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Foster Youth and Post-Secondary Education: A Study of the Barriers and Supports that Led to Academic Achievement

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FOSTER YOUTH AND POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION: A STUDY OF THE
BARRIERS AND SUPPORTS THAT LED TO ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the perceptions of former and current foster youth on the barriers, supports, helps and strategies they encountered during their K-12 education, and to learn how these contributed to their ability to enroll in post-secondary education.

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 four-year university. These in-depth interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The data was first coded by topics and then grouped into themes.

The results of this study indicated that previously identified barriers and supports to academic achievement were true for this group of participants, but that these topics or themes represented the effects of a deeper issue; the issue of anger, abuse and disempowerment. This anger, abuse, and disempowerment touched every aspect of their life, resulting in high mobility, IEPs for emotional/behavioral issues, and difficulty transitioning from care to independence.

The findings of this study contribute to the conversation on foster youth in several areas. First, the study has implications for teachers and teacher educators on the challenges foster children and youth face, and how to prepare future teachers to meet those challenges. Second, the study encourages teachers to look beyond labels given foster children and youth, such as IEPs for emotional/behavioral issues, to consider the root of the problem and seek solutions. Third, the study has implications for the Department of Human Services, who have been charged with the care and protection of children they remove from the homes of biological parents and guardians. It is their job to

ensure that certified foster parents are providing quality care for foster children and youth placed in their home. The study concludes with recommendations for future research on foster youth and academic achievement.

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This study would not have been possible without the 11 participants who patiently told their stories, shared painful memories and stories of celebration; I thank you. You have deeply touched me and inspired me to seek change.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER 1.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Background	2
Statement of the Problem.....	4
Research Questions.....	5
Definition of Terms	5
Limitations and Delimitations	6
Summary.....	10
CHAPTER 2.....	11
Review of the Literature.....	11
Introduction.....	11
Educational Achievement and Foster Youth.....	11
College Aspirations and Foster Youth.....	13
Barriers Contributing to Academic Challenges for Foster Youth.....	14
Supports Contributing to Academic Achievement for Foster Youth.....	25
Conclusion.....	28
CHAPTER 3.....	29
Methods.....	29
Introduction.....	29
Setting.....	30
Participants.....	30
Role of the Researcher.....	31
Research Design.....	33

Procedures.....	34
Instrumentation/Materials.....	34
Data Analysis.....	35
Research Ethics.....	35
CHAPTER 4.....	37
Findings.....	37
Introduction.....	37
Textural and Structural Descriptions.....	42
Participant Stories.....	42
Emily.....	42
Roberto.....	43
Samantha.....	46
Dianna.....	47
Jason.....	49
Andrew.....	50
Tanya.....	52
Ben.....	53
Jennifer.....	55
Byron.....	57
Tessa.....	59
Introduction to Themes.....	61
Barriers to Academic Achievement.....	62
Foster Care System.....	62
Trust.....	64
School.....	66
Special Education / IEP.....	68
High School Challenges.....	70

Challenges to College Enrollment.....	72
Disempowerment.....	74
Support for Academic Achievement.....	76
Foster Care System.....	76
Support from the Department of Human Services.....	79
Supportive Adults in their Lives.....	79
School.....	81
Teachers who Cared.....	83
Help, Support, and/or Strategies.....	84
Support from High School Programs / Personnel.....	84
Support from the Department of Human Services.....	85
Self-Advocacy.....	86
Conclusion.....	87
CHAPTER 5.....	88
Discussion.....	88
Barriers to academic achievement.....	88
Anger.....	88
Abuse.....	90
Disempowerment.....	91
High Mobility as Symptomatic of Anger, Abuse, and Disempowerment..	92
Systemic barriers.....	94
Support to academic achievement.....	95
People who cared.....	95
Teachers.....	95
Foster parents.....	96
Counselors.....	97
Community support.....	97

Counselors.....	97
Systemic support.....	98
Foster care system.....	98
Independent Living Program.....	99
Inner strength.....	100
Implications.....	101
Department of Human Services.....	101
Education system.....	102
Recommendations for future research.....	103
Conclusions.....	104
References.....	106
Appendices.....	113
Appendix A:.....	113
Appendix B:	115
Appendix C:	117
Appendix D:	118

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Foster children are an invisible population. Teachers and administrators often do not know that a student is in foster care. Their complex needs compound the challenges to their academic performance. Children and youth in foster care represent one of the most academically vulnerable populations in schools today (Zetlin, 2006). 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 foster children and youth extends to the educational system, where educators are not adequately trained to meet the unique needs of this group of students. In addition, teachers and administrators are often unaware of foster children in their school and classrooms, and sometimes unable to meet the needs of this population. This lack of information creates an unfortunate disadvantage for the student, teacher, and administrator.

Foster youth graduate from high school at substantially lower rates than those of their non-foster 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 post-secondary education at a community college, four-year college, or university (Barth, 1990). As of December 2010, there were 427 foster youth in Oregon that exited the foster care system as a result of reaching age 18 or 21 (H.Schatz, personal communication, February 24, 2011). Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study (2005) findings estimated that of these 427 foster youth exiting care in the state of Oregon, 240 will earn a high school diploma (Pecora et al., 2005). The same study found that 28.5% earned their general education diploma (GED). Of the graduates, both with a

traditional diploma and a GED, the same study found that 43 foster youth went on to participate in some form of post-secondary education (Pecora et al., 2005).

Because the majority of studies have focused on the unfortunate outcomes for former foster youth, I chose to focus on the positive outcomes. My study explored the unique population of former foster youth in Oregon, focusing on the barriers as well as the supports, help, tools, and strategies they used to overcome these barriers and achieve academic success. This study is important as it gives a voice to current and former foster youth, providing critical insights to the barriers and supports they encountered and sharing how they overcame tremendous obstacles to enroll in post-secondary education. To my knowledge this study is the first for the state of Oregon and the third in the nation to focus on academic achievement of foster youth. Previous to this study Rios (2008) and Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005) were the first to focus on academic achievement.

Background

Foster children, also referred to as “clients,” are minors and adults who are receiving protective services from the state (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2010). Foster children are typically under the age of 18, have been removed from their home, and have been placed in the care of state-certified foster parents. The most common reasons for removal from the home are neglect and abuse.

In 2002, 896,000 children in the nation were victims of abuse and neglect (DeBellis, 2005). Oregon reported 49.6% of children who entered care did so due to the threat of harm and 31.4% due to neglect. At the end of the 2010, the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) reported there were 408,452 children in foster care in the United States in 2010 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,

2011). In Oregon in 2010, there were 13,129 children who were in state custody for at least one night during the year.

Foster children have often undergone traumatic and horrific experiences. The abuse and neglect that many of these children have endured result in long-lasting consequences. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2000) identified difficulty with attachment, reduced physical development, unsociable behavior, and lack of stimulation as the most common consequences. Experiencing abuse in the early years can cause the brain to remain in a mode of heightened sensitivity, in which the child can respond to situations in an agitated manner (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000). Children who have lived in a state of acute stress are often unable to shut down this stress when the threat has been removed. This heightened and prolonged state of acute stress can cause the brain to overdevelop in specific areas, including those which control the response to fear (Cole, O'Brien, Gadd, Ristuccia, Wallace, & Gregory, 2005). The long-lasting consequences of early traumatic stresses can manifest in the classroom in a variety of ways, presenting challenges to educators.

Removed from their home, separated from their parent(s), and placed into foster care, these children are often moved from one foster care placement to another. As they are shuffled through life, they become the most educationally vulnerable population of students in classrooms today (Zetlin, 2006). This vulnerability is unintentionally intensified by an educational system unprepared to meet the needs of foster children. For this reason, it is not surprising to learn that foster children experience academic failure at rates significantly higher than children outside the foster care system.

The academic vulnerability of this group of students can be attributed to many significant factors. One such factor is mobility. Foster children move from placement to placement with unfortunate regularity. Emerson and Lovitt (2003) stated that, nationally, half of all foster youth experience at least four school changes during their time in care. These statistics are slightly higher than those reported in Oregon, where 38.2% of foster children are reported to have experienced more than three placements (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2010). Each move a foster child makes results in a four-to six-month loss of academic achievement (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Rios, 2008). The average time spent in care is reported to average 25.3 months (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

Foster children tend to score significantly below their non-foster peers on standardized tests, with researchers reporting a deficit of between 15-20 percentile points (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). They also found 30 – 96% of foster children performing below grade level in math and/or reading (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). With the academic performance of foster children significantly below their non-foster peers, it is not surprising that only 50% graduated from high school, and of those only 1.8% continued on to college (Bruskas, 2008). In contrast, non-foster high school students continue on to college at a rate of 24% (Bruskas, 2008).

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological research was to explore the lived experiences among Oregon former foster youth who overcame barriers to academic achievement and have enrolled in a community college, four-year college, or university for Fall term, 2011. I sought meaning through the lived experiences of the foster youth to

“reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). Specifically, I studied current and former foster youth in Oregon who applied for the Chafee Education and Training Scholarship. My objective was to “attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of [their] lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 10).

Research Questions

Using hermeneutic phenomenological research design to explore the perceptions of current and former foster youth K-12 experiences, I identified the following primary and secondary research questions:

Central question.

What do former foster youth perceive as the barriers and supports that contributed to their academic success and college enrollment?

Subquestions.

1. What are the perceived barriers and supports that college-enrolled former foster youth experienced in their K-12 education?
2. What help, support, tools, or strategies did college-enrolled former foster youth use to overcome these barriers?

Definition of Terms

Barriers are defined as “obstacles identified by students as limiting the achievement of their career goal” (Kenny, Gualdron, Scanlon, Sparks, Blustein, & Jernigan, 2007, p.338).

Foster care is defined as “placement in foster family homes, relative care, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child care institutions, and pre-adoptive homes” (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2010).

Independent Living Program is defined as a program “designed to assist youth who are or were in foster care to become independent adults. Youth served must be age 14 or older” (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2010).

Individualized Education Plan or Program is defined as an education plan that is tailored to meet the needs of a student found eligible for special education services under the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) 2004 (McLeskey, Rosenberg, & Westling, 2010).

Neglect is defined as “abandonment, physical, medical, educational, and emotional neglect” (DeBellis, 2005, p.151).

Support is defined as “a source of help in achieving post-high-school and work goals” (Kenny et al., 2007, p.340).

Youth aging out is defined as “youth who will exit the foster care system at age 18 or older, as independents” (Children First for Oregon, Status of Oregon’s Children, 2010).

Limitations

The possibility of bias must be acknowledged. I am a certified foster parent. At the time the study was designed, I was caring for four foster children. During the eight months I cared for the children, I saw first-hand the academic barriers identified in the literature.

In January 2010, I began the training process to become a certified foster parent. In March 2010, I completed my training and became certified, by the Department of Human Services, as a foster parent for Clackamas County, Oregon. Later that year, our family received a sibling group of four, ages 9, 10, 13 and 14. For the children, our home was their third placement in 16 months. Over the course of the seven months the children lived with us, I saw first-hand the many barriers to academic achievement the children experienced. The youngest child had behavioral challenges at school that the classroom teacher initially was unsure how to address. With a full classroom, and without knowledge of the experiences of foster children, she was at a loss for how to work with him. She did, however, reach out to us and together we found ways to support and guide him. The second youngest child received wonderful instruction and support from her teacher. However, she was substantially behind her non-foster peers in reading and math. She was subsequently tested for special education services, for which she was found to be ineligible.

While the elementary school reached out to our family and offered support, the middle school, where two of the children attended, did not. Emails to teachers went unacknowledged, requests for help to understand grades, current progress, and behavioral concerns fell on deaf ears. As an educator and licensed administrator, I was frustrated by teachers and administrators who ignored me, a foster parent, working to be an educational advocate for two at-risk youth

There are two additional limitations that must be acknowledged. First, foster youth are very difficult to contact. Foster youth often keep their foster care status private. For those who are currently in care and those that have aged-out, it is very difficult to

gain access to contact information because the state protects their identity. Current and former foster youth who have applied for the Chafee Education and Training Scholarship provide their contact information on the application. The Chafee Education and Training Scholarship is a voucher program. The Independent Living Program Director for the state of Oregon has access to contact information for applicants. Unfortunately, the application process to obtain this information from the state of Oregon resulted in a three-month delay. Therefore, I contacted the Oregon Foster Youth Connection, a non-profit organization sponsored by the Children First for Oregon organization. The Oregon Foster Youth Connection works directly with current and former foster youth, providing assistance with daily living challenges, college applications, support filling out the Free Application for Student Assistance (FAFSA) form, which provides financial resources for education, to name a few important activities. After contacting the director, I was given the opportunity to forward a flyer describing my study, and solicit participants for my study. All 11 participants were found through this process. All participants were current and former foster youth in Oregon, who applied for the Chafee Education and Training Grant, and were enrolled, or planning to enroll, in a post-secondary institution, either community college, four-year college, or university for Fall term, 2011.

Delimitations

I specifically selected a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study in order to understand the meaning of the lived experience of foster youth who go on to post-secondary education. The group selected to participate in the study was limited to 11 individuals who participated in an in-depth interview. This study took place in the state of Oregon. The study focused specifically on current and former foster youth in Oregon,

who applied for the Chafee Education and Training Grant, and were enrolled, or planning to enroll, in a post-secondary institution, either community college, four-year college, or university for Fall term, 2011. To be eligible to apply for the Chafee Education and Training Grant, applicants must be “currently in foster care, or previously been in foster care for a minimum of 180 days (six months) after your 14th birthday and exited substitute care at age 16 or older,” or “be participating in the voucher program on your 21st birthday” (Oregon Student Assistance Commission, 2010). This eligibility excluded:

1. Foster youth who were in care at some point during their K-12 education, but were either reunited with their biological family or adopted from the foster care system before the age of 16, and did not return to the foster care system.
2. Foster youth over the age of 16 that were in care after their 16th birthday, but were not in care for at least six months after their 14th birthday.

