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# Barriers to Academic Achievement for Foster Youth: The Story Behind the Statistics

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The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the perceptions of former and current foster youth about the barriers they encountered during their K-12 education, and to learn how they overcame these obstacles and achieved academic success. The study included in-depth interviews of 11 participants, all of whom were current or former foster youth who were enrolled or had plans to enroll in a community college or 4-year university. The results of this study indicated that previously identified barriers to academic achievement were true for this group of participants, but that these topics or themes represented the effects of the deeper issues of anger, abuse, and disempowerment. This anger, abuse, and disempowerment touched every aspect of their lives, resulting in high mobility, Individualized Education Plans for emotional/behavioral issues, and difficulty transitioning from care to independence.

Keywords: child voice, education, at-risk learners, emotional maltreatment, high school students, families, individualized behavior plans, parent-child caregiver relationships

This article presents findings from a phenomenological study on current and former foster youth intended to uncover barriers to academic achievement. The goal was to hear firsthand and record the perceptions of foster youth on the academic barriers they encountered during their K-12 experience.

Zetlin, MacLeod, and Kimm (2012) pointed out that the outlook for children in foster care is cause for alarm. In fact, children and youth in foster care represent one of the most academically vulnerable populations in schools today (Zetlin, 2006; Zetlin et al., 2012). In spite of this, a 2003 national poll revealed that people know very little about the foster care system (Wolanin, 2005). This lack of knowledge about children and youth in foster care extends to the education system, where educators are not adequately trained to meet the unique needs of these students. Teachers and administrators are often unaware of foster children in their schools and classrooms and are sometimes unable to meet the needs of this population. This begins to explain why foster youth graduate from high school at substantially lower rates than their nonfoster peers. Approximately 50% of all foster children will graduate from high school (Bruskas, 2008).

Of those that graduate from high school, approximately 33% will go on to pursue postsecondary education at a community college, 4-year college, or university (Barth, 1990).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Children and youth in foster care experience trauma on many fronts. Removed from their home, separated from their parent(s), placed in the care of strangers, and assigned to a child welfare worker, they often experience trauma and stress that individuals in the general population cannot begin to comprehend. Removal from the home quite often also means a move to a new neighborhood, a new community, and a new school without the benefit of time to acclimate to these new surroundings. When the state assumes the role of the parent for children in care, the safety of that child is the first objective. It is important, however, that the education of the child is not overlooked (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004).

## EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT AND FOSTER YOUTH

Children who have suffered neglect appear to be particularly vulnerable to academic deficits (Stone, 2007). In general, children in foster care have been found to score significantly below their nonfoster peers on standardized tests, with researchers reporting a deficit of between 15 and 20 percentile points (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). Additionally, Emerson and Lovitt (2003) found that 30% to 96% were performing below grade level in math and/or reading. Shin (2003) found that 33% of foster youth, with an average age of 17.5, were reading below the 6th-grade level, 31% had reading skills between the 6th- and 8th-grade level, and 18% were reading at the 9th- and 11th-grade level.

In addition to facing academic challenges, children and youth in foster care also struggle with behavior issues. Scherr (2007) found that 24% of youth in foster care had experienced either a suspension or expulsion from school. Their research suggests that youth in foster care are 3 times more likely to experience disciplinary actions than their nonfoster peers. The 24% is significantly higher than the 7% national average. Emotional and behavioral challenges can also help to explain grade retention and representation in special education at higher rates than nonfoster peers (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). It is clear that youth in foster care bring emotional and behavioral challenges into a classroom and that the education system may not be adequately prepared to meet those unique needs.

## BARRIERS TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

A review of the literature points to special education, mobility, and transition as the three largest categories of barriers to academic success for foster youth. It is clear that children in foster care face tremendous obstacles as they attempt to navigate their K-12 education while attempting to work through the challenges of state custody (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

## Special Education Barriers

Many children face academic challenges as a result of abuse and neglect, including a compromised developmental and mental state (Bruskas, 2008). It is estimated that 14% or more of children in the United States with disabilities acquired their disability as a direct result of maltreatment (Mitchell, Turbiville, & Turnbull, 1999). In their 2000 study of more than 50,000 children who were maltreated in Nebraska, Sullivan and Knutson found that 37.4% of these children who are maltreated suffered from behavior disorders, 25.3% were intellectually challenged, 16.4% had an identified learning disability, and 11.2% had a disability related to health issues (Sullivan & Knutson, 2000).

