sampling Strategies

I selected 8 students for the study and conduct in-depth individual interviews to generate sufficient data. As foster youth constitute a small percent of the total student population on college campuses, I utilized a combination method for selecting the foster youth, combining criterion and snowball sampling methods. This sampling strategy allowed me to establish a group of students who meet the predetermined criteria to best capture the experience of the foster

youth in their own words (Creswell, 2012). This simply means that these students have met a predetermined set of conditions to be included in the study; in this situation, foster youth who completed their first year of college. In addition to criterion sampling, I also employed the snowball sampling strategy. The snowball strategy allows foster youth the opportunity to identify other foster youth. This strategy is important to the study, because some foster youth develop relationships with other foster youth and with this population being difficult to identify, this can help me locate additional participants.

Sample Characteristics

The participants of the study have attended college for at least one year. Each student is or has been a foster youth student who has been enrolled in college and have successfully completed their first year of college. Foster youth students are considered foster youth, if they have been removed from the custody of their parent or guardian by the juvenile court system and is under the care of a state social worker (Foster Youth Educational Services, 2015). These students have experienced either abuse or neglect, which will have precipitated their removal from the home (Wolanin, 2005). The participants are between the ages of 17 and 25 and are of either gender.

Ethical Issues

Foster youth have been subjected to significant stressors during their time in foster care and this highlights the elevated concern for these students' privacy. Not all foster youth want to be identified, for fear of being stigmatized by fellow students. Foster youth also have faced significant traumas, which caused their foster care placement, and that may have continued through their foster care experience (Wolanin, 2005). It is precisely this reason that the ethical concerns are extremely important to address with the students. Maintaining voluntary

participation is vital to the study. Should a student want to back out of participating in the study, I provided a deadline for the student to back out of the study. I also conduct interviews with students with whom I had no personal relationship to in the past, to prevent any possibility of conflict of interest in this study.

To protect the students in my study, I created pseudonyms and remove any personal details that can be used to identify them, such as any major or any identifiable characteristics that can be used. Any person or entity associated with this study was required to sign a confidentiality agreement to protect the students' identity. Any ethical concerns that may cause concern, I consulted with my mentor and dissertation chair to discuss appropriate actions I needed to take to ensure absolute anonymity for the student subjects. In compliance with federal regulation I also submitted my human subject's research application to Human Subjects Committee at California State University, Northridge for review.

Data Collection Instruments

In this study, I utilized a semi-structured interview protocol for my primary form of data collection. Semi-structured interviews present a consistent protocol for the collection of data, while allowing the foster youth participants an opportunity to provide additional data, through the process of follow-up questions. The grounded theory tradition provides the structure needed to extract the appropriate data for theory creation. The semi-structured process provided a uniform starting point for each participant in the study, while allowed them the freedom to provide information that I may not have accounted for. Glaser (1992) stressed the importance of allowing a theory to emerge from the data, while avoiding an overly rigid categorical system to dominate the theory identification process.

Interview Protocol

I designed the interview questions to be broad in scope, while providing a semi-structured interview process to explore multiple topics during the interview process. The interview questions are designed to probe the experiences of foster youth from their K-12 school experiences through the first year of college. The questions follow the same timeline by examining through a chronological timeframe the students' development and exposure to familial and social influences. Through probing questions of support systems in and before college, I seek to explore the personal lived experiences these students faced leading up to and in college, again by exploring how these familial and social influences affected the student's educational achievement. The questions examine the student's institutional support from social services, to educational support systems, as well as the transition into higher education. I designed the interview protocol specifically to identify the influences that were crucial to the students' success in transitioning to college. The purpose of this design is to allow the foster youth participants the opportunity to create emerging theories based on the data collected and develop connections between foster youth and their familial and social support.

By utilizing a grounded theory design, this procedural approach provides an opportunity to conduct follow-up interviews to further explore and collect data to populate common themes, which was important to my research design (Creswell, 2012). The round of interviews was analyzed to identify themes and generate an initial round of data. My goal is to learn about the connection between foster youth and familial and social support. The interview process was my main tool for helping to understand the stated goals.

Research Invitation

The invitation was an important element to consider when developing a list of foster youth to participate in the study. Identification of foster youth was one of the greatest challenges

when conducting the study. The process to identify and recruit foster youth was a challenge, because of the lack of structural support for identifying these youth. Identifying foster youth was one of the most crucial steps in the process. State and federal laws require strict privacy rules. The invitation was an important tool to increasing the response rate to increase the participant pool.

Informed Consent

The informed consent form is an important instrument in the collection of data. With the instability of their residential settings, foster youth may be placed in multiple setting during their time in foster care. This can lead to mistrust of adult figures in their lives. With the consent form a well-documented process can be provided to the student to explicitly state the protections that are inherent in studies, but these participants may not be aware of. My goal is to highlight the informed consent process to help create an atmosphere of trust. The informed consent is vital to a group of students who have been placed into situations that were not under their control. The ability to convey the rights and power they possess was important considering the population.

Data Collection Procedures

I collected data exclusively through semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted with each student to identify the experiences of foster youth during this transitional period in their higher education careers. I conducted personal interviews with 8 students at one college sites. These interviews were designed to explore the lived experiences of these students to help identify any emergent themes that may exist. I achieved this by identifying familial and social support systems that were involved in the student's transition to college. This process is designed to explain a "basic social process" experienced by these students (Glaser, 1992).

Glaser explains that a basic social process is a patterned process in the organization of human behavior over time. In this study, I sought to identify a durable pattern over time to help explain a basic process that has helped foster youth become successful. Using the emerging design for grounded theory, modifiability is a key component to creating an effective study (Creswell, 2012). For this reason, the interview process was crucial to my study. By creating a process that allows modification, we are allowing the grounded theory an opportunity to fully utilize the interview process.

The data collection process involved one set of interviews. Constant comparative data analysis was crucial in the ground theory process, which meant an ongoing update of the interview process. By breaking down data into discrete incidents, which are then coded into categories,

With the help of foster youth administrators, I was able to contact foster youth who were currently participating in the foster youth programs at each respective school, as well as youth who were connected, but not participated in these program through an extended network. I was also able to advertise at each college's newspaper to communicate the study. I randomly selected from this list of respondents a group of 8 students who participated in the study. Once I sent out invitations to the foster youth participants, I set up the interviews and allow the student to pick the interview sites and interview date to accommodate them. Due the sensitive nature of the interview content, I requested that the site be private to allow for confidentiality to provide the best environment for data collection, this allowed for a high-quality recording without background noise for the audio recording. This is the only restriction I placed on the students and any other considerations they requested I tried to accommodate to the extent it was possible. Often foster youth have had unstable life environments, so it was vital to provide the safest

environment for these youth to be interviewed; a place that is conducive to their feeling safe and secure for the interview process. I explained the process to the students, and stressed the importance of their rights and their ability to remove themselves from the study. Only after the student is informed of their rights and they sign the informed consent form, did I conduct the interview and record the interviews with an audio recorder.

As I interviewed the students, I then coded the data immediately to explore what additional information was needed to be collected to develop the appropriate theories (Creswell, 2012). I assessed the transcripts after data collection to see if additional rounds of interviews were necessary, based on the amount of data—given the need to collect sufficient interview data to inform emerging themes. Should I have found any deficiencies the students would have been contacted to participate in another round of interviews. Once the process was complete, I acknowledged the students' participation in the study, thanked them and then provided each student with the compensation promised for the participation in the study.

Data Analysis Procedures

Grounded theory is a systemic approach to qualitative research used to generate a theory that explains a process, interaction or action informing a “substantive topic” (Creswell, 2012). The data analysis procedures ensure the data is treated fairly and without bias. By coding, interpreting, and reporting the finds derived from the data I can begin to make sense of the data and provide an explanation of the phenomenon being recorded. A grounded theory approach generates data through multiple rounds interviews to fully develop theories explaining a phenomenon. The grounded theory also allows for data analysis and data collection to occur simultaneously, which allows for the study to be shaped as these processes occur (Glesne, 2011). By using theoretical sampling, which is “seeking pertinent data to develop your emerging

theory,” I sought to develop categories until no new properties emerge (Charmaz, 2006). With the simultaneous collection and analysis of data, the procedures generated for this study provided a strong theoretical framework for the continued design of this study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Data Preparation

After I conducted and recorded the interviews on audio recorders, the data was transcribed by a professional data transcription service using a denaturalized transcription process to allow for the most accurate voice for these students. Through a protocol, I submitted my requests to the transcription service to comply with all instructions. The names and identities of each participant was redacted as quickly as possible to protect the identities of the individuals participating in the study. The students’ identification was replaced with a pseudonym and the legend was kept confidential, stored in a secure location. Before I coded the transcripts, I identified themes from the existing research. In addition to the literature review, I also utilized funds of knowledge to frame the process and help define the codes used in the study (Moll et al., 2001).