Additional people not included are former or current foster youth who were enrolled in a vocational/technical preparatory program. While the Chafee Education and Training Scholarship includes vocational/technical preparatory programs, individuals applying for vocational/technical preparatory programs were not included in this study.

An additional group excluded from this study, were individuals over the age of 16 that were in care for at least six months after their 14th birthday, but did not apply for the Chafee Education and Training Scholarship.

The last group excluded from this study were those current and former foster youth that did not participate in an Independent Living Program. They could qualify for funds but were unaware of the Chafee Education and Training Scholarship.

Summary

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological research was to explore the lived experiences of Oregon current and former foster youth who have overcome barriers to academic achievement and have enrolled in a community college, four-year college, or university for Fall term, 2011. Specifically, I explored these lived experiences through in-depth interviews seeking meaning to gain understanding of the barriers and supports that contributed to enrollment in post-secondary education.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction

Foster children and youth 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, these children experience trauma and stress that non-foster individuals 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).

The following literature review on the education of children in foster care moves from a global view of educational achievement in foster youth to college aspirations of foster youth, and then presents internal and external factors that are found to affect rates of college enrollment. I include a review of both positive and negative factors identified in the literature as assets and barriers to educational achievement. With few studies focused on foster youth who have experienced positive outcomes, the literature review is reflective of that history (Hass & Graydon, 2009; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Rios, 2008).

Educational Achievement and Foster Youth

The academic career of children and youth in foster care is fraught with challenges, arising from both the educational K-12 setting and the foster care system as a

whole. While there is a long list of challenges within the foster care system, a few important challenges to note include placement change, abuse occurring from within the new foster parent home, neglect from the foster care system, and a Department of Human Services system that is poorly preparing foster youth to be successful in society once they are out of the care system (Allen & Vacca, 2011). With this in mind, it is not surprising that four years after leaving the foster care system 46% of foster youth have not finished high school, 25% will be found to be homeless, 42% become parents, and only 20% will be able to support themselves (Ferrell, 2004).

Children who have suffered neglect appear to be particularly vulnerable to academic deficits (Stone, 2006). Children from neglect backgrounds have lower IQs, and were underachieving in reading, comprehension and writing compared to children in care for reasons other than neglect (Stone, 2006). In general, foster children have been found to score significantly below their non-foster peers on standardized tests, with researchers reporting a deficit of between 15-20 percentile points (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). Additionally, Emerson and Lovitt found that 30 - 96% were performing below grade level in math and/or reading. In a 2003 study, Shin found that 33% of 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 (Shin, 2003).

In addition to facing academic challenges, foster children and youth also struggle with behavior issues. Scherr (2007) found that 24% of foster youth had experienced either a suspension from school or expulsion. Their research suggests that foster youth are three times more likely to experience disciplinary actions than their non-foster peers.

The 24% is significantly higher than the 7% national average. The emotional and behavioral challenges can also help to explain grade retention and representation in special education at higher rates than non-foster peers (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). It is clear that foster youth bring emotional and behavioral challenges into a classroom and that the educational system may not be adequately prepared to meet those unique needs. Foster children need specific and individualized programs designed to address their challenges. The absence of these programs results in adults in the criminal justice system or as welfare recipients (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2003).

In spite of these barriers to academic success, many foster children aspire to post-secondary education. While the experience of each child in care is unique, there are several challenges these children and youth will experience in common as they move through the education system: academic challenges attributed to abuse, neglect and mobility, over- and under-representation in special education courses and programs, and lack of preparation for the transition from care to independence.

College Aspirations and Foster Youth

Because there are numerous barriers to the academic achievement of foster youth, it is interesting to learn that the majority of foster youth aspire to graduate from high school. Merdinger et al. (2005) found that 79% of the participants in their study reported aspirations to graduate from high school. In their 2003 study, consisting of 262 foster youth, McMillen et al. (2003) found that 95% of the foster youth planned to continue their education beyond high school. Merdinger et al. (2005) found that 63% of foster youth in California planned to continue their education beyond high school. These high statistics are consistent with Blome (1997). What was of particular interest is that of

those students aspiring to attend college, the study by McMillen et al. (2003) revealed that while many experienced behavior problems while in school, this did not deter them from pursuing post-secondary education.

Lovitt and Emerson (2008) interviewed eight students who received college scholarship support from the Casey Family programs and graduated from a four-year university. The researchers found three common characteristics among the eight participants. First, they all indicated they had someone important and influential in their lives. Second, they stated that before leaving for college, their foster placement was supportive, with a few indicating they were encouraged to attend college. The third and final commonality was that they shared their stories with others, which they felt helped them begin to understand who they were.

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. Each of these categories is intertwined with the others, as in the case of mobility, which contributes to over-representation in special education. It is clear that foster children face tremendous obstacles as they attempt to navigate their K-12 education while simultaneously attempting to work through the challenges of state custody (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). These challenges culminate in the difficulty foster children face when they leave the care system and attempt to find success as an adult.

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). This maltreatment could have occurred in-utero through drug or alcohol use, or could have come from neglect or abuse after birth. In their 2000 study of more than 50,000 maltreated children in Nebraska, Sullivan and Knutson found that 37.4% of maltreated children 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 (Gore & Janssen, 2007). While researchers have been able to determine which disabilities are most common in foster children, determining how many foster children are receiving special education services has proven to be difficult.

Foster children 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 four-fold: 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 Program (IEP) services once they have been found to be eligible for special education.

The identification of foster children and youth for special education is only the first step in providing needed academic and emotional support. Once they are identified, service delivery must take place. However, problems with delivery has been found to be another barrier for foster children and youth. Record transfer from one school to the next can take weeks. This can cause serious delays in identification of IEP services, resulting in educationally-misplaced students enrolled in the wrong classes, without educational support. A 1995 study of twelve special needs foster children found that for five of the

twelve children, time violations had occurred, including a six month delay from referral request to referral for testing (Weinberg, 1997). Because youth in care are more likely than their non-foster peers to lack a consistent advocate, they experience these special education violations in greater numbers than their non-foster peers (Geenen & Powers, 2006). In a 1997 study, Weinberg found that of those identified for special education services, one-third of the subjects did not receive the services that were specified on their IEP. White, Carrington, and Freeman (1990) found that of the 39% of children in foster care in Oregon known to have a current IEP, of those 39%, only 16% were in special education classes.

The high mobility of this student population often results in a change of schools, which sets off a domino effect of procedures, including record transfers and evaluation for academic placement. Foster children who were identified as special education students were found to have one more placement, on average, than their counterparts without special educational needs (Geenen & Powers, 2006). Services are often delayed at the new school for foster children and youth who were previously receiving special education. This is due to delayed record transfers, district requirements for their own evaluations, resulting in weeks or months without needed services (Altshuler, 1997). These delays have both academic and disciplinary consequences. Studies have shown that foster youth have a higher rate of suspensions for behavior problems than their non-foster peers. These students would have benefitted from counseling through special education services (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006).

The consistent movement of foster children makes it difficult to ascertain the number of foster children receiving special education or Section 504 services. A study of

children in an Oregon urban school district focused on 278 children and youth in foster care. Of these 278, only 222 were enrolled in school (Geenen & Powers, 2006). Subtracting the students in an alternative learning environment, they analyzed the data on the remaining 158 students. Of these 158, they found 44% enrolled in special education. Of those 44%, in special education, 30% of the 44% were placed in the most restrictive learning environment. This is in stark contrast to the 15% in the same restrictive learning environment category for non-foster children in the same school district. This finding is consistent with that of Zetlin (2006), who found that one-third to one-half of foster children are identified for special education, versus 10% to 11.4% of the general school population (McLeskey, Rosenberg & Westing, 2010; Zetlin, 2006). It is important to note that while foster children appear to be over-represented in special education, there are foster children in schools that are being underserved. In these schools there are children, unable to qualify for special education, who still have challenges that need to be addressed. These can include academic, behavioral, or counseling needs (Stone, D'Andrade, & Austin, 2007). Again, these needs are often not recognized, or communicated to the appropriate school personnel.

There is a lack of communication and joint participation between state agencies, child advocates, foster parents, and schools. This causes unnecessary time delays for children to receive needed services since school administrators are unsure as to who has the authority to speak for and sign documents on behalf of the foster child. At the center of this issue is that of educational rights; did the court limit the biological parents' education rights, and if so, who now holds those rights? When a school determines through an assessment that a change in placement or services is warranted, the process is

often held up because the school is unsure who can grant permission for this to take place (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). While the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) provides for parents, guardians or surrogates to initiate, attend, and participate in the IEP process in an effort to ensure that the appropriate services have been identified and implemented (McLeskey, Rosenberg, & Westing, 2010), foster parents can be overlooked in this process as schools are unsure if they qualify as surrogates, and therefore hold educational rights. Once the educational rights have been established, the school must communicate with all parties before proceeding. Unfortunately, foster parents, who are often most familiar with the academic needs of the child in their care, are typically unfamiliar with how to navigate and negotiate through special education and Section 504 services (Vacca, 2008). When academic, emotional, and/or behavior problems exist, but the child does not qualify for special education, foster parents have been found to experience many of the same frustrations as non-foster parents; there is lack of support or interventions to help the child in their home, and no direction for the next steps (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010).

While many foster parents have been excluded from the IEP process, in their study, Stone, D'Andrade, and Austin (2007) found that administrators were trying to work with foster parents in their schools, including allowing foster parents to sign IEP reports. Their study found that 81% of foster parents reported signing the IEP reports for children in their care. Administrators reported wanting to do what was best for the children in their schools, breaking through communication barriers which keep children from receiving the special services they needed.

Learning, behavior, and emotional disabilities are the predominate reasons for IEP and Section 504 plans for foster children. With the majority of children coming into care due to abuse and neglect, it is not surprising to learn that approximately 50% of the foster children with IEPs are for emotional/behavioral issues. One little-known behavioral concern for foster children and youth is post-traumatic stress syndrome. Vacca (2008) reported that 25% of foster children suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome. To put this into a national perspective, this means that more foster children suffer from this syndrome than the number of veterans returning from war (Vacca, 2008). Pecora et al. (2005) found that foster alumni were found to have suffered from post-traumatic syndrome at a rate of 25.2% versus 4.0% for non-foster populations. This rate of 25.2% is significantly higher than the percentage of veterans found to suffer from post-traumatic syndrome from the following wars: Vietnam 15%, Afghanistan, 6% and Iraq 12% to 13% (Pecora et al., 2005). When left undiagnosed or untreated, post-traumatic stress syndrome can manifest in the classroom.

Educators face the difficult task of creating a safe, welcoming environment without understanding stimuli that could trigger a negative emotional response or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) response from a student with an abuse or neglect background. Some children may feel trapped in the classroom environment and need to be provided with a safe place either in the classroom or on the school campus where they can escape and reset their emotions. Because foster children could be suffering from anxiety or panic attacks due to PTSD, it is important to have a plan in place that is rehearsed with the student so that the student knows how they will be supported if or when they become anxious. Training in how to respond to children who have suffered

abuse or neglect is essential to ensure that children are comfortable and feel secure in the classroom. Without knowing that the student has this syndrome, or without an IEP or Section 504 plan to help accommodate the student, the student is often reprimanded for defiant behavior. It has been found that older children suffering from posttraumatic stress syndrome may instinctively freeze when they experience anxiety, and can therefore be viewed as oppositional or defiant by others (American Association of Pediatrics, 2000). This is one explanation for why foster children experience disciplinary actions that remove the child from the classroom disproportionately more often than non-foster peers (Scherr, 2007).

It is clear that foster children, particularly those with a disability, are academically fragile. With lower grade point averages (GPAs), more disruption due to additional placements, school changes and special service interruptions, it is imperative that attention be paid to this particular group of learners.

Mobility barriers.

Children and youth in the foster care system experience high mobility rates due to unstable living situations. Pecora et al. (2005) found 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 four- to six-month loss of academic achievement (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Rios, 2008). Pecora et al. (2005)

found foster youth moving, on average, 6.5 times while in care. This begins to explain a major barrier to academic achievement.

The instability foster children face in where they live and where they attend school creates challenges for both caregivers and teachers, who are not familiar with the needs of the children (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). When an initial placement is made or when a placement change is made, it can often involve moving from one school to another. While foster children are moving and getting settled into a new home, many are not immediately enrolled in their new school (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). The move from one school to another causes disruptions in friendships, school sports and activities, and separates foster children from their former community where they may have established a system of support. The new school presents obstacles such as delays in registration, inappropriate classroom placement and delays in special education services if enrolled in those services at the previous school (Vacca & Allen, 2010). Additionally, documentation of up-to-date immunizations are required, and if they cannot be found, the child must be re-immunized before being allowed to attend classes (Stone, D'Andrade, & Austin, 2007).

Once the child is able to attend classes, foster children are often met by teachers who are reluctant to spend time tutoring foster children, even when the child needs the extra academic support. The largest reason found for this reluctance is a view of foster children as a transient population. Faced with larger classrooms and fewer resources, teachers are reluctant to pour valuable resources into a child that may not continue in their classroom through the entire school year (Stone, D'Andrade, & Austin, 2007).