Children in foster care who are also receiving special education services, or who have been referred for special education evaluation, are placed at an even higher risk of academic failure. The reason for this is fourfold: high mobility, over- and under-representation in special education, communication challenges related to their foster care status, and problems with the delivery of Individualized Education Plan (IEP) services once they have been found to be eligible for special education.

Children in foster care who were identified as students with special education needs were found to have one more placement, on average, than their counterparts without special education needs (Geenen & Powers, 2006). Services are often delayed at the new school for children and youth in foster care who were previously receiving special education. This is due to delayed record transfers and district requirements for their own evaluations, which can result in weeks or months without needed services (Altshuler, 1997; Zetlin et al., 2012).

Learning, behavior, and emotional disabilities are the most common reasons for implementing IEP and Section 504 plans for children in foster care. Approximately 50% of the children in foster care with IEPs received them for emotional/behavioral issues. One little-known behavioral concern for children and youth in foster care is post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS). Vacca (2008) reported that 25% of children in foster care suffer from PTSS, and Pecora et al. (2005) found that foster alumni were found to have suffered from PTSS at a rate of 25.2% versus 4.0% for nonfoster populations. This rate of 25.2% is significantly higher than the percentage of veterans found to suffer from PTSS from the following wars: Vietnam 15%, Afghanistan 6%, and Iraq 12% to 13% (Pecora et al., 2005).

## Mobility Barriers

Children and youth in the foster care system experience high mobility rates due to unstable living situations. Pecora et al. (2005) found that 32.3% of participants experienced eight or more placements over the course of their time in care. Participants with eight or more placements were also found to have experienced 1.23 placements a year. In addition to formal placement changes, 21.2% had run away at least twice during their time in care (Pecora et al., 2005). Sixty-five percent of foster care youth were found to have experienced seven or more school changes between elementary and high school (Pecora et al., 2005). Each move a foster child makes results in a 4- to 6-month loss of academic achievement (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Rios, 2008). Pecora et al. (2005) found youth in foster care moving, on average, 6.5 times while in care.

The instability children in foster care face in terms of where they live and where they attend school creates challenges for caregivers and teachers who are not familiar with the needs of

the children (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). The move from one school to another causes disruptions in friendships and participation in school sports and other activities and separates children in foster care from their former community where they may have established a system of support.

A placement move can often mean leaving before the end of the grading term, resulting in a loss of credits. They generally do not know what courses they successfully completed prior to the school transfer or what credits can be transferred to the new school. This lack of information, coupled with the challenges of a new school, unfamiliar personnel, and new procedures, make it nearly impossible for the foster children to navigate through the registration process and take the courses they need to graduate.

Mobility also brings new foster parents into the life of the foster child. Although some foster parents are active in the academic lives of their children in foster care, Blome (1997) found that children in foster care are less likely to have a parent or guardian monitor homework or attend school functions. In fact, Blome (1997) found that 65% of the children in foster care said that a parent or guardian had never attended a parent conference, more than 73% never had a parent visit the classroom, and 70% never had a parent volunteer at the school.

### Transition From Care to Independence

The placement instability children in foster care experience also affects their ability to prepare for independent living. With each new placement, time is needed to build rapport between the new foster parent and the youth. Each new placement brings new house rules, a new community, and a new school. With the focus on building rapport and helping a foster youth acclimate to a new placement, it is difficult for the foster parent to focus on teaching and modeling the skills necessary for that youth to be independent (Geenen, Powers, Hogansen, & Pittman, 2007). For this reason, many foster youth do not know about the Independent Living Programs that are in their communities.

Pecora et al. (2005) found that 56.9% of alumni stated that upon aging out of the foster care system they were prepared for independent living to some degree, with 33.3% having a valid driver's license and 38.4% reporting they had \$250 in cash. Children in foster care with disabilities face additional barriers to independence, because caseworkers often fail to refer them to an Independent Living Program. There are two possible explanations for this failure. First, because the program focuses on skills needed to be independent, and because the caseworker may not believe a youth with disabilities can ever be independent, they may not see the value of the program in such a case. Second, the Independent Living Program may not be able to accommodate the youth's specific disability, and on that basis deny access (Geenen et al., 2007). Without adequate preparation for independent living, attendance at a postsecondary institution is unattainable for the majority of foster youth.