Preliminary Data Analysis

The initial data analysis objective was to analyze the interviews to identify themes, by following a step-by-step process, guiding by the initial review of the literature. This initial analysis provided a starting point for theme development. The interviews generated raw data that was analyzed for coding. The codes were extracted from the data and then I employed theoretical sampling to generate themes (Charmaz, 2006). I continued to utilize memo’s during the coding process, which prompted me to progressively strengthen my data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). This constantly analysis kept the process rooted in the data and also allow me to generate additional themes. After the initial data preparation, I coded the interviews using ATLAS.ti, a

professional qualitative computer assisted data analysis software, to transform the raw data into a form that can be analyzed for codes and themes. Coding relied on emerging data, and any use of existing preset categories was minimized (Creswell, 2012).

Thematic Analysis

Through constant-comparative data analysis, the process of coding to interpretation was conducted with the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As the codes developed, they were grouped based on emerging trends based on the responses of the participants. By comparing the initial codes derived from the literature review and the codes identified from the interviews, I began to analyze and review the existing codes. I identified common themes to help prioritize code usage and modify these codes if necessary. In grounded theory, constant analysis is critical and was conducted throughout the multiple stages of interviews to ensure that the core theme emerged, not from outside research, but from the foster youth themselves.

Researcher Roles

Researcher Effects

Effects of researcher on case. As a student, professional, and doctoral student I have been influenced over the years by the struggles of communities of color and underrepresented populations in higher education, populations I have worked with closely throughout the years. More specifically, as a professional who has worked with low-income and first-generation students, I have been exposed to and been sympathetic to the struggles these student populations face. In the same work capacity, I have also had the opportunity to work with foster youth as a liaison for a foster youth support program at the institution where I was employed.

Researcher bias. I realized that not only as a professional, but also someone who identifies themselves as being a member of a minority population, I have biases I bring to the table. Because of the perspective I bring as a minority advisor, as well as researcher, it was vital that I maintain a high level of awareness of the biases I possess to prevent myself from guiding my research project in a direction that the data does not support.

Bias in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. As a longtime advocate for disadvantaged populations, I bring my biases into my study, but by being aware of these biases I was able to minimize their role in collecting the data. Despite the experiences I have encountered over the last few years working with this population, I must acknowledge that because these experiences are anecdotal, my personal thoughts and feelings on the matter may not be representative of the greater population at large.

Participant reactivity. The nature of the study naturally exposes participants to sensitive subjects that may be difficult to deal with. Because of the one-on-one design for interviewing the participants in the study, I provided an environment that was conducive to creating trust that allowed these participants as safe and confidential of an environment as possible.

Effect of case on researcher

Effects in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Working with the grounded theory I am bound to the process of theory generation to guide the study (Creswell, 2012). As the researcher conducting the study, it was my job as someone who is also sympathetic to this population to have awareness of my desire to open up to these students and be mindful of my own conduct during the interview process (Glesne, 2011). Taking into consideration the

challenges facing myself as the researcher developing strategies it was vital to generating data that had a high degree of validity.

Strategies to mitigate research/er effects

Researcher bias and participant reactivity. My role in this study was of a qualitative researcher, where I analyzed, sort and interpreted data as I collected information from the study participants. As I collected this data, I worked closely with a mentor to ensure multiple perspectives are examined to provide the most objective and thorough examination of this data. I also adhered to a semi-structured open-ended interview process. By adhering to this structure, this allowed me to carefully control the delivery of the interview questions. I also created follow up questions in advance to prevent my own biases from leading my line of questioning. The structure of the grounded theory helped me create a systematic approach to the study, which minimized the risk my biases can play a role in the study.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Based on the textual data that I explored, several themes emerged from participant feedback. The foster youth participants had defined ideas as to what they perceived as the issues that affected them, both negatively and positively. By using thematic analytical approach—segmenting, coding, categorizing, and thematizing text from transcribed interviews—I was able to identify themes that help organize their feedback in a way that helps define the transitional experiences of foster youth seeking college degrees. Below, I present participant profiles and thematic results. All participants are provided pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity.

Participant Profiles

Susan, is 25 years old and self-identified as Hispanic. During her stay in the foster care system, she was placed in 16 different homes. Until she was placed with her final foster parent, she dealt with an unstable home environment, being moved from home to home frequently. Her foster placements ranged from foster homes to juvenal hall. She was eventually adopted by one of her foster mothers, who then became her mentor and coach and was critical in her continuing on with her education.

Sara is 19 years old and is self-identified as Hispanic. She was briefly placed into foster care with her sister and two brothers. After this placement, she was taken in by her grandmother. She is currently in college now working on her bachelor's degree.

David is 25 years old and self-identified as half Chinese and half Caucasian. During his experience in the foster care system, he was placed with three different foster homes. He was placed into foster care for a little less than one year. He graduated from college with a degree in public health and is currently working toward his Master's degree.

Jessica self-identifies as African-American and is currently 23 years old. She was in foster care for approximately 5 years until she was placed with her aunt, then another foster home. From there she went to another aunt and then finally an uncle who had already taken in other siblings. Without the support from her uncle, she would have reentered the foster care system. She is currently living on campus in the dorms and is working toward her bachelor's degree in social work.

Shaun, is 20 years old, and self-identified as Hispanic. Shaun entered the foster care system during his fifth-grade year and for approximately a year he was placed into care. After going through the court system, his sister was able to become his guardian, but he has continued to interact with the foster care system until his emancipation, but he is continuing to receive services while he is working toward his degree in film production.

Elizabeth is 23 years old and self-identified as Latina. She entered the foster care system when she was 13 years old and had two foster homes. Her longest placement was with a foster family for 5 years. She maintained contact with her mother during the course of foster care placement, but while her siblings were reunited with their mother, she remained in foster care. When she first entered the foster care system she was undocumented, but during the course of her stay, they were able to obtain a green card for her.

Eric is 27 years old and self-identified as African-American. He has been in foster care since birth and has been in 33 different placements. The majority of his placements were group homes and safety homes. Because of the amount of times he has been displaced, he averaged approximately 6 home placements a year. During his final year of high school, he got by living in a shelter.

Jennifer is 23 years old, and she self-identified as Japanese-American. While she did not enter the foster care system until she was 16, she had several placements, from a shelter to a level twelve treatment facility. After she graduated from high school she had to relocate to a transitional housing facility. Once she turned 19 years old she was able to relocate and live with her paternal grandparents.

Familial Support

Family of origin. Not all foster youth student participants were removed from their families of origin, and despite the displacement, some were able to maintain at least an open line of communication with their family of origin. For the students who could maintain some sort of connection, there seemed to be a range of experiences that had both negative and positive influences on their ability to continue in college. For instance, one student described her experience with her paternal grandparents, “So when I left the transitional housing program that’s where I went to live and they’ve provided me with stability.” Another participant described her relationship with her biological mother by saying, “I really don’t have that attachment.” The majority of participants who did have experience with their families of origin mostly describe their experiences as positive. For instance, one student describes having a “good relationship” with her siblings, another describes their experiences with family as a “good amount of support.” Another participant described being placed with two aunts and one uncle. Before being placed with her uncle they were threatened with being placed with a foster family. She stated, “My uncle had to take us or we go into group homes, so our uncle decided to take me in and my sister, because he already had our brothers.”

Overall, a relationship with their families of origin appeared to complicate the lives of foster youth participants. One student described her experience with her mother as knowing her

mother “sacrificed her life, you know, bring us to this country,” but also recognizing that her mother did not provide the emotional support she needed. Another student described her experience with her grandparents as providing a mixed message. On one hand, she believed her grandparents were “doubtful because I lived with them before I went to foster care and it didn’t work out well,” but on the other hand they did provide material support to help her stay in school, which provided stability to help her succeed in college.

Foster parents. Each of the participants in this study all had one thing in common. They all had, at one point or another, foster parents. Similar to the family of origin, foster parents provided a range of experiences to their respective foster children. From providing a supportive and encouraging environment to creating some level of discomfort, foster parents had an impact on their foster children. One student mentioned how her foster mother was previously a staff member at one of the organizations she frequented and she took her in and after becoming her foster mother ended up adopting her. She mentioned, “She was the one who pushed me to get a job and go to school, because when I was thrown into... thrown out of the system I didn’t have anything.” Another spoke of being treated as, “if I was one of their daughters.” Yet not all experiences were positive. Two of the participants expressed dismay at seeing foster parents favor their own children and one even mentioned how “whatever money they collected from, you know, from DCFS they kind of used it on themselves and we would get hand me downs.”

School Support

Student experiences related to high school were more consistent. Many of the students expressed some level of disappointment in how their high school experience prepared them for college. While not all experiences related to high school were universally negative, there was inconsistency in their experiences that help create a deficiency that provided challenges

Institutional environment in high school. Administrative support for these participants provided one of the greatest challenges and also one of the single most universally criticized aspects of the high school experience. One student mentioned how “I had an advisor, didn’t really care... she had her favorite high school students and I was not one of them.” Another student explained that he went to a non-public high school that focused on higher monitored students. He goes on to state “my school was more interested in trying to keep the kids under control instead of learning.” Another goes on to explain despite taking AP courses, “they don’t enforce a lot like in college.” Other students explained their success as “I didn’t have a lot of guidance, but I just kind of persevered.”