Many high school students may not know what courses are needed to graduate from high school. A placement move can often mean leaving before the end of the grading term, resulting in a loss of credits. This is, in part, due to the fact that they do not know what courses they successfully completed prior to the school transfer, or which courses will be accepted by 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 child to navigate through the registration process and end up with the courses they need to achieve graduation. If the student continues to move, required credit deficiencies begin to increase, resulting in an inability to graduate from high school on a traditional track. School counselors and administrators point foster children toward alternative programs because of the lack of academic credits the foster child has completed (Vacca, 2007). Geenen, Powers, Hogansen, and Pittman (2007) found that foster children were often put on a modified diploma due to lack of credits, which was typically a direct result of multiple placements, and also found that in the majority of these cases, the student was unaware of the implications of this type of diploma, or that this was the type of diploma they would be receiving. If a student graduates with a modified diploma, it can limit their ability to continue on to a four-year college or university as many do not accept a modified diploma (www.ode.state.or.us/...titleiii_dirdiplomaoptions2011.ppt). Additionally, a student with a modified diploma does not qualify for Federal Student Financial Aid (www.ode.state.or.us/.../2009/comparison diplomaoptions.pdf). In many situations, this type of diploma may be unnecessary as the foster youth, if still in high school when they

turn 18, may stay in foster care until they complete their high school education (Geenen, Powers, Hogansen, and Pittman, 2007).

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

Barrier of transition from care to independence.

The placement instability foster youth 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 et al., 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. Foster youth 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 disabled youth 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 accessibility (Geenen et al., 2007). Without adequate preparation for independent living, attendance at a post-secondary institution is unattainable for the majority of foster youth.

Another potential barrier to the move from care to independence is the inability to access post-secondary schooling. For many this is attributed to lack of finances. In 2001, 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 educational expenses to eligible current and former foster youth. Those that meet the requirements, and that continue to make progress toward completion of their program, are eligible to continue to receive up to \$3,000 in support until the age of 23, as long as they are in enrolled in a post-secondary education or training program (Oregon Student Assistance Commission). This voucher program provides much needed financial assistance. However, Blome (1997) found that foster youth received significantly less financial support for their education than their non-foster peers.

But, finances are not the only consideration when determining college accessibility; additional barriers continue to exist at the post-secondary level. Attending a post-secondary institution requires that the student to be able to make decisions and advocate for themselves. They must also 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, having been cared for and having 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 to living as independent adults.

Supports for Academic Success

There have been many studies conducted and articles written regarding the negative outcomes for foster youth, but only a handful that have looked at the positive outcomes (Hass & Graydon, 2009; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Rios, 2008). The research that has focused on foster youth with positive outcomes points to resiliency as a major factor in the lives of those who have been successful (Hass & Graydon, 2009; Hines et al., 2005; Rios, 2008; Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Benard (1991, 1993) provides a definition and framework to understand resiliency. Benard (1991) defined resiliency as a set of environmental protective factors in the family, schools, and community, and identified specific categories. The categories include: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, sense of purpose, and future (Benard, 1991). The categories are further expanded through the lens of family, school, and community. Under the heading of family, factors identified include having a caring and supportive person in their lives, and high expectations for success by a supportive and respected person. These same two factors were also found in the school and community contexts, in addition to participation in the school or community setting and participation in activities (Benard, 1991). There are also personal strengths that are

found in resilient children. Benard (1993) identified these as social ability, capacity to solve problems, independence, and sense of purpose.

Family support.

Hass & Graydon (2009) conducted research focused on the potential sources of resiliency in foster youth identified as successful. Youth were identified as successful if they had completed a vocational or post-secondary program, or were in their junior year at a four-year college or university (Hass & Graydon, 2009). When asked where they received most of the help or support in their lives, 38, or 84%, indicated that an individual or individuals were responsible for helping them the most. Eleven of the 24 in Rios' (2008) study credited foster parents, described as authoritative, as the reason for their academic success. Along with foster parents, 14 participants referred to supportive biological relatives as providing support (Rios, 2008).

School support.

Reflecting on resiliency in his school, principal Martin Krovetz (1999) observed firsthand the challenges in supporting resiliency in the school. However, he noted that encouraging resiliency in children is not something we can mandate or support with grant money. It is his belief that teachers make a difference every day in the life of a child (Krovitz, 1999). This notion is evident in the research conducted by Hass & Graydon (2009), Hines et al. (2005), Merdinger et al. (2005), and Rios (2008).

While previous literature indicated the over-representation of foster youth in special education (Geenen & Powers, 2006, Zetlin, 2006), Hass & Graydon (2009) found that only 5% of their participants had special education services during their academic career. This finding is consistent with Hines et al. (2005), who found that 5 of the 14

former foster youth who had successfully transitioned from foster care to post-secondary education had been identified as talented and gifted in school, and that 11 of the 14 participated in college preparation classes such as advanced placement (AP) courses.

Education is a large component in the lives of youth, yet many do not feel a connection to school. For foster youth who have experienced multiple placements and several school changes, a positive experience with schools may be difficult to achieve. However, in this study of 14 former foster youth, all 14 indicated that they viewed school as a positive component of their lives (Hines et al., 2005). This connection to school was also found in 13 of the 14 former foster youth who were identified as driven, goal-oriented individuals in the context of academics (Hines et al, 2005). Of the 14 former foster youth, 12 indicated future plans that included high expectations and goals they had established for themselves. Rios (2008) had findings similar to Hines et al. (2005) and Hass & Graydon (2009). Rios (2008) found that most of his participants indicated they had experienced attentive teachers. Additionally, Rios (2008) found that teachers, supportive school counselors, and an environment that provided for rigorous academics were all credited as supports the former foster youth had experienced. Support from teachers, administrators, and/or school counselors was also found to be significant in the study of Merdinger et al. (2005). They found that 55.1 % of the 216 participants in the study received some type of college advising while in high school, 65.3% were enrolled in college preparatory courses, and 65.7% participated in extra-curricular activities. Most notably, Merdinger et al. (2005) found that former foster youth remembered these influential teachers by name and how they went out of their way to advocate for, or intervene on behalf of the foster student.

Community supports.

In their 2009 study, Hass and Graydon found that mentors in the community were identified as important sources of support for successful foster youth. Of the 44 in the study, 23 or 63% identified a mentor in the community. Rios (2008) found that 10 of 24 participants indicated they had support from a member of the community. The participants pointed to the mentors as the main reason they were able to achieve academically and go on to college.

In addition to receiving help from the community, many also indicated a strong commitment to give back in some way to the community that had supported them. Hass and Graydon (2009) found that 79% of the participants had a strong sense of community and worked to serve others in various capacities. In addition, 52% indicated they were part of a club, church/temple, sports team, or other activity in the community.

Conclusion

Foster children and youth experience multiple barriers to academic achievement. These barriers begin to explain why only approximately 50% of foster children graduate from high school (Bruskas, 2008), and of those graduates, only 33% pursue post-secondary education (Barth, 1990). However, there is little research on the perceptions of foster youth regarding their educational progress and achievement (Hass & Graydon, 2009; Hines et al., 2005; Merdinger et al., 2005; Rios, 2008). It is imperative that the challenges foster children and youth face and the ways in which some are able to overcome these challenges are shared with a larger community.

CHAPTER 3

Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological research was to explore the lived experiences among Oregon current and former foster youth who have overcome barriers to academic achievement and have enrolled in a community college, four-year college, or university for Fall term, 2011. Specifically, I explored these lived experiences through in-depth interviews, seeking meaning to gain understanding of the barriers and supports that affected their ability to enroll in post-secondary education. A hermeneutic phenomenological study focuses on the meaning of the lived experience for individuals (Creswell, 2007). It is specifically defined as “a human science which studies persons” (van Manen, 1990, p.6). The goal of this particular type of research design is to take the shared lived experience of individuals and provide a description of the significance of this experience (Creswell, 2007). Van Manen (1990) describes phenomenology as a design that “attempts to describe and interpret these meanings to a certain degree of depth and richness” (p. 11). Phenomenological design uses retrospective reflection on the part of the individual who experienced the phenomenon. It is retrospective rather than introspective because in introspective reflection the individual is still in the midst of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). This specific design was appropriate for Oregon former foster youth, as they were asked to reflect on prior experiences.

For my study, the following central research question and two sub questions were identified:

Central research question.

What do former foster youth perceive as the barriers and supports that contributed to their academic success and college enrollment?

Subquestions.

1. What are the perceived barriers and supports that college-enrolled former foster youth experienced in their K-12 education?

2. What help, support, tools, or strategies did college-enrolled former foster youth use to overcome these barriers?

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in the state of Oregon, focusing on current and former foster youth that had graduated from high school, were pursuing a post-secondary education, and had applied for the Chafee Education and Training Scholarship for Fall, 2011. Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) funding is available through the Department of Human Services Independent Living Program, awarding up to \$3,000 a year to eligible applicants. Eligibility requires that the applicant (Oregon Student Assistance Commission):

1. Currently be in foster care, **or**
2. Had been in foster care for at least 180 days (six months) after their 14th birthday and exited substitute care at age 16 or older

3. Be participating in the voucher program on their 21st birthday. Youth may then continue to apply/receive funds until they turn 23 years old as long as they are enrolled in a post secondary education or training program and making satisfactory progress toward completion of that program.

The potential participants were contacted through the Director of the Oregon Foster Youth Connection. While the participants for the study were all current and former foster youth, by soliciting participants from the Chafee Education and Training Scholarship pool, the study was strengthened by participants who had all experienced foster care, and who had all qualified for the Chafee Scholarship, ensuring that all participants had the same experience or phenomenon that I explored (Creswell, 2007). From the interested participant pool, I purposively selected 11. This was accomplished by asking the potential participants a few questions, ensuring that they met the criteria established for the study. By soliciting from this participant pool, similar characteristics, common experiences, and themes emerged (Creswell, 2007).

Role of the Researcher

In January 2010, I began the training process to become a certified foster parent. In March 2010, I completed my training and became certified, by the Department of Human Services, as a foster parent for Clackamas County, Oregon. Later that year, our family received a sibling group of four, ages 9, 10, 13 and 14. For the children, our home was their third placement in 16 months. Over the course of the seven months the children lived with us, I saw first-hand the many barriers to academic achievement the children experienced. The youngest child had behavioral challenges at school that the classroom teacher initially was unsure how to address. With a full classroom, and without

knowledge of the experiences of foster children, she was at a loss for how to work with him. She did, however, reach out to us and together we found ways to support and guide him. The second youngest child received wonderful instruction and support from her teacher. However, she was substantially behind her non-foster peers in reading and math. She was subsequently tested for special education services, for which she was found to be ineligible.

While the elementary school reached out to our family and offered support, the middle school, where two of the children attended, did not. Emails to teachers went unacknowledged, requests for help to understand grades, current progress, and behavioral concerns fell on deaf ears. As an educator and licensed administrator, I was frustrated by teachers and administrators who ignored me, a foster parent, working to be an educational advocate for two at-risk youth.

I share my personal experiences with this phenomenon because hermeneutic phenomenology research requires transparency on the part of the researcher as to their personal experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) goes on to present the idea of “epoche.” Epoche is defined as “refraining from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). Moustakas (1994) further states that epoche requires a fresh approach to the way in which we view things and that we “learn to see” that which is before us (p.33). Working to achieve epoche, the researcher must first be “transparent to ourselves” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). This is achieved by “bracketing” or setting aside personal experiences with the phenomenon to the extent possible, and allow for a “fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59-60).

Research Design

The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of the educational experience among Oregon current and former foster youth who overcame barriers to academic achievement, and had plans to, or had enrolled in a community college, four-year college, or university for Fall term, 2011. This is a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry study. I specifically chose hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry design as it “differs from almost every other science in that it attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it” (van Manen, 1990, p.9). This design allows a story to be told in an organic fashion, by relaying experiences. The study utilized interviews with open-ended questions.

Criterion sampling was employed for this study. This sampling technique requires that the potential pool of participants be narrowed so that those in the study have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). By applying this sampling technique to the study, I was able to identify three specific criteria. The first was limiting the participants to Oregon current and former foster youth. The second was limiting participants to individuals who qualified for the Chafee Education and Training Scholarship. The third criterion was that the participants had to apply for the Chafee scholarship for Fall term, 2011. By limiting the potential participants through the established criteria, I was able to strengthen the study by interviewing participants who all had similar experiences. Once a participant pool was established, I had 11 individuals for my study.

Procedures

Current and former foster youth who meet the eligibility requirements can apply for the Chafee Education and Training Scholarship. The names and contact information of this population are known to the state of Oregon Department of Human Services Independent Living Program, but remain confidential. In order to gain access to the entire population, application to the State of Oregon Department of Human Services is required. The Department of Human Services requires that all researchers follow specific policies and procedures in addition to the submission of an approved Institutional Review Board (IRB), with supplemental materials attached. I completed the application, but the approval process took much longer than anticipated. I then made the decision to contact the Oregon Foster Youth Connection in Oregon. The Oregon Foster Youth Connection is a non-profit organization that is sponsored by Children First for Oregon. The membership includes foster youth members that are currently in care and foster youth that have exited the care system. I received approval from the Director of the Oregon Foster Youth Connection to create a flyer about my study and participant requirements, and she presented my study to the membership. Interested participants then contacted me through email and by phone. After receiving confirmation that the potential participants met the criteria for the study, I created a list of all interested participants. With all purposive sampling eligibility met, I had a final pool of 11 participants.

Instrumentation/Materials

Open-ended interview questions were used for each and every individual interview. Ten of the 11 interviews were conducted face to face. One interview was conducted via phone as the participant was outside the designated area. Each interview

was audio recorded and transcribed at the conclusion of the interview session. I also took field notes during the interview as a way to provide a back-up should the audio recording fail. Field notes also allowed me to make note of comments or topics that emerged during the interview that were important for follow-up questions and to guide the conversation during the interview.