Another potential barrier to the move from care to independence is the inability to access postsecondary schooling. For many, this is attributed to lack of finances. In 2001, the U.S. Congress made additions to the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act by establishing the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Program. This amendment provided financial assistance each year to offset tuition, room and board, and other education expenses to eligible current and former foster youth. Those who meet the requirements, and who continue to make progress toward completion of their program, are eligible to receive up to \$3,000 in support until age 23, as long as

they are enrolled in a postsecondary education or training program (Oregon Student Assistance Commission, n.d.). This voucher program provides much-needed financial assistance but does not effectively close the financing gap. Blome (1997) found that youth in foster care received significantly less financial support for their education than their nonfoster peers.

However, finances are not the only consideration when determining college accessibility; additional barriers continue to exist at the postsecondary level. Attending a postsecondary institution requires that the student be able to make decisions and advocate for themselves. They also must be able to manage finances, health care, housing, and transportation. These are all adult activities. Up to this point, the student has been a dependent, with basic necessities provided by someone else (Wolanin, 2005). For many, the transition to independence is a tremendous obstacle. For this reason, Independent Living Programs are vital to the successful transition of foster youth from care to living as independent adults.

## METHOD

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of former and current youth in foster care in the state of Oregon about barriers they encountered during their K-12 education. Specifically, the lived experiences were explored through in-depth interviews, seeking to gain understanding of the barriers that affected their ability to enroll in postsecondary education. From the interested participant pool, 11 were purposely selected.

Interviews were conducted with each participant. The interviews averaged 80 minutes in length. The majority of the interviews were held at the Children First for Oregon offices. Oregon Foster Youth Connection (OFYC) is a program of Children First for Oregon, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, state-wide child advocacy organization. Through OFYC, current and former youth in foster care advocate for change to the foster care system. OFYC assisted in soliciting participants for this study from the youth they serve. After receiving signed consent to participate, each interview was audio-recorded and field notes were taken.

### Data Analysis

Each participant transcript was reviewed carefully, and significant statements the participants made about the phenomenon were highlighted. Statement significance was determined by noting those statements the participant made more than once, and statements deemed important to the participant as identified through voice inflection and emotion. This yielded 181 significant statements. Following the Creswell (2007) procedure, these were sorted into themes and then organized into three specific categories for barriers, with subtheme categories.

## FINDINGS

The Oregon Foster Youth Connection promoted my study to their members, and to Independent Living Program personnel in the metro area. Participants contacted me directly, and interviews were scheduled for those participants who met the research criteria. There were 11 participants in this study. Each participant was given a pseudonym to provide anonymity. I also replaced all

TABLE 1  
Participant Demographics

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Reason placed in care</i>	<i>Years in care</i>	<i>Total number of foster care placements</i>	<i>Number of high schools attended</i>	<i>Traditional diploma or GED</i>
Emily	Female	White	Abuse/Neglect	11	6	2	Diploma
Roberto	Male	Hispanic	Abuse/neglect	18	18–19	3	Diploma
Samantha	Female	White	Voluntary	12	8	7	Diploma
Dianna	Female	African American	Abuse/neglect	15	7	1	GED
Jason	Male	White	Abuse/neglect	2.5	3	2	GED
Andrew	Male	White	Abuse/neglect	7	65	6	GED
Tanya	Female	White	Abuse/neglect	20	15	2	Diploma
Ben	Male	White	Voluntary	6.5	20+	2	GED
Jennifer	Female	White	Abuse/neglect	5	13	6	GED
Byron	Male	African American/Native American	Abuse/neglect	15	8–10	3	GED
Tessa	Female	Hispanic	Voluntary	4–5	11	5	Diploma

*Note.* GED = Graduate Equivalency Diploma.

names of individuals, towns, and schools mentioned in the interviews with pseudonyms, which have been placed in brackets []. This was done to maintain the anonymity of all people and places involved in the lives of the youth interviewed. Basic demographic information is provided in Table 1.

Each of the 11 participants has a unique story. Although they are all children in foster care or former children in foster care, their journeys into the state care system are each unique, as are their experiences during their time in care. Specific themes run through their experiences, but I felt it important to introduce the participants, to present their individual stories before discussing their collective experience. What follows is a brief textural and structural description for each participant.