High school teachers. Despite a lack of perceived administrative support, there were some positive influences in their lives during high school. Instructors provided an overall positive influence on the students’ ability to persist and thrive. One student described a high school that was on their group home’s property. He described “the teachers most, many were very supportive.” Another described their history instructor as “very supportive.” One student explained that their “tenth grade teacher from 10th all the way to 12th grade, she supported me; she still supports me.” Some described a more passive support system where they felt they could have used additional support, explaining they would have appreciated one on one support.

High school peers. When it came to social support systems, the students described a support that provided both emotional and practical support. One student described getting assistance with essays and application support and described how his friends helped: “A couple of my friends because they were also in the process of applying so we would be supporting each other helping each in the way some of them went to UC. So, going over their essays or something like that.” Another student explained the support as “we would meet up like Starbucks

and like do... our college applications.” One student described their strong social support as, “and again my peers were pretty supportive even no matter of our behavior.” One of the students described a profound friendship that persisted beyond high school. “She’s still today one of my close friends that you know. She opened her home for me... she supported me.” Many of the students described receiving critical support from their peers, whether it was related to a practical or emotional support, they relied on these friendships. One student stated it this way, “but barring the fact that I have a decent amount of friends like I probably would have been way worse off.”

Yet, despite the support, there is an underlying message some of these students shared. They believed while these friendships were critical in their development, their own internal motivations were just as vital. One student described a situation with a friend, “She, she wanted to be, stay with her and her parents as long as I needed... But I decided to go through [redacted] center because I wanted to feel independent.” Yet another student explained how there was a detachment despite receiving support. “There was a good amount of support from like, like you know family and friends you know it's almost like that last push. But like once you know I got here that's when it was kind of like a detachment.” Many of these students, on one hand, acknowledged benefits from the support, but they still felt a sense of responsibility that their friends would not be able to assist with. These students articulated a deeper sense of purpose that these friendships would not be able to satisfy.

Social services. During the transition from high school to college students turning 18 will start to reach the point of emancipation and this can become a stressful and anxiety producing life event. For these students, there was a varied range of experiences, which impacted their lives. Several students received support from the Department of Child and

Family Services (DCFS), which provided the necessary opportunities to assist these students. Several students described their experience with DCFS as being positive, while others had a different experience. Some of the experiences were related to the benefits they could receive, such as one student explained how her “social workers also helped me in getting braces, because my medical wouldn’t cover it... pretty much anything I needed.” While others expressed dismay with the system and their social workers.

Several students explained they felt they received adequate services and felt the communication between DCFS and themselves was sufficient. One described the communication as “they were made sure that people who were emancipating out of the system made sure they had ILP services.” They went on to explain that they were provided with life skills courses to help with the transition. Another explained “Oh they was very informative, from the ninth grade my social workers were giving me stuff about college like all the time.” Another one of the students who was undocumented at the time stated “I didn’t have papers and in foster care they helped me obtain my green card. “One student praised the benefits from being in foster care, “I was in a residential, so I got some of the best therapy I could have asked for.” Another student explained how her social worker, who was with her through emancipation, expressed her desire to see her succeed; “she was like please invite me do to your graduation, you know she wanted to make sure that I was still staying on track.” One participant had another perspective by simply stating; “Definitely not DCFS or the system.” He explained his experience was consistently negative. One student explained that DCFS was unwilling to provide additional assistance to her foster mother because, as she said, “They kind of just didn't give her any benefits because they just felt like she’s almost done so we're not going to help you with anything. And I feel they also didn't prepare me for stepping out into the world like they

didn't all these all the resources that I should have had as being in foster care like ILP or college.”

Even with the positive experiences some of the students encountered, it was acknowledged with a sense of trepidation. These students acknowledged the challenges they faced with DCFS. They also acknowledged the limitations and also the expectation that you probably won't have a positive experience. Despite receiving services, one student summed up her experience as, “The one thing that prepare me for college was my mom, foster mom.” While the services were helpful, it seems that they fell short when it came to preparing them for college. Based on the social workers whom they were assigned to and specific contact points at each department, it was hit or miss. This was one area where experiences were varied and unpredictable.

College Readiness in High School

Instability is certainly a defining characteristic for foster youth. For the students interviewed there were some challenges that made the transition from foster care to getting ready for college, a challenge. One of the common themes for the students who were situated in foster homes, group homes or other non-familial placements was the ability to maintain a stable environment in high school, so as to develop meaningful relationship with individual who could help them transition. Developing a meaningful relationship was immensely important for one of the students, who shared: “Umm.. I really didn't see myself in college until like I started talking to my Counselor from High school.” Another student explained how his “nonpublic high school” helped him in his transition: detailing the school in the following way:

[In] smaller classrooms you get more like feedback like you know attention is needed from or your teacher. That's pretty helpful. And so I definitely like have a good

relationship with you know my teachers...I say just encouragement or support it like the academic environment is essential to sort of want to feel that the interest even enroll in the community college in the first place because I think that they were kind of sort of suggesting that I do that.

On the positive side, some students expressed how internal motivation was also a major influence in their ability to work toward their own success. One student described it as, “my background really pushed me because nobody could do it for me. I do for myself... and negative thoughts of you know my biological parents is what pushed me.”

Because of the instability and multiple placements some of the students experienced, this lead to interrupted studies during their high school years. One student stated, “When you move so much, you go to different schools and you fall behind, So I knew I was behind.” One student explained “My total group homes and foster care, living total, Thirty-three.” He went on to explain that on average he was changing schools more than three times a year. Another student stated: “Lack of stability it's hard to concentrate for me. In my particular situation, I always felt that if I had one thing good the other was bad. So, for instance, I lived in a group home in Compton. The group home was horrible, but the school I was in was great.” By not being able to settle into a stable routine and environment several students experienced challenging situations that hindered their ability to transition smoothly.

College Student Transition Experiences

Foster youth have many challenges facing them and these challenges are often significant enough to have an impact on their studies. There was a common theme among the students. Emotional struggles were a significant challenge for these students. One student explained it as, “I want to say most of my obstacles are mainly emotional struggles.” One student identified

family problems as an obstacle, which distracted them; “Because I would focus a lot of what's happening at home what's happening with my academics.” Yet another student identified time management and lack of support were also obstacles that was discussed. One student described their situation; “and just I didn't really know how to manage my time until my spring semester.” Naturally financial struggles were also discussed. “You know financial or like living situation... I would say these problems generally speaking are exacerbated for foster youths.” One student put their struggles succinctly, “Every day is an obstacle.”

One of the common themes for the students who were situated in foster homes, group homes, or other non-familial placements was the transition from foster care to independence, which affected their ability to adjust to their new-found freedom. Talking about this transition, one student shared: “I was horrible my freshmen year because that amount of freedom, no one prepared me for. So, I went buck wild and I took advantage of every night that I didn't have to come home.” Another student described transition experiences as follows: “I was coming from being institutionalized... and then I was for the first time, I was on my own.” She explained how going from a restrictive facility to an apartment with two roommates didn't prepare her for college, which then lead to her taking a two-year break from her studies.

Challenging foster youth environments. Foster youth have some of the lowest levels of achievement as an identifiable population, so it is no surprise that they also face challenges related to their everyday stability. Some of the participants were placed with family members, while others were in foster care, such as group homes, foster families and juvenile hall. One commonality is the struggle to overcome the challenges that affect each student. One student explains her challenges as, “I had a really bad experience because of foster parent's kind of favored their children over the foster kids... and whatever money they collected from, you know,

from DCFS they kind of used it on themselves and we would get their hand me downs.”

Another student explained how she felt, “so that when I did go into foster care I went to a foster home for like two weeks, I see the experience very different because it was me my sister and my brother and a lady had her own children living there as well. So, I think she would give a lot of favoritism to her children.”

Many of the students articulated their insecurities, fears and frustrations at the instability in their lives. One participant explained his experience, “My total group homes and foster care, living total, 33.” Another explained they were at 15 different group homes, yet another lived in 16 different foster homes. The instability that is created from that many placements was articulated by several of the participants. “So, the first place I was in was a 30 day shelter in [redacted]. And that ended up being 43 days and I was 16 so I never had any experience with the foster care system and then to go from that to being thrown into a shelter was pretty traumatizing I guess you could say. But then afterwards I had transitioned to [redacted], it's a level 12 facility group home and a residential treatment facility in [redacted]. And after that I guess the rules of the facility where you had to leave after he had graduated high school. So, the day after I graduated high school I went to a transitional housing program.” Another student expressed how restrictive her residential situation was, “and so I couldn't join any clubs or sports or you know do anything like that. I mean to say how restrictive the group home was for my prom I had to be driven by one of the group the staff members in a beat up green minivan.”