Data Analysis

I followed Creswell (2007) when analyzing my data. There are six steps in this analysis. They include:

1. Creating a listing of important statements from each interview,
2. Creating a description of the “what” or the “textural description” of the experience (Creswell, 2007, p. 159),
3. Building on the list of important statements by sorting these into themes,
4. Creating a description of the experience, including the “how” of the participants’ journey. This also includes the “structural description” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159),
5. Constructing a description that incorporates both the textural and structural, sharing the experiences as perceived by foster youth. The textural description includes “significant statements and themes” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). The structural uses the “significant statements and themes” to create a description of the “context and setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61).

Research Ethics

I conducted this study in an ethical manner, adhering to all policies and procedures of George Fox University, including the Human Subjects Research

Committee. All data and files obtained for this study, all consent forms and confidential communication were secured in a locked file cabinet at my home and the confidentiality of participants was maintained.

Chapter 4

Findings from the study

Introduction

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological research was to explore the lived experiences of Oregon former foster youth who overcame barriers to academic achievement and enrolled in a community college, four-year college, or university for Fall term, 2011. I sought meaning through the lived experiences and perceptions of those experiences from current and former foster youth.

Research Questions

Using hermeneutic phenomenological research design to explore the perceptions of former foster youth's K-12 experiences, I identified the following primary and secondary research questions:

Central question.

What do former foster youth perceive as the barriers and supports that contributed to their academic success and college enrollment?

Subquestions.

1. What are the perceived barriers and supports that college-enrolled former foster youth experienced in their K-12 education?
2. What help, support, tools, or strategies did college-enrolled former foster youth use to overcome these barriers?

Participants

The Oregon Foster Youth Connection promoted my study to their members, and with 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 eleven participants in this study. Each participant was given a pseudonym to provide anonymity. I replaced all names of participants, individuals named in the interviews, towns, and schools mentioned in the interviews with pseudonyms. Participant names have been changed, and other individuals, towns, and schools are noted with the pseudonym in []. This was done to maintain the anonymity of all people and places involved in the lives of the youth interviewed. Basic demographic information is below in Table 1.

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>	<i>College currently enrolled in</i>
Emily	Female	Caucasian	Abuse / Neglect	11	6	2	Diploma	State University
Roberto	Male	Hispanic	Abuse / Neglect	18	18-19	3	Diploma	Private University
Samantha	Female	Caucasian	Voluntary	12	8	7	Diploma	Private University
Dianna	Female	African-American	Abuse / Neglect	15	7	1	GED	Community College
Jason	Male	Caucasian	Abuse / Neglect	2.5	3	2	GED	Community College
Andrew	Male	Caucasian	Abuse / Neglect	7	65	6	GED	Community College
Tanya	Female	Caucasian	Abuse / Neglect	20	15	2	Diploma	Community College
Ben	Male	Caucasian	Voluntary	6.5	20+	2	GED	Community College
Jennifer	Female	Caucasian	Abuse / Neglect	5	13	6	GED	Community College
Byron	Male	African – American / Native American	Abuse / Neglect	15	8-10	3	GED	Community College
Tessa	Female	Hispanic	Voluntary	4-5	11	5	Diploma	Community College

Interviews

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. Children First for Oregon is the parent company of Oregon Foster Youth Connection, an organization that works directly on advocacy issues for foster youth, and who allowed me to solicit participants from the youth they serve. Two interviews were conducted off-site, at public locations determined to be more convenient for two of the participants. I audio recorded each interview, and took field notes during the interviews after receiving their signed consent to participate.

The interviews began slowly, with demographic questions, which allowed each participant time to feel comfortable with me. They were able to share more details as the interviews progressed. Often, later in an interview, the participant would ask to go back to previous questions because they wanted to add more detail to their original answer. There were instances when this came as a result of sharing on a different topic which triggering the recollection of additional past events. This was expected. As van Manen (1990) explained, “phenomenological reflection is not introspective but retrospective. Reflection on lived experience is always recollective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through” (p. 10). Therefore, it was not uncommon for participants to state, “I had not thought about that in years” (Roberto), “I forgot about my placement with the family in [Salmon Creek]” (Tessa), “I never thought about how much that foster mom helped me with my homework” (Samantha), and “you know, I was angry. I was angry because my mom left me” (Jason). With one participant in particular, I knew she had reached a comfort level when she said, “I never told anyone that before” (Jennifer).

Transcription

Following the completion of each interview, the audio recording was then transcribed. Using the field notes and the audio recording, I created a verbatim transcript for each of the eleven interviews. While the quality of the recording was very good, the voice level of the participants would sometimes drop, making it difficult to clearly hear a word or two. In addition, voice inflections and word choice at times made understanding difficult. Therefore, I listened and transcribed each interview and then replayed each

audio recording while following along in the transcription I had created, making corrections where needed.

At the completion of each transcript, participants were contacted for follow-up questions or to clarify a statement made during the interview. This information was then added to the transcription document. This yielded 286 pages of transcribed data for analysis.

Results

Once all data had been collected, transcribed, and organized, I followed Creswell's (2007) phenomenological analysis and representation steps (p. 159). There are six steps:

1. Describe personal experience with the phenomenon.
2. Develop a list of significant statements.
3. Take the significant statements and group them into larger units of information.
4. Write a description of "what" the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon. This is called a "textural description."
5. Write a description of "how" the experience happened. This is called "structural description."
6. Write a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions (p. 159).

I read through each participant transcript and highlighted significant statements the participants made about the phenomenon. I identified 181 significant statements. I then followed the procedure for Creswell's Step 3, sorting these into topics or themes. I

organized these into three categories for barriers, with sub-theme categories, two categories for supports, with sub-theme categories, and one category for help, support and/or strategies, with sub-theme categories the participants used to overcome the identified barriers. This was accomplished by following the format identified in Creswell (2007).

Textural and Structural Descriptions

Each of the 11 participants has a unique story. While they are all foster children or former foster children, 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 the age of 7 after her biological mother lost custody due to her drug use. She was under the legal guardianship of her aunt and uncle until the age of 14, and then moved to several relative and non-relative foster care placements over the next four years.

Emily endured physical abuse from her aunt while in her home. For a year and a half Emily tried to get someone to notice and take action. She believed, however, that because the foster parents were relatives, no one checked out her allegations. She said, “Every day I was in the counselor’s office telling them what was happening, taking pictures of bruises. They would send me to my school officer and he would call my aunt

[Camille] and would say 'Nicole is in here again saying that you beat her,' and then they would send me home. Eventually when I had a fractured cheekbone, they actually took me away."

Once she was removed, she was living 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. She said, "Well, it was 4 extra hours a day that I was riding, and my foster mom was at home all day and wouldn't give me rides at all, even though she got reimbursed for it. So, that kind of sucked." While 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 [Early Admission], a program in her school district, which would allow her to graduate from high school and earn college credits. She continued to ride the city bus to attend school, but this program eliminated the possibility that DHS could require her enrollment in a local high school because [Early Admission] was open to all students in the district. She graduated, earning a traditional diploma.

Emily continued her education, completing her associate's degree at a local community college, and will continue on toward her bachelor's degree at a state university.

Roberto

Roberto was raised in the foster care system. He entered care at birth due to the incarceration of his mother. His four siblings moved in with their fathers. 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 DHS removed him from her care. His next placement lasted for four years. During the four years, his foster dad repeatedly sexually abused him. It wasn't until he was acting out sexually and behaving inappropriately at school that his foster mom confronted him. He said, "One day my foster mom sat me down on her knee and was like, 'Who taught you to do this?' and all of this stuff and I said 'Daddy'", and she was instantly like, 'Oh My God.' She had me go to my room and she was crying and she didn't understand. Then she talked to him and I don't know what happened, but within a week I was removed from the home. But nothing happened, so she didn't report it." 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 awhile."

Tragically, this was not the only home in which Roberto experienced this kind of abuse. Roberto stated, "I had a lot more houses where that happened." He shared that he was placed in the care of an older foster mother, who also chose to sexually abuse him. He said, "I went to a program called the [Neighborhood Program], and then I had a really big issue that kept me from being able to stay at [Neighborhood Program]." As Roberto shared this, he touched his arms, where scars remain from the cutting he inflicted upon himself. He was moved to the:

[Kentwood Institute for Boys]. They deal with anger issues, sexual offenders, drug issues, those kind of things. More of a lock-down kind of place. It was hard-core. I was super livid and I don't know, they decided to send me to a really intensive place that I really hated, because it was actually hell. [Kentwood] was like you couldn't wear jeans, you couldn't wear shoes unless you went hiking, it was like all the meals were two to a table and you had to sit one to each side. And you had to eat your meals within a certain amount of time. I felt like I was in prison. It was here that I had an attitude change. I am not getting anywhere being angry and argumentative all the time. I was never really violent. I was confrontational and angry all the time.

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".

When asked how he could have experienced so much in his life and end up successful, he shared the following about his caseworker, judge, attorney, skills trainer and others who were supportive:

When I graduated, I walked across the stage and...she started crying and I was like "Oh my gosh. I am almost crying now." I felt like the dream had ended. She said, "Okay, you are scheduled to be signed out on your 18th birthday. After all I have seen you go through, I would never have seen you be so successful." Then she hugged me and was like so proud of me because I was able to do this. It was really because of her and my judge, my attorney, my skills trainer, everybody who was there for me.

Samantha

When she was six years old, Samantha was moved in with her adolescent sister, who was living in a foster care placement. Their parents had voluntarily placed both daughters in foster care but kept their parental rights. Samantha, seeing that her sister was happy living with another family, was at first excited to join that family. The original plan was for both sisters to be adopted by the foster parents. Samantha's adoption failed and since her biological parents had by that time voluntarily agreed to the termination of their parental rights, Samantha was placed in the foster care system.

Samantha's first placement lasted eight years. She was in a foster home with a large number of foster children. She recalled being happy in this home, but admitted that there were disagreements with the foster parents. On one occasion, during her freshman year, Samantha and her foster mother had a heated exchange and the foster parent suggested Samantha take a walk to cool down. After being out much longer than she knew she should have been, Samantha stayed with a friend instead of returning home. The caseworker determined that a short-term placement would be best to allow both the foster parent and Samantha to have a break from each other. During this break, the Department of Human Services decided to close this foster home, so Samantha was never able to return to what she called "home." This caused trauma in her life, resulting in anger and distrust toward her future foster parents and placements, which contributed to her constant movement over the next few years. She said, "Moving to new homes, you don't want to settle in or be a part of their family because you are like, how long is this one going to last? So, I never really cared about making relationships with a lot of my foster families."

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.” This perfect placement provided her freedom to make choices within a structured environment. She had a job, she had chores to do at home, and she went to school and focused on her education. Once secure in this placement, Samantha learned that a math course she took at another school would not transfer to her current school, leaving her .5 credits short of graduation. Samantha took a summer class to complete the credit and graduated with a traditional diploma.

Samantha requested that she be allowed to stay in foster care beyond her 18th birthday. This allowed her to receive financial support as well as the support of the staff at the Department of Human Services. She applied to colleges and decided upon her current school, because the move-in date kept her from being homeless.

Dianna

Dianna and her brother were removed from their home, due to abuse and neglect, when Dianna was five and her brother was three. They were placed in foster care and lived together in traditional foster care homes for a few years before they were separated. Dianna remembered that they were both removed from their first foster home when the Department of Human Services noticed rope burns on both Dianna and her brother’s ankles during a routine visit. Dianna does not remember the foster parents, but does remember being tied up regularly. Both children were then moved to their second home, where they met with more abuse.

The second placement was with a woman and her husband and two other girls, also in foster care. They foster parents also had grandchildren who regularly visited the home. Dianna remembers very clearly an afternoon when she was not allowed to go to the basement to play with her toys. While she was initially upset about this, she later learned that the foster dad 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. He was molesting the other girls down there.”

Dianna was not safe, however, from the grandsons. The grandsons, who were just a few years older than Dianna, began to act out sexually on 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 Dianna. It wasn’t until the grandmother asked DHS to remove Dianna’s brother from the home that Dianna’s rage spilled over. She was taken to a secure residential treatment center where the staff pieced together, from Dianna’s stories and pictures she drew, what had happened to her. Again, Dianna credits God for protecting her: “Things happen for a reason. God has looked after me. That is how I really feel. I am glad He got me out of that foster home because that boy would have tried something on me and had sex with me.”

Dianna was in and out of lock-down facilities and residential homes until she was placed with [Maybell], the foster parent she calls “Mom.” [Maybell] loved Dianna and cared for her from the time Dianna was eight until Dianna reached 19. Dianna left this home once after assaulting a girl. She was moved to [Emily’s Care], a lock-down facility, until it was determined that she would be able to go home. Once she was home

with [Maybell], she attended a local high school consistently for four years, but dropped out to complete her GED.

Jason

Jason's entrance into the foster care system came late in his teen years. At the age of 17, Jason was kicked out of his home and left in the care of his grandparents. This all occurred during a trip to [Texas] with his mother and uncle. While traveling with his mother and uncle to [Texas] to visit relatives, his mother surprised Jason by flying home early (one day into the seven day trip), abandoning Jason in [Texas]. With another week before his round trip ticket home was valid, Jason stayed in [Texas] with his uncle, attempting to understand what had just occurred and what this meant for his future. Jason flew home and was met by his biological father, who lived in Portland. His father made it clear that he was not welcome to live with him, and his father drove him up to Jason's home in Washington. When he arrived, Jason was directed to pack his belongings because he would be moving in with his grandparents.

Jason's mother and stepfather had a rocky marriage and created a home that was volatile. As long as Jason could remember, his home was not a happy place nor one where he wanted to spend time. When he was in middle school, up through the trip to [Texas], Jason spent his free time out of the house with friends, looking to escape his home situation. He shared that he was not without his own faults, but said he was never a bad kid: "I wasn't ever really rebellious in the sense that I tried to do anything rebellious. I just tried to be gone all the time. If they weren't fighting then they were...I mean, it just wasn't a good place to be, in my opinion."