## Emily

Emily spent 11 years in the foster care system, aging out at 18. She entered the state care system at age 7 after her biological mother lost custody due to her drug use. She was under the legal guardianship of her aunt and uncle until age 14 and then moved to several relative and nonrelative foster care placements over the next 4 years. For 1 ½ years, Emily endured physical abuse from her aunt while in her home.

Removed from the home of her aunt, she was moved 35 minutes away from her middle school. Determined to stay in her same school, she would ride a special bus that she would have to board at 5:00 each morning and one that she would need to catch each day immediately after school. Although this was inconvenient and frustrating to her, she was able to complete her 8th-grade year and maintain her friendships.

When she entered high school, she learned about a program in her school district that would allow her to graduate from high school and earn college credits. She graduated, earning a traditional diploma. Emily continued her education, completing her associate's degree at a local community college, and plans to continue on toward her bachelor's degree at a state university.

## Roberto

Roberto was raised in the foster care system, entering care at birth due to the incarceration of his mother. Over the next 18 years, Roberto would experience 18 to 19 placements. These placements ranged from relative foster care to lock-down facilities.

When Roberto's mother was sent to prison for drug use, Roberto went to live with his aunt. His aunt determined that she was not able to care for a toddler, and so Department of Human Services (DHS) removed him from her care. His next placement lasted for 4 years, during which he endured repeated sexual abuse from his foster father. It wasn't until he was acting out sexually and behaving inappropriately at school that his foster mother confronted him and learned the truth. He was moved to a residential treatment home where he shared his experience. The staff was supportive and worked with him and also reported what had occurred. Roberto said, "We went through all this court stuff and as far as I know he actually died in prison because he was pretty much sentenced for 20 years there so he was there for a while."

Tragically, this was not the only home in which Roberto experienced this kind of abuse. He shared that he was placed in the care of an older foster mother who also sexually abused him. Roberto was eventually placed with a solid foster family, where he received support, acceptance, and advocacy. This was his last foster placement. This is the placement he calls "family" and the parents he calls "Mom" and "Dad."

Roberto graduated from high school and is attending a 4-year private university.

## Samantha

When she was age 6 years, Samantha joined her 1-year-old sister in foster care. Samantha's first placement lasted 8 years. She was in a foster home with a large number of children in foster care. She recalled being happy in this home but admitted to disagreements with the foster parents. DHS eventually closed this foster home. This caused trauma in her life, resulting in anger and distrust toward her future foster parents and placements, which then contributed to her constant movement over the next few years.

Samantha experienced traditional foster home placements and several group homes until she was placed with her last foster parent during her last few semesters of high school. Samantha said, "I actually did not find my perfect placement until I was 17."

## Dianna

Dianna and her brother were removed from their home, due to abuse and neglect, when Dianna was age 5 and her brother was age 3. They were removed from their first foster home when DHS noticed rope burns on Dianna and her brother's ankles during a routine visit. Dianna does not remember the foster parents but does remember being tied up regularly.

Her second placement was with a woman and her husband and two other girls, also in foster care. The foster parents also had grandchildren who regularly visited the home. Shortly after arriving at the home, she learned that the foster father was sexually abusing the two older foster girls living in the home. Dianna shared, "I think God was protecting me. He didn't want that man touching me. So, he was down there touching these other girls, and me and my brother were safe."

Dianna was not safe, however, from the grandsons, who began to act out sexually toward Dianna. When she would not do what they said, they would tell their grandmother lies and she would hold Dianna down and allow her grandsons to repeatedly punch her.

Dianna was in and out of lock-down facilities and residential homes until she was placed with the foster parent she calls "Mom." [Maybell] loved Dianna and cared for her from the time Dianna was eight until Dianna reached 19. Dianna attended a local high school consistently for 4 years but dropped out to complete her Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED).

## Jason

Jason's entrance into the foster care system came late in his teen years. At age 17, Jason was kicked out of his home. He was left in the care of his grandparents. He was very concerned that if he were told to leave his grandparents' home, he would be homeless.

His situation, living with his grandparents and attending a local high school, was in jeopardy the next fall. His mother, who had just moved to the [Mt. View] area, attempted to enroll him at a local high school. Because of her actions, Jason, living with his grandparents in Portland, was unable to reenroll in the high school he had just attended. The administration at the school stepped in and contacted the Juvenile Rights Project. At this point, DHS became involved and Jason entered foster care.