Foster care can be a traumatizing experience and this was certainly true for several of the participants. Several students mentioned how disengaged their social workers were and how they felt lost in the system. “So, I remember one of the first social workers I met when I got separated from like my family essentially I forgot her name but I just remember there being no

kind of like like sympathy or like you know in the tone of her voice or the way she's like spoke to me it was just like this is what's going to happen.” Another experience was similar, “And the coercing was because the group home I was with being crappy, they didn't want to pay certain fees. So, they basically nudged and pushed the social worker to get me into, excuse me. ILP. It was the independent living program and the service, it wasn't like they wanted to pay for it so it wasn't like they actually care enough to say, you know, to say let's just graduate him from high school and get him into college It was more so y'all got to pay for this because we're not.” One student lamented about her experience with her social workers; “I do believe that they get paid a whole lot first and I've heard countless foster parents tell me oh you're only here because they give me enough money, but even this isn't enough to deal with you. I don't believe that a number size should ever be placed on a child.”

For those who still have some connection with their families of origin, there can still be obstacles that prevent them from gaining full stability. One student expressed her situation as, “I was in foster care since six years ago since my mother used drugs then I lived with my auntie... Then I went to another foster home in Lancaster for a couple of months then I went to my other auntie for about a year then I went to my uncle for like a couple of months. Then went to another lady like in Watts area... my uncle takes us or we go into group homes so our uncle decided to take me and my sister because he already had our brothers. Then I stayed with my uncle from seventh grade up until now.”

Lack of resources. Many of the participants expressed concern and dismay at the lack of resources they received during their foster care placements, as well as during the college years. One of the major complaints is a lack of resources for students who often have no support systems to assist in getting back to independence. Also, not all students are educated on the

resources they have available to them. One student explained how this affected him; “I'm not I'm not sure there's really anything specific that I can think that actually help me because I feel like my transitioning to college was kind of like head on, like there was a lot of things that I wish I would have known or like you know like a lot more resources. I wish I would have like been like directly told about. It sort of like having to kind of figure it out on my own.” Not only does this impact physical resources, but also mental preparation for entering the world as independent. One student explained it as, “and I feel they also didn't prepare me for stepping out into the world like they didn't... all these all the resources that I should have had as being in foster care like ILP or college you know transfers like that I didn't have any of that. So I was kind of just left out when I aged out.” Yet another student express how dire their financial situation was; “But when I was a senior in high school I never I didn't I didn't have the support from my school to help me and apply. I didn't have you know \$50 to apply to [redacted]. [Redacted] was always the school I wanted to attend.”

Social workers. There was a clear delineation between extremes related to the student experiences of participants. Student experiences were usually exceptional or inadequate. The one consistent pattern seemed to be that these students had a strong opinion on the performance of their social workers. One complaint was a lack of engagement and caring by the social worker. One student explained her situation as, “and in my case I would say like I didn't really have a good relationship with my social worker because I wouldn't really interact with her. It would just be like OK she's coming I have to, you know, be ready, make sure I'm home on time from school or something that you just give us like. Check up on our rooms and then give us bus tokens and then she would be on way.” Another student explained her interaction as, “Yeah as far as communication goes, ummm, you know they complained their work it was so long or was

so heavy and it was a lot of kids ahead of me or I can't place you because I just placed another kid and this group home won't take anymore or this or that. It was to me as to a reason why they couldn't versus why they could. One student lamented about the lack of empathy from her social worker; "Not great. A lot of my social workers I. I was in I was in foster care I mean for five years and I had. Five or six social workers and none of them I really connected with, a couple of them I really butted heads with it. And even just the way that they had handled my case when I first got there and it was just an emergency situation and the way that the woman had treated me you know it wasn't what I would have hoped for someone who was just ripped away from their family."

Not all experiences were bad and several students explain how they benefited from their interactions with their social workers." I've actually had a really good experience like I had good foster, I mean social workers and people who are ILP coordinators and case managers to where they help me a lot, I got lucky." Another student shared a positive experience with a social worker who went out of her way to help assist her in college. "So, I entered community college and then I don't know where, I get a phone call from this social worker [redacted] from... She works at DCFS and I don't know how she got a hold of me. Honestly she had seen my transcripts and everything and she asked me what was I up to and I told her that I was you know enrolling in AVC and that I wanted to go to school."

Reversing trends during college transition. There were several common themes from the student for recommendations regarding how to improve services to foster youth to improve their success in college. First, the transition from high school to college was an issue addressed. One student described it as, "So the transition if I had been more monitored... then it probably would have been an easier transition." One student articulated a recommendation for foster youth

themselves: “I would say don't be afraid to ask for help because I know it's like as foster students we tend to keep to ourselves and be more independent which ... can hurt us in the long run... So, just ask for help, ask questions, don't be afraid to ask questions and learning to manage your time.”

Second, the ability to be educated on the resources available to foster youth was important. One student went as far to say, “I would hope that future foster youth would be able to ask for what kind of rights...and not be afraid to ask for those resources.” Most feedback was similar to this student's request; “I think they need a lot of support in their freshmen year.” Another student stated a similar sentiment, “I think they need a lot of support their freshmen year.” The common theme is a quick identification of foster youth and similarly quick integration into a program that assists foster youth. This student's feedback sums up this recommendation well, “For future foster youth definitely knowing all of the resources that are available as soon as possible not finding out is two years later.”

Third, having some guidance from either a mentor or program support to help assist in transition to college is important.” So, having a liaison to really you know sit down and talk with you know the student.” Another student explains in more detail, “for me supports that could have been given that it would have made it easier. Maybe, like a liaison... how to figure out what class to take.” Some of the advice was not just related to having a mentor or liaison, but having that resource immediately. One piece expressed by a student, “definitely knowing all of the resources that are available as soon as possible, not finding out two years later... So having a liaison to really, you know, sit down and talk with you.” The message was clear and universal. The students acknowledged timeliness and personalized personal support as a major component in a successful transition to college.

Mentoring support. While there are plenty of experience with foster youth not getting the services or resources needed to transition to college, there were some individuals who provided timely support. The individuals who were involved in these students lives became instrumental in supporting them through their transition to college. Each of the students had someone who mentored them to some extent. Whether it was a high school mentor, or a foster parent, these mentors became a critical piece in their educational achievements. One student shared her experience, “actually she was a mentor who ended up adopting me so it was kind of like a foster home but I think that that was the greatest place and it got me where I'm at now.” One student listed one of their social workers as a mentor stating, “but I've been lucky to have really good social workers, is like one of my social workers his name is [redacted], like even though he was not a social worker he was still sending us and still is not my social worker, but he is still sending my uncle stuff so he is still on us. So he was very caring.” One social worker was sympathetic to one of the students and her needs, “But she was just she was when I was looking for housing. She had been pretty helpful. And then most importantly to me is she's a dog lover. So with the housing I was like I stress to her I'm like I need to find a place for my dogs to.”

Yet another student shared a story of how her mentor made a sacrifice to support her. “the mentor I was speaking to you about they pretty much went into her own pocket. Her and her husband told me it was a lot. You know from the simple things as far as you know how to do the financial aid how to do college applications and things to the large things, paying for, you know, cap and gown and photos and she actually took me to my first interview with Shiva in EOP. Actually, a day before my grad night from my college. So, you they, that program really, really put kind a fire to actually start college and finish up.

College Student Support During Transitions

Academic success. Understanding that foster youth achievement is significantly less than non-foster youth populations, understanding academic success is of critical importance. Several students address this concern and what they felt was important to their achievement. There were several suggestions ranging from internal to external motivation as well as program support. One student mentioned an internal motivation for being successful. “So that’s where I kind of like mentally told myself I had to perform and that I had to seek things out...and it was my own reinforcement.” Another student explained how a piece of advice caused him to find his own motivation. “A mentor at high school, she definitely tried to help me. Look you black and a male below the poverty level... So, I knew hearing both those things I was kind of doomed. So, if I had an opportunity to make it better for myself that exactly what I wanted to do.”

One student credited one her student programs EOP with providing the resources to be successful. “Well the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP)... dress program, disability resources.” They went on to explain how their major advisor was also a part of their academic success. Another student also credited one of their foster youth programs for greatly improving their grades. “And that’s when I started to like blossom and my grades went from being D’s and F’s and withdraws to A’s and B’s.

Community support. Several of the students expressed receiving support and participated in several organizations designed for foster youth as well as religious and social organizations. Whether they were college based or non-college based programs, some of the student’s express support from specific individuals. One student explained how they received support from two individuals, “My deans at [redacted] and the mentor from [redacted],” both from outside community based organizations designed to provide support for foster youth.

Several other students articulated the necessity for specific foster youth program support, financial support and transitional support and the role these aspects played in their success.

Financial support. It cannot be impressed enough on how much financial support plays a role in a foster youth's ability to be successful. Without a stable social and familial support system, having access to practical supports can be problematic. This was not lost on the students, but rather a deep understanding was very apparent in the conversations. "Yeah, when you age-out there is nothing left...When you are in foster care you have the option or when you are kicked out of foster care you have the option of going on Social Security and SSI and you're given that until you're able to get on your feet."