Jason moved in with his grandparents and reality began to set in: “Three parents and no one even wants you.” He was also very concerned that if he were told to leave his grandparents home, he would be homeless. Over the next few months, Jason shared that he “got completely clean and sober” and focused on his academics. Yet, he believed he was treated without respect and without any trust from his grandparents.

His situation, in which he was 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. Jason, living with his grandparents in Portland, was unable to reenroll in the high school he had just attended because of her actions. The administration at [Sunnyview] stepped in and contacted the Juvenile Rights Project. At this point, the Department of Human Services stepped in 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.

While Jason is finding academic success and has a plan for his future, he is a very angry young man. With the situation with his mother very recent, in comparison to the other participants his anger is visibly bubbling just below the surface.

Andrew

At the age of 10, Andrew entered care. Andrew 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 explained, “She would come in the house drunk and that is when my behavior kicked in. Because I didn’t know how to handle myself around people like that.” 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 the Department of Human Services arrived at his school and took him into foster care. Andrew remembered that day very clearly. He said, “My teacher cried. She was my most favorite teacher. She was my art teacher. And that is how I learned how to draw. She taught me how to deal with my anger through drawing. So visual arts is what I do to keep my anger under control.”

Over the next seven 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.” Additionally, Andrew said he was a very angry child and acted out. He attributes his high number of placements to this anger and foster parents not knowing how to relate to him. He was physically abused in one home when a pastor assaulted him. He was removed from that home.

Eventually, Andrew was able to return to his original neighborhood and attend a local high school that was particularly special to him. Both of his siblings had attended the high school and at one time his grandmother was the principal. He is very proud of the fact he attended this school. When he arrived, the transition was not easy. 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.

Andrew is now living in a home with several other boys. They are all attending the same community college. His foster parent, who he now calls "Dad," has taught him carpentry, and through working with his ILP worker he was able to obtain a handyman license. Working with his hands and building furniture reminds him of his love of art and of his favorite teacher who helped him deal with his feelings through art. He is working now on learning how to drive so that he can be a bit more mobile and pick up jobs as a handyman. His hope is that this income will continue to support him through college.

Tanya

Tanya entered care at the age of one. She experienced 20 years in the foster care system, the longest of all participants in this study. The majority of foster youth age-out of the foster care system at the age of 18. Tanya, however, asked to continue on in foster care until the age of 21.

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. After being selected by the [Michael Hall] television show, Tanya, eight and her sister 11, along with their caseworker flew to New York to participate in a special show on foster children available for adoption. A couple from [Illinois] saw the show and was approved to adopt the girls. The girls moved to [Illinois] for about 11 months but the adoption failed. Tanya said, "we got separated because she got labeled a 'bad' kid." 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.’” Tanya shared that it was particularly difficult to have her voice heard during these times when she was being abused because she was doing well at school. Tanya said, “I tended to flourish when things were happening that weren’t supposed to be happening. So when I was being abused my grades tended to get better. Which is weird because you would think that you would take a step back.”

Tanya landed in a solid foster home during high school. The foster parents were supportive and encouraging, attending her many choir concerts and supporting her academically. As Tanya’s 18th birthday was approaching, 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. She is now attending a community college and living with her sister, from whom she was previously separated.

Ben

Ben, like two other participants, entered the foster care system through a voluntary route. An adopted child, he had a very rocky beginning. Ben’s first memories are of moving to Arizona with his dad, expecting his mother to follow a few days later. His mother never arrived. His dad eventually remarried, but Ben had a difficult time

accepting his step-mom into his life: “I started accusing my mom of abuse and it wasn’t true, but I told him it was. He didn’t believe it but he didn’t tell me until like three years later. So, he pretty much said this is going to be a long haul. I need some help here. He is accusing my wife of abuse, so I need him to not be here, because he might become dangerous.”

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. Given the amount of fuel that was found, and the resultant danger to the occupants and the home, 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. Ben was diagnosed with psychosis NOS, requiring supervision. He was moved from home to home, and was in and out of several schools. He entered his last public high school with only six credits. Due to his diagnosis, he was assigned a one-on-one. This is an individual who would accompany and supervise Ben at school and at home. Ben did not feel comfortable sharing the details of why this was deemed appropriate, but he did say, “They accused me of doing things that I never did or never wanted to do. I am not going to get too much into what it was, but it was like they didn’t understand me. Because, sure they understood me on a cognitive level but they didn’t understand why I did what I did.” Even with the additional help and support, Ben found no way to get caught up. While the one-on-one was academically helpful, psychologically Ben began to question who he was. He said, “So they had someone from

my house come to school and wait outside my classroom. It didn't keep me from being successful, but it made me feel really bad about myself. Am I this horrible kid you are making me out to be?"

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. He earned a 3.61 GPA his first term and is excited for the next term to begin. He continues to have a relationship with his dad that he characterizes as very strong. He credits his dad's dedication to helping him get to where he is today: "I have been in the most laid back, relaxed foster homes to the most secure lock-down facilities you can be in without having committed a crime. I came out okay. I mean, sure, it matters what went on, but like as long as I came out okay, I am not going to hold a grudge."

Jennifer

Jennifer entered care at the age of 14, but her relationship with the Department of Human Services began when she was 12. Jennifer said she grew up in a dysfunctional home where she was neglected by her mother and abused by her brother, who is autistic. She described herself as rebellious, choosing to do drugs, run away, and have sex for the first time at the age of 12. She said, "It was my first time and I ended up getting pregnant. The guy really didn't know. I didn't want to be like oh yeah, I am a virgin, so it would be awkward. But, I was really young." Shortly after becoming pregnant, Jennifer learned of her pregnancy when she was admitted to the hospital for overdosing on drugs. This is when the Department of Human Services became involved in her life.

When she was removed from her home at the age of 14, her pattern of running away continued, resulting in numerous placements in various settings. She started in traditional foster homes, but continued to run away. 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.

Two years later she found herself, once again, pregnant. Living now with an abusive boyfriend after running away from another foster home, the state placed her at [Mary’s Home], a residential treatment center for pregnant and troubled youth. Because she continued to remain in contact with her abusive boyfriend, in 2007 when she delivered her second son, that child was also removed from her care and placed for adoption.

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 the value in an education. She was always a smart child and when she focused, she found that she enjoyed school. This enjoyment was reflected in her 4.0 GPA. Once she was enrolled in a traditional high school, she continued to do well. Yet, a few years later, she chose to drop out of high school, even though she was on track to graduate with honors. When asked why she chose to not continue and earn her diploma, Jennifer said, “I got so much stress from my foster mom, my case worker, 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. I want to graduate for myself and I didn't feel like it was for me, so I didn't want to do it."

Jennifer went on to earn her GED at a local community college and then moved to [North Gate] to be closer to family. She enrolled at a community college in her community and began working towards her associate's degree. Jennifer found motivation to continue on to college because "I don't want to be poor. I want to have a good life. Then when I do have more kids, I want them to have a house that is secure and safe. I want them to have a good childhood and I want them to go to a good school and not in the poor side of town."

Byron

Byron is a 21-year-old male, who experienced 15 years in the foster care system. At the age of three, Byron was removed from his home because his parents were involved in drugs. 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, both his great uncle and his older brother physically, and sexually abused Byron. When talking about his great uncle, he said, "He used to beat me and molest me." Unfortunately, no one believed Byron. He said, "I love my brother, but he stabbed me, he tried to drown me and then that stuff happened. He killed my pets. My brother is borderline sociopath. He has a hard time like he doesn't get other people's pain." Finally, while attending an anger management counseling session at the age of six or seven, Byron found help. He said, "Like I freaked out one time and tore the room apart and chucked chairs around. And she was like what is going on at home? And I was like

told her what was happening not really knowing it was wrong and that was how the whole process got started.” Byron was moved into non-relative foster care where he moved from placement to placement over the next 14 years.

At the age of 12, Byron was in another abusive foster home. After being physically and mentally abused, he was moved to 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, spend time with his friends and use drugs. At the age of 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 eight years for the manufacture, distribution and possession of marijuana and methamphetamines near a daycare. He spent close to two years in a juvenile delinquency center and was released a few weeks before his 17th birthday.

As Byron began to reflect on his time in prison, he immediately remembered [Nick], his counselor: “He got me to stop talking down to myself all the time. You know. Like, he just made me have, he let me see myself for who I truly was not for all the shit I had suffered.” Once he was released, he returned to the home of [Rebecca], the high-risk placement he was in before he was caught and sent to the juvenile delinquency center. [Rebecca] is whom Byron calls mom. When asked why she made such an impact on him, Byron said, “She is just unconditional.” He felt safe and he felt loved for the first time in his life. Even though Byron is no longer in foster care, he continues to enjoy a relationship with [Rebecca] and the boys he lived with. This is his family.

Upon his release, he attended an alternative school where he earned his GED and learned trade skills. The alternative school connected him with businesses in the community, where Byron learned the contracting and landscaping business. These skills have allowed him to find employment and pay his tuition bills.

In summing up his foster care experience, Byron shared, “Well, it was definitely hard, and I have a lot of bad experiences than good, and I mean, I don’t know. It has made me a really strong person and I have met some good people. Ultimately, I would not change anything because I do like who I am.”

Tessa

I met Tessa at a local public library, close to her home. We chose a large table in a far corner of the library where others would not overhear our conversation. When the interview began, Tessa was quite hesitant, but slowly worked her way through the demographic questions. Tessa’s journey into foster care is not the typical path. When asked why she was placed into care, Tessa said, “My mom just thought...she just didn’t want to deal with me. So she and I were having a hard time. She found out that like she could do a voluntary case at DHS, so she signed me over to them.” At the age of 12, Tessa was an angry pre-teen who was dealing with a new step-dad who, in her opinion, was taking her mom away from her. Tessa began looking for ways to force her mom to pay attention to her. Unfortunately, Tessa chose to do this through skipping school, getting into fights at school, and being sent to detention. She said, “I would go to school and get into fights because I thought that if I did that I would get to see my mom more and that she would care about me.” When Tessa’s mother determined that she could not deal with her behavior any more, she turned to the Department of Human Services for

assistance. Tessa was admitted into the foster care system as a voluntary case. Tessa said the hope was that both Tessa and her mom would have time to cool down and repair their relationship.

Over the next four to five years, Tessa was in and out of foster homes, alternative schools, and residential treatment. She had contact with her mom 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 [Mary's Home]. This is a residential treatment home for pregnant teens and troubled teens. It was here that Tessa said, "My attitude was better. It was just because I figured out that I could focus more of my energies on school it was going to better me. So going to school and not getting into fights was better than being sent home." Tessa focused on academics and found teachers encouraging and supportive. She began to work on her classes and successfully complete credits. When she was moved from [Mary's Home] into a traditional foster home, she found that many of her credits transferred. She worked very hard and was able to graduate with a traditional diploma.

Today, Tessa is back at home, living with her mom. She is attending a local community college, pursuing cosmetology training. While she still finds it difficult to live with her mom, living at home provides her with the finances she needs to attend school. She is motivated to continue her education because "it is the only thing that I am going to have left. The only thing that I am really going to own."

Introduction to Themes

This study considered barriers and supports to academic achievement, as well as help, support, tools, or strategies current and former foster youth used to overcome the barriers. Three specific themes emerged that the participants determined to be barriers to their academic success. They include: a. foster care system, b. school, c. disempowerment. Two themes were identified as supports to academic achievement. They are: a. foster care system, b. school. Lastly, considering help, support, tools, or strategies used by the participants, three themes emerged: a. support from high school programs / personnel. b. support from the Department of Human Services. c. self-advocacy.

Barriers to Academic Achievement

Foster care system.

The foster care system was found to be a barrier to foster youth. The barrier was attributed to abuse and neglect experienced in the foster care home and a lack of trust on the part of foster children and youth toward society. Each of these will be discussed at length.

Of the eleven participants in this study, six were either abused or neglected in some form while in foster care. This abuse happened in the homes of relatives approved for care, non-relative foster care, residential treatment centers, and secure lock-down facilities. In each case, the participant struggled to understand why they were victims of this abuse and expressed frustration that the abuse occurred and no one knew until the abuse escalated.

Two participants recollected their experiences living with relatives. Byron was sexually abused by his great-uncle in front of his great-aunt. Yet, no one came to his aide. Byron explained, “he used to beat me and molest me.” A second participant, Emily, experienced abuse for a year and a half before she was removed from the care of her aunt. She said, “Because they were relatives, no one checked. So, for a year and a half I tried to get removed. Every day I was in the counselor’s office telling them what was happening, taking pictures of bruises. They would send me to the school officer and he would call my Aunt [Camille] and say, “Emily is in here again saying that you beat her and then they would send me home. Eventually when I had a fractured cheek bone, they actually took me away.”