Jason moved from a couple of traditional foster home placements and eventually ended up at a group home. It was while living in this group home that he was able to earn his GED and also enroll in a local community college. At the time of our interview, Jason had just moved out and was living on his own in an apartment, still attending college.

## Andrew

At age 10, Andrew entered care. He was living at that time with his mother, who regularly took drugs and was often drunk. During the times when she was under the influence, the home became very volatile. Andrew went to school on more than one occasion with some type of injury caused by his mother. He said, "My mom would lie to my teachers and they would believe her." On one occasion, he arrived at school with a broken hand and a black eye. A few days later, the police and DHS arrived at his school and took him into foster care. Andrew remembered that day very clearly.

Over the next 7 years, Andrew experienced 65 placements. These placements ranged from traditional foster home settings to residential treatment facilities. When asked why he had so many placements, Andrew said, "Some thought I was just too unstable. Not sure how to deal with me." He attributes his high number of placements to his anger, and foster parents not knowing how to relate to him.

Eventually, Andrew was able to return to his original neighborhood and attend high school. Andrew said, “When I moved into this placement, I hadn’t been in school for like 6 months.” He eventually left this high school and earned his GED at a local community college.

## Tanya

Tanya entered care when she was age 1 years. She spent 20 years in the foster care system, after asking to stay in the system beyond her 18th birthday. Tanya entered foster care with her older sister. They were removed from what Tanya characterized as a “hurtful situation.” The abuse she experienced had long-lasting implications for Tanya, “Until I was 6, I didn’t speak one word. I signed everything. They said it was because of trauma.” The two sisters were placed together in various foster homes until a failed adoption was blamed on Tanya’s older sister. The girls were returned to Oregon and placed in separate homes.

Over the next 12 years, Tanya moved very regularly. At more than one foster home placement, she was abused. Reflecting on these placements, Tanya shared:

You were taken away to be protected and these people end up hurting you anyways, so that is kind of why I moved to so many placements. I kept saying, “This is happening, and this is happening. You need to do something.

As Tanya’s 18th birthday approached, she realized that if she aged out of the foster care system, she would be left homeless during her senior year. She contacted her caseworker and was able to extend her time in the foster care system, allowing her to finish high school and continue to receive support into her first few years in college. Tanya successfully graduated from a public high school and received her diploma.

## Ben

Following the divorce of his parents, Ben had a difficult time accepting his stepmother into his life and began accusing her of abuse. His father sought help from DHS.

Ben entered care and was placed into a traditional foster care home. Unfortunately, that placement did not last long. The foster parents smelled gasoline and discovered that Ben had drenched a toy truck in the basement. Ben was immediately moved to a residential treatment center. Over the next few years, Ben was in and out of residential treatment and group homes. When he returned to a traditional foster home placement, he was enrolled in a public middle school. He was given an IEP to support his needs. He was moved from home to home and was in and out of several schools.

Ben decided to leave high school and pursue his GED. The staff at the high school made several calls on his behalf and enrolled him in a GED program at a local community college. After earning his GED, he enrolled at the community college, where he continues today.

## Jennifer

Jennifer entered care at age 14, but her relationship with DHS began when she was 12. Jennifer was neglected by her mother and abused by her brother. Jennifer, at age 12, learned she was

pregnant after she was admitted to the hospital following a drug overdose. When she delivered her child, DHS took custody of her son.

When she was removed from her home at age 14, Jennifer began to run away, resulting in numerous placements in various settings. When asked why, Jennifer replied, "I just didn't feel normal staying in a foster home. I felt out of place. So when I stayed with my friends, I felt normal again. I just wanted to feel normal." Her placements continued to escalate in terms of security levels and treatment. She ended up in several lock-down facilities and residential treatment homes.

Jennifer received academic support while in the lock-down facilities where she was placed. It was here that she was able to focus on her education and began to see its value, earning a 4.0 GPA. Although this success continued when she moved to a traditional public high school, she eventually chose to drop out of high school, even though she was on track to graduate with honors. Jennifer went on to earn her GED at a local community college and is currently working on her associate's degree.

## Byron

Byron is a 21-year-old male who experienced 15 years in the foster care system. At age 3, Byron was removed from his home because his parents were involved in several criminal activities, including the manufacture, distribution, and use of drugs, stealing, and pimping. Byron and his older brother were removed from the home and placed with their great aunt. During their time in this placement, his great uncle and his older brother physically and sexually abused Byron. He said, "He used to beat me and molest me."