Because many of foster youth have no expected family contributions, state and federal aid are available to them. Many student's express gratitude for receiving the Chafee Grant, which is a state grant specifically for foster youth. "The Chafee Grant I remember I was the recipient of that for... a few years." Several other students mentioned outside organization that helped with books and tuition. "But on top of the [redacted] I would probably say the [redacted] foundation helped me with book grants and they're like a foundation specifically for foster youth." Social Services also provides financial support for foster youth. One student explained how Independent Living Programs (ILP), "if you need extra money for your dorm fees, they help you with that and also if you need a tutor they help you get a tutor and stuff."

We also have to remember that foster youth may or maybe reconnect or maybe never lost touch with their families of origin, which can also be a source of financial support. Two of the participants explained how their families were supportive. "So, my mom and I we definitely did support each other financially throughout you know my early college." The other student expressed gratitude to their grandparents for the support they provided. "I was fortunate enough

that I was able to live with my paternal grandparents. So, I left the transitional housing program that's where I went to go live and they provided me with stability enough to lay down roots."

Campus-based foster youth support programs. There has been relatively recently a greater interest in serving foster youth and with this increased attention new programs have been created to address the needs of foster youth with the purpose of increasing graduation rates among this population. These programs are designed to streamline access to academic, financial and social support. One student explained the benefit of a foster youth program. "And when I did find out about the program it really truly helped me and that's when I started to like blossom." It is not just 4-year colleges that are creating programs to support foster youth. Community Colleges are also working to increase support. One student mentioned she was a participant until "my last year at [redacted] College. When conducted properly these programs can have a profound impact. "It's just kind of the place where you can walk in and you know you are welcome.

Empirically, we know most foster youth will lack basic support systems in their lifetimes, which leaves them vulnerable to situations that people with established support systems can weather. For foster youth, simple situations can lead to significant challenges. One foster youth explained the importance of their foster youth programs as, "basically you know the folks and the foster youth and supporting us financially, emotionally, basically all around especially educationally, just keeping us, you know, just close." They also went on to state, "It is easy in a large institution like [redacted] for students to kind of fall by the wayside, but it was frequent emails, frequent meetups. They almost made it mandatory and it definitely worked, because had they not I probably would not have excelled." Another reiterated the importance as; "Just the program in general, like a lot of resources and [redacted] is really nice and they have a lot of

events for us.” Not all the students who participated in the study were part of foster youth programs, but they did benefit from being identified and received invitations to campus events.

Foster youth program mentors on campus. There seems to be little doubt that the programs that create the structure to assist students is incredibly vital, but individual interactions are also a key component in student success and this point is not lost on the foster youth receiving these services. One student expressed their appreciation by stating, “Through the [redacted] program for foster youth, [Redacted] has always been there for me. She’s kind of been life guidance and kind of held my hand throughout the whole time.” These individuals can provide a sense of belonging that endears a student to persist. One student explained how she used her mentor as a support; “But also I would go in and talk to her if I’m having a rough day.”

Once this relationship is established the mentors are able to reach these youth in a way that generic correspondences would fail. “You know to me all those emails when [redacted] asks me like where I am, are you ok? I haven’t seen your face, come by the office; Is that longing for family support that, that kinship [redacted] definitely gave me... it was just reassuring.” These mentors can also be a conduit for access to resources. “I spoke to [redacted] and she was the one who referred me to all these like scholarships...events.” Because some foster youth lack parental support, these mentors can provide one consistent presence that can help provide stability. One student explained it succinctly, “Having people that if I have a question, especially [redacted] can guide me.”

Transition services in foster youth programs. Whether guided toward foster youth or other groups, colleges and high schools gear programs toward helping transition students to the next level. For foster youth, because of the low levels of educational attainment, the transition is extremely important. One student expressed their challenges, “I kind of came by it hitting the

ground running with this whole college thing, and my first semester was pretty rough. My whole first year actually was pretty tough transitioning so, so yeah I didn't really feel prepared."

Another student expressed the opposite and mentioned how "I started to blossom and my grades went from being D's and F's and withdraws to A's and B's." Yet another student mentioned, "No freshmen year was bad for me like I got stopped out, failed a couple of classes."

Some programs have designed events and experiences that would help bridge the gap and make the transition easier. One student explained, "It goes out to the [redacted]. Their main goal was they created this thing called Summer Bridge and it's a transfer from a community college, but they prepare you to get into university and during the summer bridge you have to take them in order to be in the [redacted] program; you have to take a certain course during the summer." As you can see there was a defined difference in experiences for some students.

Advising in the context of foster youth programs. While many foster youths are able to identify and join organizations and groups for foster youth, sometimes additional resources are needed to help guide the student. One student noted the importance of advising; "My college counselor actually directed me to the foster care counselor on campus." Another student acknowledged their high school counselor and the role they played in supporting their transition. "Just getting to know all the different resources that we have as foster youth. Umm... I really didn't see myself in college until like I started talking to my Counselor from High school. Which encouraged me to apply and actually get the opportunity to come to a university." Of course, advisors are also for when students have problems as well. One student talked about when they faced some academic issues." Yeah but. I decided you know what I got to move forward. And let's just say I went to talk to my adviser and I told her and she just told me that I can retake it. So, there was hope there."

Building community in foster youth programs on campus. One of the major components of foster youth programs is in creating community. Creating a sense of belonging is important to feeling engaged and a sense of belonging. Many of the foster youth expressed gratitude for the many programs that sought to assist the transition. Others see their community as a component for motivating them to be successful. One student articulated their drive as, “Most like I think most of the, the drive to pursue a high higher education comes from my background essentially. And like you know like my community as a whole and like how like. Like the demographic in my community is looked at...” Another program specifically worked to help transition a student to college. “I applied... but I am, I’ve been here since 2014 that you know, she was one of the resources that I had and another resource that I had was [redacted] Center which was a transitional home.” Other community resources help to provide assistance in professional development. One student explained their situation before college; “So there was another resource that I had was the work source center and they had a special program just for foster youth who were trying to obtain a job.”

Some of the students had profound experiences at their community centers, for instance one student shared an experience they had, “Place by the name of [redacted] ... They are actually no longer there due to lack of funding from the county. Pretty much prepared me for college. They helped me with applications, they gave me fee waivers and what money they did have.” One community provided an extension of services to assist one student, “I think when I when I was in when I was at [redacted] the residential treatment program I was also. I was made to attend narcotics anonymous AA meetings stuff like that and they had those bi weekly. And after I left the facility they still allowed me to come back for my meetings and stuff like that. And so it kind of smoothed the transition.” Another student shared a positive experience they had with a

program, “as far as transitioning. I mean. THPP the first steps for youth was amazing. Like. My favorite staff member from my group home is the one who moved me into the THP program and they had everything set up because I was worried about furniture and everything and you know ... and I even got to choose my own room and they right away provided a check you know for food and do you know they encourage kids to open up a bank account so I went and did that. And you know they made sure that we had a working washer and dryer made sure I knew how to cook and clean first so they made sure I could live first before they transition me.”

Peer environment in foster youth programs. Because of the traumas of the foster care system, foster youth can often display many behaviors from isolation to developing meaningful connections and everything in between. This was no different for these students. The range of responses is across the board. For instance, some of the students mentioned reconnecting with their biological families, developing and maintaining peer relationships. While some students limited peer relationship, one commonality is there was some support for each of the participants.

While there were challenges with some of the families of origin, several students mentioned connecting with cousins and other family members. One student mentioned both family and friends in their response, “A few biological family members but more so just verbal proud of you, you know... Umm, a few good long-term friends and as far as support beginning college and going through that journey they knew I was by myself. So, I did have that.” Another student mentioned, “So my time in college I actually researched, found a lot of my family members... and some of those who did stick around for the long haul I ended up getting a lot of support. There was friends, you know family members finding out that I was actually in school.

One of my cousins who kind of made the process a little less strenuous so I wasn't pretty much by myself.”

One student mentioned meeting her friend while in the foster care system and how she encouraged her to apply for college.” Goodness. I believe. It was my roommate [redacted] because I had heard about the FAFSA when I was in the THP program at [redacted]...But when I went around again my friend she was my roommate at the THP program and I told her I wanted to go back to school again. She was the one who told me about it and she's like [redacted] you know to read, we can figure it out. But she was the one who just told me go FAFSA.gov.” While everyone has a different threshold for developing a social network one participant is “in the process of joining a sorority.”