Four participants were abused or neglected by non-relative foster parents. The first, Tanya, explained her frustration with her experience. She was sexually abused in more than one placement. She said, “It was very difficult because I got taken away from a hurtful situation with my parents and got put into...foster homes [that] were hurtful. You were taken away to be protected and these people end up hurting you anyways.” She had a difficult time convincing people that the abuse was occurring because she said, “I tend to flourish when things were happening that weren’t supposed to be happening. So when I was being abused my grades tended to get better. Which is weird because you would think that you would take a step back.” Roberto had a similar experience. He shared that “The next few homes that I went through were abusive, through the first few years of my life.” Dianna experienced both physical and sexual abuse in two homes. The first home both Dianna and her brother were removed from because rope burns were found on their ankles after the foster parents had tied them up. Dianna was moved to a

home where she was physically abused by the foster mom and grandsons and sexually abused by the grandsons of the foster parents. Dianna said, “Those parents mistreated me and they mistreated the other girl. Her little grandson was nasty. He was like trying to have sex with us and touch on us.” Dianna also tried to protect her little brother who was placed in this home with her. She said, “I used to fight the lady’s grandson because he used to mess with my brother, teasing him and touching him and I was like don’t touch my brother. That is my brother. I protected that baby.” When Dianna would fight off the grandsons, they would tell their grandmother, Dianna’s foster mother, that she hit them. The foster mom would “hold my hands down and hit me and punch me. Her grandsons would punch me.” Jennifer shared her anger toward one foster mother who treated her poorly:

She seriously did neglect me. Like she would stick me in a corner for like five hours with no food, nothing. I couldn’t go to the bathroom. I got so, like, insane in my mind. I was like “Oh my God, I can’t deal with this. I have to leave.” So I ran away and I told my caseworker why I left so that she would move me. She just put me back and my foster mom did it again. I was like I am not doing this, so I ran away again and they sent me back with her again.

Ben had an interesting perspective. He shared that “it is like there is just a lot of really good people out there and there are people who probably started out with good intentions and just kind of went wrong somewhere and just didn’t realize it.” The abuse and neglect that the foster children experienced caused trauma in their lives. For some, this was not the first time they had experienced abuse and neglect. For others, it was a

new form of abuse. Regardless of their experience, the actions of parents and foster parents had long-lasting consequences.

The abuse and neglect foster children and youth experienced had serious implications. Tanya, mentioned earlier, was so traumatized by the abuse she experienced that “until I was 6, I didn’t speak one word. I signed everything. They said it was because of trauma.” Roberto, who was sexually abused in several placements, described his personality change from the experience: “I went from being a very rambunctious person to a very quiet person and then an angry person. All this stuff was happening to me and I didn’t know why. That is where my aggression clearly came out too because I was so angry, trying to figure out why this happened.” Roberto’s anger was consistent with others in the foster care system. Ben said, “back then, they would probably say I was the angriest child they ever came across.” Jason shared, “My parents are complete deadbeats who left me to rot in foster care. Yes, I have psychological problems that have come as a result of that, but anyone would have psychological problems after that. I am dealing with them by doing to school, getting an education and doing what I am supposed to be doing.”

After experiencing abuse and neglect from biological parents and foster parents, it is not surprising to learn that foster children and youth have a very difficult time trusting people.

Trust.

Samantha had a placement that lasted for eight years. This was a positive placement that made a difference in her life. However, after eight years, the Department of Human Services decided to close this placement. This move was devastating for

Samantha. 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 are like, 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.”

During my interview with Jason, he articulated how foster youth negotiate trust with people, in this case teachers specifically. His insights provide a deep look behind the façade that teachers can see in youth and do not know how to break through. Jason said:

It is pretty obvious to know when, at least at high school, when a kid has issues. You can see it in their face. I mean, some will try to hid it but sometimes they

can't hide it or won't hide it because they are not gonna come up and ask for help or say what is concerning them or anything. They will show it but it is up to the teacher or whoever is there to actually ask. There is a whole thing about actually asking for help. You don't actually ask for help, you know, you wait until somebody asks you if something is wrong and then you say, "No, nothing is wrong," and then they have to say "Alright, are you sure? You can tell me if there is something that is bothering you," real casual. You just have to be real subtle about it. That is just how it works with some guys. It's just a negotiation. Until finally on the outside, from a third-party perspective, it looks like the teacher is really seeing that there is something going on and, "I can see that there is something concerning you and I want to help you with what it is." It can look like the teacher is prying, but really the kid is putting up a front. "Yeah, I am okay. I don't need any help. I am perfectly fine the way I am," and then it looks as if they are being bothered and then they tell. When they really wanted to tell someone. So, that is foster kid psychology right there.

Jason was able to articulate the trust negotiation that many in foster care go through. Several participants indicated a desire to trust, but an inability to fully trust another person. Yet, those that are able to trust found they were able to reach out and access help and resources and to develop a support system.

School.

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.

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. She moved to the [Mt. View] area and was trying to enroll me over there.” The administration knew Jason and contacted the Juvenile Rights Project. They were able to intervene on his behalf.

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 that came from attending school. Ben said, “I feel like they [foster parents] didn’t have enough connection with me to be supportive with the school and stuff. It would have been helpful to have like 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 the home of her aunt. “I was going to [Elkton] Middle School. I was in my 8th grade year and it was like April and I didn’t want to lose my friends or where I was in school. I moved to [North Creek], which was about a 35 minute drive from [Belton], but I still

wanted to go there. So what happened was that every morning I had to get up at 5:00 am and ride a special bus so that I could stay in that same school.”

Each of these students faced barriers to academic success because of decisions that were made on their behalf. None of the participants had a voice in the process. Emily was attempting to self-advocate, yet her foster mother, who could have driven her to school and been reimbursed, refused to do so. These three struggled with both the school system and the foster care system.

Special Education / IEP.

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 ADHD and one was for speech. Roberto, Dianna and Ben reflected on their IEP and the way in which the IEP was carried out. Roberto’s IEP was in effect primarily in elementary school. “I used to have an IEP for math and they claimed that I had ADHD.” He went on to say, “I noticed when I had an IEP, I had a lot of excuses for things and I could get out of a lot of stuff. I could get out of standardized testing with the rest of the class. I could get special tests. I could retake my tests. I didn’t do that, but I kind of took advantage of that IEP.”

Dianna had the opposite experience. 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. I want to learn. So I started being nice and acting good and coming to school to get up out of there so that I could learn some stuff.” When Dianna did act up,

she was returned to the special education class. “I was in a special classroom and then they mainstreamed me. When I had problems they moved me back in. I was embarrassed to be in there. I was like ‘I am just visiting my auntie. This is my auntie right here’. I would make some lie up. This was not my classroom, this was not me.” 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 Psychosis NOS and ADHD. After moving from school to school, he recalled feeling helpless and giving up. “Even though they [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. He said, “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.

High school challenges.

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 new educational institution the foster youth has enrolled in. Often the foster youth were transferred to a new institution before the end of the semester or trimester, and were therefore unable to finish that class and receive the credits they earned. For Samantha, while her friends were enjoying their senior year, taking fewer courses, “[my senior year] was the hardest year because I was taking a full schedule and catching up on credits that the school I was going to graduate from did not accept and that is part of the reason I wasn’t going to graduate. I had taken a math class that my new high school didn’t accept so I had to take another math class. That was the class that kind of screwed me.” Ben also 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.”

Another challenge that emerged was with teachers. Jason encountered a few teachers who did not know him or his situation. He said, “I remember a lot of teachers that I pissed off. I remember an English teacher who called me an idiot one time, in front of the whole class.” Byron was also frustrated with several of his teachers. He stated, “A lot of teachers are so quick to punish and get a kid expelled and you aren’t helping

nothing. You are just showing that kid that another person does not give a fuck about them and that they are worthless and easy to discard.”

Andrew and Roberto faced a very different challenge. After spending significant time in alternative, residential, group homes and treatment centers, they were re-entering 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 six 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 1 ½ 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.”

Two participants, Jason and Jennifer, talked about their attitude toward high school and toward people trying to support them. Jason struggled to see the value in education. He said, “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. “I got enrolled in [Sunnyview] and I pretty much was like I got dumped with my grandparents and if I can’t make it here, I could end up homeless. So, I was like, whatever I have to do, kiss ass, do my homework. I mean, I was taking a

couple AP classes and a couple honors classes. I mean, I had never taken these kind of classes before, but I was like screw it. It looks good and I am doing what I am doing.”

Jennifer’s situation was a little different. Considering her 3.88 GPA, I was surprised to hear that she dropped out. When I inquired as to why she would make that decision, 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. While she did earn her GED, I could hear regret in her voice when she talked about going back.

Challenges to college enrollment.

Several foster youth, interested in pursuing post-secondary education, recounted barriers during the application, the financial aid process, and also after they were enrolled. For many, the first barrier was faced during the completion of the Free Application For Student Aid (FAFSA) application. One question on the application asks if the applicant is or was a ward of the court. For applicants who check the box, the federal government would follow-up. Emily said, “They do these random checks to see if those who check the box that they are a ward of the State or if their parent was deceased. Well, it just so happens that $\frac{3}{4}$ of those kids who are getting “random checks” are foster kids.” The applicant, in this case foster youth or former foster youth, would have to contact DHS to have proof of their claim sent in. Applicants who were 18, or who just recently aged-out or who were still in care, knew they needed to contact their caseworker. Those who had aged out no longer had a caseworker and therefore had to find someone in the state system who could assist them. Emily said, “You have to have

proof of being a ward of the court for financial aid and if you finished foster care and you have been on your own and now you want to go on to college...who are you supposed to ask for that paperwork? They are supposed to give it to you when you age out, your social security card, your birth certificate, and a few other things. But if you lose it, it is really hard to get them back.” This delay in receiving financial aid is a serious issue for foster youth. Without the money they need, they are not able to purchase required textbooks, even though classes have started. Emily said, “They hold up your financial aid up to three months even after you turned in all of your forms. Things like that are really hard because you can’t be like, ‘hey parents, can I borrow \$200?’”

As Emily stated, this barrier was not just limited to the FAFSA, but to important documents such as social security cards, birth certificates, and immunization records.

Samantha had a difficult time with her social security card. She said:

I had an issue with my social security card. I went to the office and it said that my card had gotten taken out six times and somewhere in the midst of it being taken out so many times, and I am sure it was when I was moving foster homes and they would lose it, so God knows who all knows my ID. But in the process of it being taken it out one time, they misspelled my middle name. So, my social security card had a problem with my name so that was why I was having trouble getting scholarships. Even with my FAFSA they were like it didn’t go through. So, I had to go fix that.

Both Emily and Samantha shared challenges with immunization records. Emily said, “When I was filling out my paperwork for [MSU], they asked for your immunizations. That was really hard for me to get because I had lived in [Louisiana]

when I got the first ones, obviously.” Samantha was able to enroll but said, “I actually got my grades held this term because I have not turned in my immunizations.”

Disempowerment.

Throughout the interviews, I repeatedly heard stories in which foster youth were disempowered, marginalized, and silenced. The youth experienced trauma and abuse but no one was listening. You could hear the outrage in their voice as they shared their stories.

Tanya was sexually abused in multiple placements, yet her caseworker did not act to protect her. Tanya said, “I kept saying this is happening, and this is happening. You need to do something. My caseworker wouldn’t move me, or she wouldn’t be the one to initiate the move. It would be me telling other caseworkers that she worked with and they would tell her to move me.”

For Emily, even when the abuse was documented with photos, it still took a year and a half for her to be removed from the home of her aunt. She said, “They [the police] were at the house all the time for domestic violence. Like my uncle would run her over with the car and yell at her. The cops were always over there. There were like three different investigations going on at once, yet they still didn’t take me away.” Even with photos and a fractured cheekbone, there appeared to be no consequences for her aunt. Emily said,

After I got taken away, no one told me how to press charges or anything and she never got in trouble for it. She still has her day care even after she had committed child abuse in front of the kids. It wasn’t until a few months ago that she went to jail for it. They told her that unless she got in trouble again, she wouldn’t get in

trouble for what she did. But then they found her with weed, so they decided to press charges on her for what she did to me, but only because she had weed. So, I am like, oh, weed is more important than children?

Andrew also had visible bruises when he arrived at school. However, his mother was quite convincing when she would talk to his teachers. Andrew said, “My mom would lie to my teachers and they would believe her. One day I walked into school with a black eye and a broken hand. She had shoved me against a wall and started pushing me trying to get me out the door. She called the cops on me and I, um, they didn’t do anything about it. They saw the bruises and sent me to the hospital and charged her.”

Many participants shared stories of desperation. They felt they had no voice, no advocate, and 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. Samantha said, “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 can not 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.” As Byron was being shuffled from home to home, Jason was in a group home with people who seemed to not care. Byron said this of his experience: “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.”

Support for Academic Achievement

Academic support is defined as “a source of help in achieving post-high-school and work goals” (Kenny et al., 2007, p.340). As stated above, there were three main support themes that emerged: a. foster care system, b. school, c. empowerment.

Foster care system.

The majority of the participants viewed the foster care system as a potential support. The foster care system was found to be both a support and a barrier, depending upon the quality of the placement. Participants who had both positive and negative

placements were able to reflect on what made a particular home a positive placement for them. Samantha moved after eight years in one placement because DHS closed the home. She shared, “I kind of took them for granted. I kind of learned that no matter how I acted out or how I would be or how much I told them I hated them or didn’t want to live there, they would always be there. They didn’t move me and they didn’t leave me so I guess I always thought that was the norm.” After moving regularly over the next few years, and evaluating her experience in other placements, she added, “It was really the only family that that never gave up or was like ‘Oh my God, you are out of control and you have ADHD and you are depressed all the time, and go away.’”

A number of participants shared that they had one foster parent who they call “Mom” or “Dad.” Given the difficulty with trust that the participants shared, this was significant. Andrew, who experienced 65 placements said, “My foster parent, I call him ‘Dad’ now.” Byron similarly shared, “She loves me. She is the one I call ‘Mom.’” Dianna, like Andrew and Byron continues to have a relationship with her foster mom. She said, “That’s my mom, you know. I see her, I work for her, I take care of her. I seen her today. She was happy to see me. See is always happy to see me. She is like 61 now. She had me for a long time. I am her daughter now.”