At age 12, Byron was in another abusive foster home. After being physically and mentally abused, he was moved to yet another home. Byron said that this placement was "a high-risk placement for kids who had stabbed someone or raped someone." While at this placement, Byron began to run away, to spend time with his friends, and use drugs. At age 14, he was on the run from law enforcement. He said, "I was at like rock bottom. At that time I was going through so much. A lot of inner turmoil." At 15, he was caught and sentenced to 8 years for the manufacture, distribution, and possession of marijuana and methamphetamines near a child care center. He spent close to 2 years in a juvenile delinquency center and was released a few weeks before his 17th birthday. Upon his release, he attended an alternative school, where he earned his GED.

## Tessa

At age 12, Tessa was an angry preteen who was dealing with a new stepfather who, in her opinion, was taking her mother away from her. Tessa began looking for ways to force her mother to pay attention to her, like skipping school, getting into fights at school, and being sent to detention. When Tessa's mother determined that she could not deal with her behavior any more, she turned to DHS for assistance. Tessa was admitted into the foster care system as a voluntary case. Tessa said the hope was that she and her mother would have time to cool down and repair their relationship.

Over the next 4 to 5 years, Tessa was in and out of foster homes, alternative schools, and residential treatment. She had contact with her mother and had regular visits and weekends at home.

Unfortunately, the relationship continued to be rocky, so she was placed farther and farther away from her mother, in the hope that this relationship would not distract her from being successful academically.

After a number of placements, Tessa was sent to a residential treatment home, where she began to focus on academics and found the teachers to be encouraging and supportive. She began to work on her classes and successfully complete credits. She worked very hard and was able to graduate with a traditional diploma. She is currently attending a local community college, pursuing cosmetology training.

## DISCUSSION

This study considered barriers to academic achievement. Three specific themes emerged from the data: the foster care system, the school system, and emotional factors.

### Foster Care System

The foster care system itself was found to be a barrier to the academic achievement of foster youth. This barrier was attributed to lack of trust with caseworkers, foster parents, and society.

As the participants moved through the foster care system, several voiced a significant loss of trust due to their experience. Samantha had a placement that lasted for 8 years. When DHS decided to close this placement, she became very angry and found that she was not able to settle into another placement for a number of years. She said, “You don’t want to settle in or be a part of the family because you [think], how long is this one going to last? So, I never really cared about making relationships with a lot of my foster families.”

Looking back on her situation, she was able to explain her trust issues. Samantha shared, “For foster kids, the people that are supposed to be there, like your family, those are the ones that walked out on me. The ones that were supposed to be there walked out on me.” Roberto shared similar feelings when he said, “I felt a lot more rejection when I was younger, you know, when your family kind of just set me aside.”

Ben also attributes his distrust to his experiences with the foster care system. After being lied to and tricked into showing up for an evaluation appointment, he learned the real reason for the appointment was for him to be admitted into a lock-down facility. He was angry because his foster parents lied to him. After this situation and others he endured, he stated,

I can’t trust people as far as I can throw them. That is what foster care sometimes does. Maybe it is something in me that I seen in them but it isn’t them per se, but something bad in my life that causes me to react that way to a certain kind of person.

### School System

The school system also was found to be a barrier to the participants’ achievement. The specific difficulties concerned high mobility and IEPs.

*High mobility.* The participants in this study shared challenges they faced with school. Catching up on credits in high school, struggling without support from foster parents, and living in limbo when legal guardianship is in question all created hardships for three participants. High mobility creates barriers, such as limited credit completion due to moving in the middle of a term or semester, loss of credits when moving from district to district, and transitional barriers to a new school or a new environment.

Wendy was faced with the mistakes she made her first year in high school. Moving between several placements, academics were not at the top of her priority list:

When I was in residential care for the second time, I had to really work on my schooling because I had really messed it up my freshman year. I think my sophomore year was the only year that I went to one school for a full year.

Wendy moved around during her freshman year and did not attend any school with consistency. Jason, who had completed a year and was attempting to enroll for his second year at the same school, was surprised to learn he had been enrolled elsewhere, "My mom was trying to screw things up for me. She never gave up custody of me."