There can be trepidation when transitioning, but some of the participants expressed a self-awareness about their situations. One student expressed appreciation for the process and the support. “We all went in knowing the vibe of how college was going to be but also like we all had a special bond and a connection together. And a lot of them were foster youth and some of them weren't you know. So, we all went in having a bond.” Some are more reluctant to admit the need to develop a support system. One student expressed it this way, “I mean I think they're more important than I'd like to admit. So, I kind of like reinforce this like frame of thought that I have to do everything on my own and I have to be able to succeed on my own or else life what worth do I really have. But I think it is extremely important to know that I have that behind me.” Another student expressed a profound appreciation for one of her high school friends that provided significant support and allowed her to stay with her and her family. “And like I said I left Northridge to Lancaster. That's what I considered home right there and knew people and I

knew that my friend would help me you know get back up and try to you know see what I could do with school.”

Conclusion

Support systems can help mitigate the damage that a lack of resources and instability create, but the net outcomes of success is much more complicated. While relationships and support are critical to foster youth success, there are also other factors that affect how students achieve success—some of these being internal. Yet, because of the instability and challenges being faced in foster care, the physical and emotional supports took on additional meaning for participants in this study. Relationships became more critical and a lack of resources created uncertainty. The consequences for foster youth were amplified, and this experience had a destabilizing influence on their lives. Foster youth know they have to succeed and it ultimately falls upon them to make sure they utilize all the resources they need to achieve academic success. By integrating a combination of resource utilization as well their own internal motivation, these students have been able to overcome the obstacles that prevent so many foster youth from being successful.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this ground theory study was to examine the first-year transitional experiences of foster youth in college. By looking through the filter of social and familial influences and support, I explored how these support systems affected students' ability to adapt and thrive in this environment. By examining these factors, I hoped that this new insight could help us better understand how they positively or negatively affected foster youth's ability to succeed—helping educators to better understand the challenges facing foster youth. It is the hope that this additional information would help administrators and practitioners design and implement programs that address foster youth needs to a greater and more successful extent.

By utilizing funds of knowledge as my conceptual framework, I examined how foster youth are shaped by their shared experiences and how a small group of students in this study were able to overcome significant obstacles to achieve academic success during and after their transition to college. Through one-on-one interviews, these participants shared their experiences, from K-12 to college. By interrogating the data, I sought to categorize the findings in a way that helps to create an explanatory model of who and what helped students' in the study achieve success where it has eluded many other foster youth. The students explained how through their experiences were able to overcome obstacles and mitigate the challenges facing them.

Discussion

Because foster youth can have significantly different experiences, determining what factors were relevant to their college transition experiences was important to help understand if there were enough commonalities to identify and target services to foster youth. Further, by then

looking through the lens of social and familial influences, I investigated how these factors helped or hindered their success. Through data analysis, I was able to identify and categorize the findings through the research questions.

Factors Shaping College Transition Experiences of Foster Youth

Familial support. The first research question that guided this study was: What factors shape the transition experiences of first-year, first-generation foster youth in comprehensive regional public universities? While our image of foster youth may stem from media that portrays only a portion of the foster youth experience, the reality can be more varied. There are also policy shifts that are affecting how foster youth are treated and placed, for instance the Department of Child and Family Services has tried to increasingly keep families connected and in the home to the extent that it is possible. Most of the participants in this study did maintain some type of contact with their families of origin. For these students, we can see that even when a student has been in foster care from birth, as one of the students of this study experienced, there can still be familial connections. For this student, he was able to establish a level of support from his family of origin while he was in college.

Foster care can be a significant and defining characteristic in these students' lives. Each of the students in this study expressed to some extent how much it defined their lives. Because foster care is imposed when a child has been neglected or abused in the home, there is some history that warranted some level introspective awareness (Wolanin, 2005). For these students, family was either a detrimental factor in their lives or at a least a complicated and complex one. Parental relationships seem to be the most problematic with some students feeling issues of abandonment or discontent. For the students who were able to make connections with extended family, there seemed to be a more positive relationship established. For one of the participants in

the study, their parent lost custody of them, but they were fortunate enough that a sibling stepped up and won custody. Another participant had contact with their parent, but their relationship was strained and she never moved back in with her mother. To say whether the family had a positive or negative impact is too simplistic, but to put it another way, the impact regardless was significant.

Losing a parent or guardian has more than just a negative impact on emotional stability; it also increases the likelihood that they will face financial instability, and students in this study expressed their own issues with losing this familial support. By having to rely on outside support systems such as social services, these students were unable to transition to independence through a normal familial process. This insecurity posed a significant impact on their lives and their ability to handle important life transitions. While some of these losses resulted in a permanent removal from their biological families, some extended family members were able to step in and prevent them from entering a foster home, which has the impact of preventing many of the negative effects of being in foster care.

Social services. There are significant challenges in navigating social services, and the students in this study expressed a complex view of the services they received from being a foster youth. The expectation of these students was you are not supposed to have a positive experience with the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS); that was an almost universal opinion amongst these students, but the actual experiences varied widely with significant outcome variations. From having positive experiences with their social workers, or with programs designed to assist foster youth to disappointment and feelings of abandonment by the system that was supposed to protect them, many of these students experienced both sides of spectrum.

One of the major factors that seemed to create positive experiences for students were individual support staff. From a social worker to a program director, the impact of these individuals was profound. One participant expressed gratitude when their program director went into their own pocket to assist them. Another student expressed appreciation for their social worker who continued to assist them even after they were no longer on their case load. The perception that they are being appreciated had a positive impact on these students. On the other side of the spectrum several participants felt dismayed at how mechanical and disinterested their social workers were considering how traumatic their situations were. It's important to remember that the perspective of a foster youth is not an evaluation of the whole system, but a reflection of their individual situation.

Social support. While addressing the factors needed to make the transition to college, social support when applicable was a source of not just friendship but also of social pressure to engage in activities that were beneficial to continued educational achievement. Several students described interactions with friends that directly advanced their academic goals. One participant described meeting with friends to fill out college applications, while yet another described being educated by one of her friends on filling out a financial aid application. Yet, the relationship with friends is not as clear cut as these two cases. While friendships benefited the students, who were able to maintain enrollment at one high school for a significant period of time, there was also a reluctance to rely on friendship too heavily. Indeed, when presented with an opportunity to take advantage of help from friends, several students opted to proceed without this help. There was something preventing these students from relying on other too heavily.

Unfortunately, the students who participated in the study who had multiple placements did not have the ability to develop close friendship and this spilled over to college. One student

described keeping her social network small and felt the impact of being in foster care as on the of factors in not engaging in social clubs and organizations on campus. For these students, romantic relationships were important. The idea of a more permanent relationship is more alluring. One of the participants moved in with her boyfriend, who also provided significant practical support in her pursuit of her degree.

High school transition. The transition to college can be overwhelming when things are smooth, but when students such as foster youth try to reach the next level of education, it can get complicated. Many of the students felt stigmatized by the foster youth experience and may not have received the support from either foster care or by the administrators at their local high schools. The students in the study shared a complex view of what happened. For instance, for those who attended specialty high school, the focus was more on either mental health or remedial education—but not necessarily for transfer to a 4-year college. They felt the focus lacked an institutional mission of progressing students for the next level of education in college. By focusing on the deficiencies of these students, their interests for higher education seemed to be neglected. Yet, not all feedback from these schools was negative. There was praise for the personalized attention as well as the class size that helped them feel they were valued. The failure of the experience was not that they were not valued but rather that they were not given the guidance to take the next educational step.

For the students who attended public high schools the experience was inconsistent. Some of the participants expressed gratitude at individuals within the institution who helped them pursue college as an option. For the individuals in this study, counselors and instructors assisted them as students interested in college. While a participant described feeling left out as she felt her counselor did not support her, many students identified a counselor or instructor who cared.

Because public high schools have a mission to assist students in their goal to go to college, this was a positive for those students who were fortunate enough to stay in one school long enough to benefit from these relationships. One student expressed her gratitude to a college counselor who befriended her. She ended up interning for her and benefitted from having direct exposure to college services—because of the personal contact and interest there was encouragement for these foster youth.

Program support. There is no doubt that when individuals show genuine interest, it creates a positive influence that provides a counterbalance to the instability they may have faced while in the foster care system. The students in this study expressed their gratitude to the individuals who assisted them. Unfortunately, because of the funding issues some of these programs ceased to exist. It seems that the challenges facing foster youth are not just exploring and examining the factors that affect them, but also maintaining a stable funding source to assist their transition to college.

The programs that work toward assisting foster youth, in the experiences of the students of this study, were vital to their success. Unfortunately, not all the students of this study had access to such programs, and the reason may be the type of placement they were in during their time in foster care. For those who did have access, the practical training and the relationships seemed to be significant in their successful transition to college. Several of the participants of this study explained how tuition assistance, help in enrolling in college, financial aid assistance and general help in navigating the transition were important. The students who did have access to these services gave a unanimous opinion that these programs were critical to them in several ways. While not ceding all credit to these programs, they did appreciate assistance they received.