In addition to feeling love and support, several participants shared specific things that their foster parent did that they believed supported them academically. Dianna lived in a home that valued education. She shared, “My foster mom, they pushed me in education. If you live with someone who has a desire to do good in school, you will do good in school.” For Wendy, she found an advocate in her foster parent when she needed it the most. She said, “They fought hard for a transport for me to go to school, otherwise

I would have had to stay at [River View High]. I knew if I stayed I would not be able to graduate. My caseworker told me that no matter what school I went to, I would not graduate. I only needed a few credits.” Tanya, Samantha and Jennifer all pointed to specific requirements in their home that helped boost them academically. A home Tanya was placed in emphasized reading. She said, “I always read for like 30 minutes because it was required in my foster home.” With Samantha, it was enrichment. She said, “Even when we didn’t have homework, they would give us worksheets after school and we, all of us girls, had to sit down and read for 30 minutes a night, no matter what.” Jennifer found success when her foster parent created a daily schedule. She said, “Homework time, 1-3 hours every day. You have to have a set time every day, then do chores. This is how it was at [Molly]’s house and that is how I got to keep my 4.0.”

Two of the participants shared the support they received for extracurricular activities that were very important to them. Roberto had an opportunity to go overseas with his high school classmates and teacher. His foster parents advocated for this to happen for him. He said, “I wouldn’t have gone to Europe had my foster parents not pushed for it because there are all of those restrictions on kids leaving the country. But they were like, he is doing what he needs to do, he is going above and beyond in high school, this is his chance.” Tanya loves to sing, so participating in choir was an important activity to her. She related, “I was always in choir, so they (foster parents) always attended every choir concert I went to. It was kind of sweet to know they were willing to help and showing support.”

Support from the Department of Human Services.

Five of 11 participants pointed to support from the Department of Human Services as reason they were able to pursue post-secondary education. This help centered around Independent Living Program (ILP) workers. For Emily, her ILP worker is a mentor. She said, "...my ILP worker...has actually been that instead of teaching me things, she helps me. So, when things go wrong, I call her, or when I don't understand something, I call her. She has been more of a mentor or supportive adult, which I don't have any." Byron received some assistance from ILP, but was optimistically cautious. He said, "If you are already a determined person, then yeah, it is going to help out a bit, but ILP needs to be more extensive. Like most kids are just incapable of making it once they get out of care, even going through ILP. Most kids I know went through ILP and can't make it by themselves." Jason, however, received significant help and support, opening up doors to college. He said, "I met with my ILP worker and she was asking me what my goals were after I got my GED and I was like, I don't know, I could look for work, go to college. She was like, 'You want to go to college?'" and I was like 'sure.' So she says 'Well, if you are going to college, we need to fill out your FAFSA.'" Jennifer is struggling with a career goal. She shared her apprehensions with her ILP worker during a routine meeting: "I met with my ILP worker and I made my goals. I just talked to my ILP worker about job shadowing and she is going to hook me up with that."

Supportive adults in their life.

The importance of supportive adults in the lives of youth cannot be overstated. Each participant shared they had at least one person in their life that they could count on. These adults entered their lives in different ways. For Tanya, a foster care advocate and

her church family are people she can count on. After meeting with the foster care advocate, Tanya said, “[Patricia] got me moved from my placement because she heard how horrible it was and got that foster home shut down. That foster home was so horrible.” Her church family has also been there for her. “At my church, they keep pushing me to go to college, I hate getting pushed into doing something, but they are pushing in a gentle way. I have had my church help me and be a supportive relationship for me.” Byron met [Nick], a man who made a big difference in his life, after receiving his sentence to a juvenile detention center. He said, “I had a counselor while I was in jail, [Nick]. He actually helped me a lot. He helped me feel good about myself. He got me to stop talking down to myself all the time. You know, like he just let me see myself for who I truly was not for all the shit I had suffered.” After his release, Byron returned to the foster home he was living in prior to being sentenced. He built strong relationships with the other boys living in the home. He calls them his brothers. Byron said, “We all have that same look in the eye, like we all, like there is an unspoken understanding between us like, we all understand that everyone sitting in the room has gone through some shit and are still here and like, that is why I was like instant acceptance by those guys.”

Roberto and Andrew both had consistency in their judge and caseworker for many years. Both talked about the support they received from these two important people in their life. Roberto, reflecting back to his high school graduation, shared, “She [his caseworker] hugged me and was like so proud of me because I was able to do this. It was really because of her and my judge, my attorney, my skills trainer, everybody who was there for me.” Roberto continued, “I wouldn’t have all that if I didn’t have people who

wanted me to succeed. It was a big collaboration. It wasn't just one person going through high school. I felt like there were 100 people pushing me through. That is how I did it."

School.

For several participants, school was not just a place they were required to go, it was an escape from their home. For participants in the home of their biological family, or in the home of a foster parent, former and current foster youth found school to be a safe haven from their homes. Tanya shared, "I loved school. I found it as an escape from my foster parents. I just felt safer at school than at foster homes." Roberto said, "School was my place to go that was my real family. I could go there and people did not know what was going on at home, really." Samantha echoed these feelings saying, "I always liked school. It came easy to me and I always saw school as my way out of being...I really didn't like being in my foster home, so I loved going to school and hanging out with my friends after school." Tessa found school to benefit her and allow her to escape. She said, "I figured out that I could focus more of my energies on school, it was going to better me. So, going to school and not getting into fights was better than being sent home. I just didn't like being at home."

Reflecting in general on their experience with school while in foster care, four participants shared a common theme; school was the vehicle to gaining control over their life. Samantha said, "Even if I was at a school I didn't like, school was really the only aspect of my life I had any control over. I could choose to skip class and get bad grades or hang out with bad friends, or I could choose to get good grades and graduate and go on to college." She continued with, "School, growing up, was the way that I was going to determine my future." Byron, Roberto, Tessa, and Dianna shared this same sentiment.

Byron said, "I always wanted an education. I pride myself on being intelligent. I believe knowledge and education is something that no one can take away from you." Roberto equated education to a future. "School was really important to me. I wanted to go to college. I wanted to have a good future." Tessa said, "I really learned to like schooling and to focus on my education. The way I think about it is that it is the only thing that I am going to have left, the only thing that I am going to own. So, depending on where I want to live, or how I want to live later on is dependent on the education I get now."

Dianna clearly remembered a speaker at her school during her freshman year. Dianna said, "That is the one thing that he said. These next four years will determine how your life will be. If you do good in school and go on to college or not, will determine the quality of the life you want for the rest of your life. That is what urged me to do good in school."

This attitude was not just in relation to high school, but was also reflected in their motivation to go to college. Emily said, "Probably why I do so well in school and am so motivated is that all my aunts and uncles have drug problems or are incarcerated and now it is all my cousins and like everybody's siblings went down that path. So, it is like well, I will be the first one. I just didn't want to be with them." Roberto also shared his hope for a better future. "I wanted to go to college. I wanted to have a good future. And above all, I wanted to be rich. I wanted to be rich. I wanted to have objects. I wanted to be able to provide for myself. I also wanted a family. I know I was starting early with those thoughts, but I wanted to be able to provide for a family." Jason was motivated to make up for his GED. He said, "I only have a GED and don't have a diploma, so I felt that I was behind in that way and that the way I was going to make up for it was that I

was starting college in what would have been my senior year.” He went on to share, “I am going to college because I am interested. The money is secondary kinda. I would like to make a living wage and maybe more to be a little comfortable, because I have lived with so little my whole life.” The hope of a better future also is what motivated Jennifer. She said, “I don’t want to be poor. I want to have a good life. Then when I do have more kids, I want them to have a house that is secure and safe. I want them to have a good childhood and I want them to go to a good school and not in the poor side of town.”

Teachers who cared.

The majority of participants were able to identify one teacher who they felt supported them. Three participants, however, spoke passionately about a teacher and how much that person meant to them. Byron said, “The teachers that understood that I was a great student and like I had issues and the guys that understood that, I remember them all.” He added, “Having those teachers who can look past my bullshit and be like ‘Hey, what is going on? You know I am here for you if you need to talk.’ meant a lot.” One teacher in particular was [Mr. Martin]: “I used to go back and give [Mr. Martin] a card every year. Then he retired. He never forgot me.” Andrew expressed similar feelings for a middle school teacher. He said, “I went back there last week and said hello to my middle school teacher. He asked me how I was doing and I said straight up, ‘You were a really great teacher. You didn’t get mad. You showed me step by step how to do my math and if I messed up you showed me again until I got it right.’” Dianna had two teachers who impacted her. The first was an elementary school teacher, [Miss Johnson]. She said, “[Miss Johnson]. I will never forget her. I wish I could just call and thank her,

but I don't know where she is at. Man, she was a good teacher." The second was her high school English teacher. It is interesting to note that Dianna failed her class. She shared, "Even though I failed her class, she challenged me, so that when I did graduate, I was challenged and knew stuff already. Just because I failed didn't mean I didn't learn. I mean, it just means that I didn't pass." Dianna recently wrote to her, thanking her for challenging her and letting her know that she has been successful in community college because of her class.

Dianna credits the strong leadership at the high school she attended for four years for her academic success. She said, "I love [Jackson]. Those teachers, they want to teach those kids. Whoever they hire at that school, they care about kids. If your butt is acting up, they are not going to deal with that here. You are going to act right and be successful." This focus on academics and eliminating the distractions that can come from behavioral issues helped Dianna be successful.

Help, Support and/or Strategies Used.

Support from high school programs / personnel.

Several participants utilized the resources in their high school when it came time to fill out college applications, write application essays and look for scholarships. Tanya and Roberto found the ASPIRE program in their high school to be very helpful. Tanya said, "My sister wasn't there to help me for the first time and my case worker wasn't there because they are overburdened with too many cases. So, I talked to the ASPIRE person because we had ASPIRE in our high school. I was like, I know you don't know anything about foster care, but I need help filling out these forms." Roberto said, "I also did ASPIRE, which really helped me find scholarships."

While finding the scholarships was very helpful, many require essays. Tonya sought the help of her English teacher to assist her with editing her essay. She had never shared her story with a teacher before. Tonya said, “I gave it to my English teacher. I was like, this might scare you a little bit to help me with this but here, could you help me?” I ended up staying with her until like 5:00. She was like balling within the first 5 minutes and I was like maybe she is the wrong person to be asking to help me. But she ended up helping me edit them. I loved her for helping me with that.”

High school guidance counselors were also credited with crucial support. Samantha said, “When I was trying to apply for colleges and I was trying to apply for scholarships and trying to get it all together, DHS was like even though I was in an Independent Living Program, they kept switching my worker so I couldn’t count on them and then I had my foster parents, but your parents only know so much. My counselor held it together. She helped me choose schools, apply to schools and get deadlines met.” When asked about support from his high school, Roberto immediately said, “Guidance counselors. They are the biggest ones, especially for foster youth. She worked with me all three years.”

Support from the Department of Human Services.

Tanya credits her ability to stay in school and graduate to the support she received from DHS. She said, “Most age out because they can’t stand it anymore, but you can tell your case worker, ‘I want to stay in until I am 21,’ to receive more help and support. That is what I asked for. Had I aged out when I was 18, I would have been homeless for the last two months of high school. So, I would not have been able to finish high school let alone go on to college.” Emily also worked with her caseworker to receive the support

she needed to attend her high school. Emily approached her caseworker advocating to be able to attend high school with the friends she made in middle school. Looking for consistency and support from her peers, she took on a difficult schedule to receive this support. Emily shared, “When I decided to go to [Washington], which is the high school I would have gone to and where all my friends were, I would have had to get up at 5:00 am and ride the city bus all the way back. A lot of kids don’t get to keep the same schools. I did, because I rode the bus.”

Self-Advocacy.

The third and final support the participants shared was that of empowerment through self-advocacy. While each participant approached this differently, each felt empowered to advocate for themselves with teachers and caseworkers, and found they received support in return. Jennifer said she really needed consistent feedback from her teachers. She set-up weekly meetings with her teachers and sought daily feedback. She said, “When I was in school, I would just go to the teacher to say, ‘Is this right?’ and they would say, ‘Okay,’ to get feedback. It just feels good to have someone say you are doing good, keep the good work up, you know. Keeps you motivated.” She went on to share, “I met with a teacher once a week and I would say ‘Hey, how am I doing and what can I improve on?’ I felt like I needed it to keep going.”

Andrew knew his own learning style and how to work with his ADHD. He believed that sharing this information with his teachers would help them understand him better and allow him to receive the support he needed. He said, “I spoke with my teacher at high school and told her about my situation and how I work and stuff. Like I have to take a piece at a time with homework and she understood that. That was really nice.”

Andrew also shared his determination and drive to succeed. He said, “I don’t back down. I know what I want and I go after it. I keep myself focused on the objective. I don’t think about the other stuff. I get my homework done. If I need help, I ask for it.” Samantha did the same. She said, “I think it was easier to just say to the teachers, ‘Hey, I have this situation at home and I am in foster care and I might need your help and or support catching up.’”

Conclusion

The 11 participants shared their stories, their experiences, and their perceptions of barriers, supports, and help, support, tools, or strategies they used to achieve academic success while in foster care. While each story was unique, themes were identified across all participants. Some of these themes were perceived barriers, some perceived supports, and others were inner strength. It was interesting to discover that school, and the foster care system could be either a barrier or a support depending on the placement, the school personnel, or the caseworker. This discovery, as well as a discussion of these themes, follows in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Utilizing hermeneutic phenomenological research methods, this study considered three specific research questions:

1. What do former foster youth perceive as the barriers and supports that contributed to their academic success and college enrollment?
2. What are the perceived barriers and supports that college-enrolled former foster youth experienced in their K-12 education?
3. What help, support, tools, or strategies did college-enrolled former foster youth use to overcome these barriers?