Ben's story is a little different. He was a ward of the court but still had consistent contact with his biological father. His father continued to be supportive throughout his foster care experience but was not able to help with the day-to-day challenges associated with attending school. Ben said:

I feel like they [his foster parents] didn't have enough connection with me to be supportive with the school and stuff. It would have been helpful to have . . . my foster parents more involved because my parents couldn't be involved because they were never in the same place as me.

Emily struggled to find a way to stay in the same school after being removed from her aunt's home. Placed 35 minutes away from her school, she chose to ride a bus at 5:00 every morning so she could stay at her school.

The participants described resentment associated with moving from school to school and the loss of credits that often was a result. Emily said:

If you are at this school for a few months working on credits and you get moved to another school, all of a sudden those credits you have been working on don't transfer. I think that is why a lot of foster kids don't graduate. They don't have the credits and they have a low GPA because of moving and lack of transfer credits.

Because different school districts, residential treatment facilities, and group homes have different classes, these classes and/or credits do not always transfer to the student's new educational institution. Often, the foster youth were transferred to a new institution before the end of the semester or trimester and were therefore unable to finish their classes and receive the credits they earned. Ben found this to be true. He said, "I had only six credits by the time I got to my junior year, so I knew I wasn't going to make it."

Andrew and Roberto faced a very different challenge. After spending significant time in alternative, residential, and group homes and treatment centers, they were reentering the public school system. Andrew shared, "I didn't know where to go or what classes to do." He continued to explain, "I hadn't been in school for like 6 months, so I was trying to get back in the flow of going to school." Roberto was struggling with transitioning into society:

I started off kind of shy because I hadn't been in public really because of the 1½ years in [Springfield]. We never went out in public. So, I was used to dealing with people who had serious issues and like beyond crazy issues.

*IEPs.* Of the 11 participants in this study, six remembered having an IEP at some point during their K-12 education. Of these six, three IEPs were for behavior, two were for attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and one was for speech. Dianna had an IEP for behavioral issues during elementary and middle school. Her IEP for behavior put her into a special education classroom where she was only able to interact with the general education students on occasion during the day. She said, "I never had a problem learning. I just had a problem with my behavior. I did not need special ed. I wasn't getting taught and I like to learn." When Dianna did act up, she was returned to the special education class. By the time she entered 8th grade, she was in a general education classroom. "Then in the regular classroom, I was like, 'I like school, this is where it is at.'" However, at this point, she recalled her frustration at being behind her peers because she did not receive the same education they did because she was in special education, "I am wasting all this time, and now I am in 8th grade and all that stuff that I should have learned I didn't learn."

Ben had an IEP for psychotic disorder: not otherwise specified and ADHD. After moving from school to school, he recalled feeling helpless and giving up:

Even though they [his foster parents] went to a few of my IEP meetings and stuff, it wasn't very helpful for me because all I heard about was that my grades were suffering and I couldn't really do anything about it because I moved every few months.

He attended his IEP meetings but expressed his frustration with people making decisions for him without his input:

I had to go to all the meetings and I just really didn't care. You get to this point where you don't care about anything anymore, once they force you into something you don't want to do. It's like you have been doing it, you are mad about it, and then eventually you stop caring and become really numb.

It is clear from these participants that the special education system was not viewed as a positive support for the foster youth.

## Emotional Factors

Emotional factors appeared to create barriers to academic achievement. The barriers arose from disempowerment, self-defeating attitudes, and anger.

*Disempowerment.* Throughout the interviews, foster youth conveyed stories about being disempowered, marginalized, and silenced.

Many participants shared stories of desperation. They felt they had no voice or advocate, and that they were at the mercy of the system and of their placement. Samantha experienced multiple placements in which the foster parents gave up on her and she was told to move:

I feel like it is so easy for families to be like, this kid is out of control, so I am going to give him away. They don't think about how that is going to affect them later on. It is just too easy. Going to a six-week class just does not prepare people. We are not recycled items. You can't just decide you don't want us and then just recycle us on to the next family.

She also talked candidly about not feeling wanted by anyone:

I think people need to realize that there are teenagers out there who want frickin' homes and they are 17 and cannot find a home. I feel like once you are not cute anymore or you cannot be changed, they don't want you.