Family and Social Backgrounds Influencing College Transitions for Foster Youth

Residential stability. The second research question was: How do family and social backgrounds influence college transition of first-year, first-generation foster youth? One of the most critical aspects of these students' lives was also one of the most basic aspects of their lives and that was their housing situations. Residential stability not only affects where one resides, but also school placements as well as employment options. For the students in this study there was a correlation between the challenges that they faced and the length and type of foster care placement they were in. The students who experienced a familial placement tended to have a more stable home environment, which assisted with the ability to develop more meaningful long-term relationships, while long-term placements tended to expose the student to a whole myriad of challenges by being in the foster care system longer. The issues facing foster youth range from mundane issues such as learning life skills to significantly more challenging issues such as developing meaningful relationships.

By not having significant long-term relationships with adults, many issues developed that would not develop for students in stable and healthy homes. To account for the lack of mentorship and adult guidance, one program worked with one of the students on understanding how to do the laundry and helping her set up a bank account. The mundane tasks we take for granted when we have individuals who have permanent roles in our lives cannot be taken for granted when they are relocated multiple times a year. Psychological issues that can arise from not developing long-term friendships can also be a significant impediment to their future success and that home security was critical to reducing challenging environments.

Families are certainly the main avenue for creating a stable residence, but social networks also had an influence in helping them achieve some semblance of normality. One of the

participants was offered a space in a friend's home until she could get on her feet. Significant others also play a role in assisting some of these students in developing a more permanent residence. While friends were able to play a role in assisting foster youth, they were not as successful as familial relationship in reducing residential instability.

Emotional support. Woven throughout the interviews with students was a focus on the quality of relationships. While foster youth may not have stability to the extent non-foster youth do, the quality of the relationships that these students engage in and maintain becomes important. The one consistent pattern in the feedback from the students in this study was the quality of the care they received and to what extent the caretaker was being authentic.

Considering most of these students at some point or another could not take adult relationships for granted, it is not surprising that when an adult showed little care it was not received well. The common perception for the foster youth is that they are treated as a task to be accomplished rather than as someone who has just undergone a serious life change. Several participants expressed dismay with the way they were being treated and felt a callousness from the people who were handling their transition. This left a mark that was expressed vividly by those who experienced this situation. Yet, there is a contrasting perspective by the students who experienced caring social workers. They expressed gratitude and appreciation. From assisting with orthodontic care to assisting with legal services for citizenship assistance, the response was the total opposite. This contrast highlighted the challenges facing foster youth and the challenges facing care workers assisting foster youth in higher education. In assisting these students there is an elevated need for awareness as to how you come across. Because of the instability from foster care there is an awareness of the fragility and lack of permanency in human relations that needs to be addressed when dealing with foster youth.

Internal motivators. In interviews, when we talked about designing a program for foster youth, we searched for the attainable goal by targeting program components that we believe would benefit students—but we operated under the assumptions that we cannot begin to quantify the experiences of foster youth and we cannot reduce their experience to predictable outcomes. Just as each foster youth has a unique experience in foster care, people also can choose how they perceive experiences. Depending on our personalities, we can choose to take a positive or negative perspective. This is no different from the student in this study. When we look at the experiences and the motivations of why they were able to succeed while others were not, we can see that intrinsic motivation was important. We know foster care is never without a negative experience, but how do some students continue to succeed. It seems to come down to how we use experiences to motivate us.

For the foster youth in this study, experiences with their families of origin and experiences with other individuals such as friends, mentors, foster parents and program directors who helped intentionally or unintentionally motivate these students to find the motivation to propel themselves. Self-reliance seems to be one of the major factors in explaining their behavior. For one student, despite an offer of assistance from a friend, she sought out assistance from a residential program, because she felt the need to achieve independence without the assistance of those around her. For another student, the realization that a failure to not achieve success would come with a heavy cost was enough motivation to graduate with his degree.

Conclusions

There is no simple explanation for why one foster youth succeeds and why another does not, but by examining the factors that surrounded their lives in foster care, we can begin to understand the complexity and work to provide a basic explanatory model for assisting foster

youth. Furthermore, we can utilize this information in guiding foster youth program creation and creating policy that is responsive to their needs.

We know there are many family circumstances that force a child into foster care. Anyone could experience a change of circumstances that lead them to become wards of the state, but how does this experience define and change the individual that is being cared for? From what the students shared and what has been documented there are certain factors that greatly increase the challenges and dangers of being a foster youth. A longer placement in foster care increases the exposure to a challenging social services bureaucracy and quite possible additional foster care placements, which in turn creates an environment that is more unstable than for someone who was placed for only a short time, or was placed with a family member. Individuals in short-term placements report having more positive experiences than those who had longer term placements. Yet, there are factors that can help to mitigate this effect.

While foster care is never an ideal situation and frequent placements can take a toll on the youth, there is a positive note; individuals can make a significant impact on their lives. Several of the students experienced at least one or two social workers they would consider to be people who helped ease the stress of foster care. One student was adopted by her foster mother and yet another experienced a program director help fund their transition with their own funds. By experiencing a positive experience interaction, these students were able to develop relationship that help provide some positivity in an otherwise stressful and negative experience.

Foster youth are no different from any person seeking to be successful, but with one major and significant challenge and that is removal from their home for the purpose of being either neglected or abused. When someone gets removed from the home and relocated to any foster care placement, it comes with the loss of stability. All the factors, from residential

instability, to emotional abuse, and reduced familial and social support. increase the risk of failure in achieving their educational goals. These challenges are enough to create one of the greatest measurable discrepancies in educational achievement. The question becomes does understanding what challenges facing foster youth become enough to help shape better programs to assist them and improve their success?

Recommendations for Future Research

There are many periods of time in which foster youth are vulnerable, but when looking at the achievement gap of foster youth in comparison to non-foster youth, we can see the glaring discrepancy in educational attainment. We know foster youth have the same aspirations as non-foster youth, but lack the ability to achieve educational success to the same degree (Wolanin, 2005). While we have documented this phenomenon, we still know very little about the specific elements, which provides many avenues for research. First, conducting a study with a narrow focus on the transition from high school to college can highlight the challenges facing foster youth during this period and also provide a detail rich narrative to help shape new efforts to bridge the achievement gap for foster youth seeking to go to college. By focusing not just on the K-12 experience, but how structural support or lack of hinders their experiences would be a valuable insight. Another research opportunity would be to explore the quality and type of relationship that benefits foster youth. Based on the findings from this study, there certainly are important insights into the reluctance of some youth to receive and accept help. Understanding how this affects educational obtainment can be valuable to improving services for these youth. Another avenue for research would be to expand on the different types of foster care placements and their effect on achievement in college. By providing a mixed method approach to this issue we can begin understanding statistical outcomes for a greater segment of the foster youth

population, while also providing a narrative to explain how foster youth perceive their challenges and the obstacles they face.

Recommendations for Practice

Not all foster youth face similar challenges and trying to understand the population as a single entity would be difficult and counterproductive. Even within this study, each student responded differently to similar challenges and institutions such as social services. Many foster youth feel the need to be understood and respected as individuals and one universal aspect of the experiences for the foster youth in this study was just this. Any perception that they are a statistic can perpetuate the institutionalization they felt when in foster care. This idea means when we are working with foster youth, we must acknowledge them not through a deficiency model, but as unique individuals who have succeeded despite these challenges. For programs and institutions, this means providing the opportunity for one on one interactions that allow the participant to feel heard and respected.

So how can we translate what we know into practice? I believe it is important to create programs that provides enough physical resources as possible. This approach will provide a challenge, because this means creating programs that are resource rich, which provide the wide spectrum support that is needed to address all concerns related to foster care. In this period of reduced support from state funding sources, locating the resources necessary to establish an effective program will be challenging. As practitioners, it is our job to advocate and secure the necessary resources to adequately address these concerns, but with the current environment as it is, can we really establish effective programs? We know foster youth face obstacles that may challenge our established practices, but I believe working with social services as well as other entities that assist foster youth we can begin to help mitigate these financial challenges and

provide an opportunity to assist foster youth and prevent them from getting lost in the educational pipeline.

It is also important to be able to identify and recruit foster youth as soon as possible. Many of the participants in this study recommended a smooth transition from the K-12 educational system to college. Because not all foster youth regain support from a social or familial support system, creating a program that will evolve with the student to assist them in their transition will also be vital. For those lucky enough to stay with a foster family, services can now be extended if a student goes to college, but for the student who emancipated from the system, graduation can also become a second emancipation and if they are unprepared for this transition it can be detrimental to their life. Understanding this is critical to any program working with foster youth. Programs that work with foster youth should not become stagnant, but evolves with foster youth to help them develop professional skills for their transition into the real world.

Once we go beyond establishing institutional and financial support systems, we must establish a strong social support for these students. The idea that permanency is vital cannot be stressed enough. The students in this study relied on relationships to move forward. There was not one student in this study who did not rely on someone to help assist them in their transition. The challenging part for many programs will be developing meaningful relationships with these students. Administration, faculty, and staff involved in these programs cannot settle just establishing connections but developing relationships that display genuine concern for the students involved. These programs must be staffed by people who have a genuine interest in the students' wellbeing and of developing a collaborative relationship. Casual relationships will not benefit these students. These programs also must establish well defined roles that can the

opportunities for developing mentoring that can provide practical support to these students through intensive and regular contact.

There is no doubt that educational systems have failed foster youth. The statistics speak for themselves, but by being mindful of the challenges facing foster youth, understanding the scope of their concerns, and addressing the lack of permanency can we start to address their challenges. As one of the lowest achieving identifiable student groups, we must acknowledge our role and address the institutional deficiencies. The model used to assist other disadvantaged groups is insufficient to create transformative changes that are required to reverse the trends for foster youth. Only through collaboration can we work to create a seamless approach to education and begin to address the underlying needs of foster youth. The losses in the educational pipeline are significant, perhaps one of the most significant in a single identifiable group. One of the most vital pieces we can use in our practice is how we address the transition from the K-12 educational system to college. Working with the K-12 system which still has the ability to track and identify foster youth and creating an opportunity for them in college can be one of the single most effective ways to address the attrition. First, we have to address the student as an individual with the expressed intent of understanding them as unique and in possession of skills that have allowed them to persist in school and will continue to support their work as students in colle

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Appendix A

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE
STUDENT TEACHING/EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION STUDY
INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Email from Michael Eisner College of Education to foster youth participating in a researcher study on first-year first-generation transition experience study.

Dear Student,

I am writing to inform you about a dissertation study that is being conducted at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) regarding foster youth and transitional experiences. Joaquin Franco, a doctoral candidate, is conducting the study as part of the Ed.D. degree requirements. The purpose of Joaquin Franco's dissertation study is to explore the transitional experiences of first-year first-generation foster youth in college.

This study will add new knowledge to existing information regarding the first year transitional experiences. Your participation in this study would be to participate in one or possible two 1 hour one-on-one interview sessions.

Any personally identifiable characteristics, such as your name or school, will not appear in the Study. Participating in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time.

Your time investment in this study is greatly appreciated. If you would like to participate, please contact Joaquin Franco at Joaquin.Franco@my.csun.edu or (818)749-9023 Thank you in advance for considering participation in this study.

Best,

Joaquin Franco

California State University, Northridge

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

A Study of First-Year Transitional Experiences among New Incoming Foster Youth into College.

You are being asked to participate in a research study. A study of first-year experiences among new incoming foster youth into college, a study conducted by Joaquin Franco as part of the requirements for the Ed.D. Degree in Educational Leadership. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything that you do not understand before deciding if you want to participate. A researcher listed below will be available to answer your questions.

**Appendix B
RESEARCH TEAM**

Researcher:

Joaquin Franco

Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

18111 Nordhoff St.

Northridge, CA 91330- 8265

(818)749-9023

joaquin.franco@my.csun.edu

Faculty Advisor:

Nathan Durdella, Ph.D.

Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

18111 Nordhoff St.

Northridge, CA 91330- 8265

(818)677-2591

nathan.durdella@csun.edu

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this research study is to examine transitional experiences of first-year first-generation foster youth.

SUBJECTS

Inclusion Requirements

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are currently a foster youth who is currently 18 years of age or older and attending college in the greater Los Angeles area.

Time Commitment

This study will involve approximately one hour of your time with a possible follow up interview approximately three weeks later, lasting one hour as well.

PROCEDURES

The following procedures will occur: You will complete an interview about your first-year experiences in college. Should there be a need for additional information, you will be contacted again to participate in a second round of interviews.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The possible risks and/or discomforts associated with the procedures described in this study include: discussion of subjects that may stir emotions and recounting of experiences that may cause some discomfort. This study involves no more than minimal risk. There are no known harms or discomforts associated with this study beyond those encountered in normal daily life.

BENEFITS

Subject Benefits

You may not directly benefit from participation in this study.

Benefits to Others or Society

With your participation in this study, we hope to generate findings that can help future foster youth transition easier to college and to increase their success rates. We hope to better identify the factors that increase success in the foster youth population.

ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION

The only alternative to participation in this study is not to participate.

COMPENSATION, COSTS AND REIMBURSEMENT

Compensation for Participation

You will receive a \$50 gift certificate for your participation in the study.

Costs

There is no cost to you for participation in this study.

WITHDRAWAL OR TERMINATION FROM THE STUDY AND CONSEQUENCES

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time. **If you decide to withdraw from this study you should notify the research team immediately.** The research team may also end your participation in this study if you do not follow instructions, miss scheduled visits, or if your safety and welfare are at risk.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Subject Identifiable Data

All identifiable information that will be collected about you will be removed and replaced with a code. A list linking the code and your identifiable information will be kept separate from the research data.

Data Storage

All research data will be stored electronically on a secure computer with password protection.

Data Access

The researcher and faculty advisor named on the first page of this form will have access to your study records. Any information derived from this research project that personally identifies you will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without your separate consent, except as specifically required by law. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not include identifiable information about you.

Data Retention

The researchers intend to keep the research data until analysis of the information is completed and then it will be destroyed.

Mandated Reporting

Under California law, the researcher is required to report known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, dependent adult or elder, including, but not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If any researcher has or is given such information, he may be required to report it to the authorities.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS

If you have any comments, concerns, or questions regarding the conduct of this research please contact the research team listed on the first page of this form.

If you have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, or questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Research and Sponsored Projects, 18111 Nordhoff Street, California State University, Northridge, Northridge, CA 91330-8232, or phone 818-677-2901.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION STATEMENT

You should not sign this form unless you have read it and been given a copy of it to keep. **Participation in this study is voluntary.** You may refuse to answer any question or discontinue your involvement at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. Your decision will not affect your relationship with California State University, Northridge. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this consent form and have had a chance to ask any questions that you have about the study.

I agree to participate in the study.

I agree to be audio recorded

I do not wish to be audio recorded

Participant Signature

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Researcher Signature

Date

Printed Name of Researcher

Appendix C

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE STUDENT TEACHING/EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION STUDY

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I. Pre-interview Session: Introduction/Background

Welcome and introduction:

Good evening, how are you doing? I wanted to thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Before we begin the interview I wanted to give you the opportunity to read and sign the Consent to Participate in Research.

Purpose of the interview:

This interview is a one-on-one interview intended to collect information for a research study that explores the first-year experiences of foster youth after completion of their first-year of college. During this interview, we will talk about your experiences of the first-year, especially related to your social and family backgrounds.

Timing:

Today's interview will last approximately 60 minutes. Are there any questions before we get started?

II. Interview Session

Main Questions:

I. Pre-interview Session: Introduction/Background

Welcome and introduction:

Good evening, how are you doing? I wanted to thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Before we begin the interview I wanted to give you the opportunity to read and sign the Consent to Participate in Research.

Purpose of the interview:

This interview is a one-on-one interview intended to collect information for a research study that explores the first-year experiences of foster youth after completion of their first-year of college. During this interview, we will talk about your experiences of the first-year, especially related to your social and family backgrounds.

Timing:

Today's interview will last approximately 60 minutes. Are there any questions before we get started?

What is your age?

What is your gender?

What is your ethnic background?

1. Can you describe your foster care placement?

What type of placement?

How long have you been in foster care?

2. How has your experiences with Department of Family Services been?

How were your experiences with your social worker/s?

3. Given your experience as a foster youth student in higher education, what do you feel helped you prepare for college?

Were there any specific programs that helped you make the transition to college?

4. Did you feel prepared for college?

If so, what experiences helped you prepare?

If not, what do you think would have helped you?

5. Did you feel high school adequately prepared you for college?

Did the high school resources help you make the transition?

Were there individuals in higher school who supported you?

6. Was there any support from individuals that helped you make the transition to college?

If so, who were they?

And what was their relation to you?

7. During your time at the university was there anyone that provided support?

If so what was their relationship to you?

8. What type of family or social support do you have while attending college?

How important is that support to your success?

9. Do you receive any support from the University for being a foster youth?

10. What are the biggest obstacles you face being a college student?
11. Have you developed a unique support system since starting college?

If so, describe the support?

12. Can you suggest improvement to the services you are receiving?

If so, can you describe them?

14. Is being a student of color a risk factor in college?
15. Did your gender play a role in your time at the university?

Is there anything you would suggest for future foster youth to make the transition easier?

16. Has your gender played a role in your identity at the university?

The interview will last approximately 1 hour.

Closing Questions:

Now that we are finished with our interview I would like to give you a final opportunity to add anything that you think would be beneficial for this study? Is there anything else you'd like to add? Have you said everything that you wanted to say but didn't get a chance to say? Have you shared everything that is significant about these experiences with me? If there's anything else that you recall after our interview session, I invite you to share it by contacting me.

III. Post-Interview Session: Debriefing and Closing

Thank you for participating in today's interview session. I greatly appreciate you taking the time and sharing your ideas with me. I also want to restate that what you have shared with me is confidential. No part of our discussion that includes names or other identifiable characteristics will be used in any report or document. Finally, I want to provide you with a chance to ask any questions that you might have about this interview. Do you have any questions at this time?