Byron and Jason both had at least one placement where they felt worthless. Byron shared:

Moving, always having to pack my stuff up in trash bags, um, not knowing how long I am going to stay somewhere, not knowing if my stuff is safe, not knowing if I am necessarily safe, um, new rules, just made it really hard to gain trust. I don't know, things were just always changing, so there was no normality and I really like structure. Many of my foster parents made me feel worthless and I knew a lot of them just did not care and were in it for the money.

Byron said this of his experience being shuffled from home to home:

It is just really sick, I think, when you just rule over foster youth. It's not like we committed a crime or anything. We aren't in juvy. Damn. I mean that is one thing, but I ended up here because my family is white trash and didn't even give a shit about me.

In each situation, the foster youth were moved through the system without a voice. Dianna chose silence so that she would not be forced to leave her home and be placed with another family that would be a complete unknown. When kids were acting out sexually with Dianna, she said, "I told [Betty] when the kids at daycare tried to mess with me and stuff but I didn't want to tell DHS because I didn't want to deal with newness."

*Self-defeating attitude.* Two participants, Jason and Jennifer, talked about their attitude toward high school. Jason struggled to see the value in education:

I liked school but not for the academics, know what I mean? It was just a place to go to hang out away from home. I mean, I just barely did the minimum so that I wouldn't be failing, but like pretty much the whole time throughout high school was pretty much hang out and not really do anything.

When asked the reason for this attitude, he replied, "I really didn't want to spend time like doing good in school when it wasn't really going to affect my life outside of school. Get good grades? What is that going to get me? A diploma?" It wasn't until the reality of his situation hit him that he began to change this attitude.

Jennifer's situation was a little different. Considering her 3.88 GPA, it was surprising to hear she dropped out. When asked why, after earning a 3.88 GPA, she would make the decision to drop out, she said, "I got so much stress from my foster mom, my caseworker, my teachers, who were all saying I needed to graduate. I just didn't want to hear it. If I want to graduate, I am going to graduate." For Jennifer, it was about being able to make decisions for herself and having control over her life choices.

*Anger.* During each interview, participants would share events in their past that were particularly difficult for them. Andrew was placed in treatment to learn how to manage his anger.

This anger resulted in three of the 11 participants having an IEP for behavior. Additionally, many participants spoke of trips to the principal's office on a routine basis, suspensions, and school expulsions. These findings were somewhat consistent with the literature, in that foster youth are overrepresented with IEPs for special education, but the literature does not explore the underlying cause of the IEP.

As the anger became problematic, treatment was identified. For Andrew, this led to a residential treatment center to help him control his anger. For others, routine sessions for anger management were determined to be the best course of action. For another group, a personal counselor was identified as most appropriate. Regardless of the path taken to treatment, it was clear that the participants were very angry young people at some point during their foster care experience. Andrew described himself as “an angry child.” He said, “School was kind of rough. Some of the teachers did not understand where I was at, you know, with my behaviors.” Byron said, “I was very angry. I hated the world.” His anger often resulted in disciplinary actions by the school. Ben said, “Back then, they would probably say I was the angriest child they ever came across.” Anger, coupled with an IEP for emotional/behavioral issues, resulted in a restrictive learning environment for Dianna. She was placed in a restrictive special education classroom where she was not allowed to interact with peers in general education classes. Her day was spent with the same group of learners, with a different lunch and recess time than those in general education. Dianna voiced her frustration with her situation and with the education system that put her in that classroom.

It is clear that children in foster care are over-represented in the special education population. Of the 11 participants, six had an IEP at some particular point in their K-12 education. These findings are considerably higher than those of Zetlin (2006), and significantly higher when compared to the general school population. Additionally, the literature showed that 50% of children in foster care had an IEP for emotional/behavioral issues. The foster youth in this study attributed this anger to abuse in their foster home placements and to feeling disempowered.

The limitations of this study must be acknowledged. This study represents the experiences of 11 participants from the foster care system and is not representative of all children and youth in foster care. Nevertheless, the barriers encountered are significant and should draw attention to the unique challenges this vulnerable group of learners may encounter.

## CONCLUSION

The literature provided a general picture of what children in foster care are experiencing, but the voices of the lived experiences of foster youth gave a unique look behind these topics and statistics, revealing the rest of the story. This story was filled with abuse, neglect, rejection, intimidating treatment centers, and lock-down facilities, yet there was hope within this despair.

The barriers to education for foster youth must be removed from their path. It is only then that the most vulnerable population of students in our classrooms today can stand academically side-by-side with their nonfoster peers.

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