Each of these questions will be answered through the barriers, supports and inner strengths shared by the participants.

Barriers to academic achievement

The literature points to specific themes as barriers to academic achievement in foster youth. I have found these themes to indeed be barriers. However, studies that identified the themes as barriers did not explore the root causes of these barriers. These causes will be explained in detail through my discussion of anger, abuse and disempowerment,

Anger.

During each interview, participants would share events in their past that were particularly difficult for them. For a few participants, their reflections would include doing well academically until a specific grade, or their middle school years as particularly difficult. As we explored the reasons for these difficulties, each participant concluded that the cause was anger. This anger resulted in 3 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 again, the literature was not exploring the underlying cause resulting in 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 my 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. Jason shared, "My parents are complete deadbeats who left me to rot in foster care." Ben said, "Back then, they would probably say I was the angriest child they ever came across." This anger, coupled with an IEP for emotional/behavioral issues resulted in a restrictive learning environment for Dianna.

Dianna 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. She said, "I was embarrassed to be in there. I did not need

special ed. I wasn't getting taught and I like to learn." Once mainstreamed, she was often returned to a special education classroom due to her poor behavior in class. At one point, Dianna said she stomped on a girls face, and was sent to a residential treatment center. When asked why she did this, she said, "I really don't remember."

It is clear that foster children are overrepresented in the special education population. Zetlin (2006), found that one-third to one-half of foster children are identified for special education, versus 10% to 11.4% of the general school population (McLeskey, Rosenberg & Westing, 2010; Zetlin, 2006). Of my 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 foster children had an IEP for emotional/behavioral issues. This statistic was consistent with my findings.

Now that we know foster children are overrepresented in special education, and that it can be attributed to anger, we can peel back another layer to explore the cause of this anger. The foster youth in my study attributed this anger to abuse in their foster home placements and to feeling disempowered.

Abuse.

While the literature talks about the abuse foster children experience resulting in their placement in foster care, little, if any attention is given to abuse occurring in the foster care system. My study revealed that abuse in the foster care system is rampant. Of the eleven participants in this study, six were abused physically, sexually, or both, while in foster care. This abuse happened in the homes of relatives approved for care, non-relative foster care, residential treatment centers, and secure lock-down facilities. For

three participants, the abuse was not limited to one foster home, but occurred in multiple placements.

The abuse that was occurring in the homes was identified as a catalyst for the anger they described. This abuse had catastrophic effects on the victims. Roberto, who was sexually abused in several placements, described his personality transformation. He said, "I went from being a very rambunctious person to a very quiet person and then an angry person." After being abused in several homes, Roberto began self-mutilation through cutting, resulting in a residential treatment program. Andrew was placed in treatment to learn how to manage his anger. Over and over again, participants shared their experiences of abuse in foster care and the trauma and emotional fall-out that occurred as a result. It is not surprising, then, that these participants were filled with anger and rage. Anger, however, was only one symptom of the abuse; disempowerment and loss of trust also followed.

Disempowerment.

As the participants moved through the foster care system, several voiced a significant loss in trust due to their experiences. As shared earlier, Samantha had a positive placement that lasted for eight years, until the Department of Human Services made the decision to close this placement. The move from this home was devastating for Samantha. She explained that she felt 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 are like, how long is this one going to last? So, I never really cared about making relationships with a lot of my foster families." Ben's distrust of people is attributed to his experiences while in care. Ben described 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 and felt betrayed by his foster parents. 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.”

While in the foster care system, the participants recounted experiences in which they were disempowered, marginalized and silenced. Without a voice to speak into the decision making process that directly impacted their lives, they felt powerless. Andrew came to school with visible bruises, but his mother would convince the teachers there was no wrongdoing on her part. Samantha was moved from home to home when foster parents gave up on her. Byron and Jason both had placements in which the foster parents made them feel worthless. Disempowerment led to despair for one participant. Jason said, “It is pretty hard to have hope when you are living in foster care and have nothing to look forward to. Why would you do good in school? It’s not going to affect your home life. Still living in a foster home, still have to deal with foster parents or group home staff.”

In each situation, the foster youth were moved through the system without a voice. This loss of voice and their powerlessness contributed to their anger. This, in turn, led to high mobility.

High Mobility as symptom of anger, abuse and disempowerment.

High mobility as a barrier to the academic achievement of foster youth is well-documented in the literature. 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, as well as transitional barriers to a new school or a new

environment. All of these barriers were consistent with my participants' experience. Ben said, "I wasn't doing well in school because I was moving around so much that I never really had anything consistent." Samantha was a half-credit short because a math course did not transfer. Like anger, however, high mobility is a symptom of a greater problem.

Pecora et al. (2005) found 32.3% of participants experienced eight or more placements over the course of their time in care. 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). These findings by Pecora et al.(2005) were found to be low compared to the experience of my participants. I found that 8 of the 11 participants experienced eight or more placements during their time in the foster care system. This is more than twice the percentage found by Pecora et al. (2005). What the literature does not address are the reasons for the high mobility in foster youth. One reason is transition. A transition was found to be particularly challenging when the foster youth was stepping down from a more secure treatment center to a less restrictive placement.

The literature did not address the difficulty in transition from treatment homes, lock-down facilities, or residential facilities to public school or another traditional academic setting. However, two of my participants struggled to acclimate to a public school after being in an isolated environment for an extended period of time. Andrew had not been in a traditional school setting for over a year. When he entered high school, he said, "I didn't know where to go or what classes to do." Roberto had a similar experience. After spending almost two years in a residential treatment facility, he found

himself enrolled in a large public high school. It was two years since he had interacted with the public. He expressed feeling overwhelmed with the decisions he had to make regarding his course schedule and in learning to interact with other students, who were very different from those he spent the last two years with.

Jennifer experienced another reason for high mobility; she consistently ran away, resulting in multiple 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.

Transitional barriers and running away are, again, all symptomatic of a larger underlying issue. Foster youth are angry. They are angry because they are being abused and disempowered while in foster care. Therefore, their anger manifests in ways that result in consistent movement from traditional foster care placements to more secure treatment centers and homes. High mobility is a problem, but unless we address the abuse that is occurring and the fact that the foster youth feel powerless to escape from it, high mobility will continue to be a barrier to academic achievement.

Systemic barriers.

Participants, who successfully overcame barriers to achieving high school graduation or earning their GED, were frustrated to learn that the barriers did not stop there. Barriers were found during the college application process, financial aid application process, and in providing proof of immunizations. Samantha had challenges due to a social security error in which her middle name was misspelled. This held up her FAFSA application, putting her funding in jeopardy. It also delayed her applications for

scholarships because her name and the one on her social security card did not match. In addition, Emily and Samantha faced difficulty in obtaining their immunization record, a required document for college enrollment. Once foster youth have aged out of the foster care system, all documentation is to be transferred to the youth. However, if those documents are subsequently misplaced, it is difficult to replace them. Those who had aged out no longer had a caseworker and therefore had to find someone in the state system who could assist them.

Support to academic achievement

The 11 participants identified the following as the individuals who supported them: teachers, foster parents, counselors, church community members, Independent Living Program workers, and caseworkers and judges. This support was credited, by the participants, as a way in which they were able to overcome substantial barriers and become academically successful.

People who cared.

Teachers.

School was not just a place foster youth were required to go, it was an escape from their home and hope for a future. While some, like Tanya, said, “I just felt safer at school than at foster homes,” others like Roberto found support. He said, “School was my place to go that was my real family.” This sense of family was due in large part to the support given by teachers. The majority of participants were able to identify one teacher who they felt supported them.

Andrew, struggling with anger, was often in trouble at school. One teacher reached out to him and taught him life-long lessons. Andrew said, “She [art teacher] was my favorite teacher. She taught me how to deal with my anger through drawing. So

visual arts is what I do to keep my anger under control.” Dianna also found one teacher who impacted her performance in college. Dianna said, “That lady challenged me and I wrote to her my freshman year in college for challenging me. Like I am doing good in my writing and I did it because you challenged me. Even though I failed her class, she challenged me.” Dianna went on to share an important lesson she learned. She said, “Just because I failed didn’t mean I didn’t learn, I mean, it just means that I didn’t pass.”

Tessa received support from teachers when she was admitted to a residential treatment center. She said, “When I went to residential care is when I found out that teachers really do care about us getting an education. I feel like people are out there and like before I felt that they didn’t care.” Three participants have gone back to those teachers to thank them for the support they gave.

Support from teachers, administrators, and/or school counselors was found to be significant in the study of Merdinger et al. (2005). Most notably, Merdinger et al. (2005) found that former foster youth remembered these influential teachers by name and how they went out of their way to advocate for, or intervene on behalf of the foster student. This was consistent with my findings.

Foster parents.

Of the 11 participants, 10 indicated their last foster placement or group home was where they found the greatest source of support. Comments like “She loves me, she is the one I call ‘Mom,’” by Byron encapsulate the love and gratitude the foster youth have for a foster parent. Roberto shared, “They helped me more than any other foster parent because they believed in me and they pushed me.” Dianna said, “My foster mom, they pushed me in education. That is the reason why. You see I was there most of the time, so

that is the reason why I was able to do stuff because we had to do good in school because I was going to get stuck or get taken away if I got bad grades in school.”

Counselors.

The participants pointed to these mentors as the main reason they were able to achieve academically and go on to college. Roberto experienced this first-hand when he entered a treatment home after he was found to be involved in self-injury.. He said, “When I was in the treatment home that I said, ‘This is what happened to me. This is what went down.’ They were up in arms. They were there for me.” This was the first time Roberto was able to share the abuse he had endured at the hands of a foster parent. Roberto went on to say, “I learned the true meaning of family and friendship isn’t just having a mom and dad or having someone to talk to. It is having connections with people and being able to interact with people at a different level.”

Community support.

Roberto was quick to point out that he had a large support network in the community. Reflecting on his ability to graduate, he said, “It was really because of her [caseworker], and my judge, my attorney, my skills trainer, everybody who was there for me.” The consistency of the same caseworker for a number of years, as well as the same judge, provided stability and that contributed to his success. Tonya also has a large support network. She pointed to church members and friends as those who have supported her and who continue to be a source of support. Emily, Jason and Jennifer also credit their Independent Living Program worker as being a supportive adult in their lives. In addition to helping with various forms and applications, the ILP workers were also available to mentor the foster youth when needed.

Hass & Graydon (2009) conducted research on potential sources of resiliency in foster youth identified as successful. When asked where they received most of the help or support in their lives, 84% indicated that an individual or individuals were responsible for helping them the most. These individuals were identified as mentors in the community by 66% of the participants (Hass & Graydon, 2009). Similarly, 11 of the 24 in Rios' (2008) study credited foster parents as the reason for their academic success. The findings by Hass & Graydon (2009) and Rios (2008) were consistent with my results. Each of the 11 participants was able to identify at least one person who was instrumental in their academic success.

Systemic supports.

Foster care system.

Each of the participants was able to point to a positive placement that had an impact on their life. In addition, two participants had the same caseworker throughout their foster care experience. These same two also have had the same judge since they entered care. This consistency was considered a support to the foster youth.

While in a traditional foster care placement, several participants found love and support from foster parents. Many participants shared that this is the person they now call "Mom" or "Dad". These relationships continue, even when the placement ended. Former foster parents are still in consistent contact and are credited with supporting the participants. One such example is in finding housing for Samantha. Samantha found that her university would be closed during the Christmas holiday, making it necessary for her to find alternative housing. Her former foster parent arranged for her to stay with friends.

In addition to feeling loved, several foster parents also supported the participants academically. Dianna lived in a home that valued education. She shared, "My foster

mom, they pushed me in education. If you live with someone who has a desire to do good in school, you will do good in school.” Wendy found an advocate in her foster parent when she needed it the most. She said, “They fought hard for a transport for me to go to school.” Transport to the new school allowed her to finish her credits and graduate. Tanya, Samantha and Jennifer all pointed to specific requirements in their home that helped boost them academically. A home Tanya was placed in emphasized reading. She said, “I always read for like 30 minutes because it was required in my foster home.” With Samantha, it was enrichment. She said, “Even when we didn’t have homework, they would give us worksheets after school and we, all of us girls, had to sit down and read for 30 minutes a night, no matter what.” Jennifer found success when her foster parent created a daily schedule that included one to three hours of homework every night.

Extra-curricular activities were also supported. Roberto had an opportunity to go overseas with his high school classmates and teacher. His foster parents advocated for this to happen for him. He said, “I wouldn’t have gone to Europe had my foster parents not pushed for it because there are all of those restrictions on kids leaving the country.” Tanya loves to sing, and was involved in school choir for a number of years. “They [foster parents] always attended every choir concert I went to.”

Independent Living Program.

Five of 11 participants pointed to help received from the Independent Living Program (ILP). Jason received significant help and support from his ILP worker, opening up doors to college. After letting his ILP worker know he was interested in pursuing post-secondary education; he received assistance filling out the FAFSA form, and received financial support allowing him to focus on his education. Jennifer,

struggling with a career goal, met with her ILP worker. While discussing her goals, Jennifer shared her desire to work in the health care field. Her ILP worker committed to setting up a job shadow for her so she could experience these careers before enrolling in a specific college program. Emily has found her ILP worker to be a supportive adult, referring to her as a “mentor” in her life, helping her navigate through challenges as they arise.

Inner strength

As the participants shared their troubling experiences with foster care, two specific themes emerged for the majority of the participants. These were determination and hope. Speaking of where they were currently in their life and what they had accomplished, the participants looked to the future and what they hoped that would look like. This future included post-secondary education as a way to step outside of the life they had led.

Roberto saw education as the key to a better future. Roberto said, “I wanted to go to college. I wanted a good future.” Byron said, “I believe knowledge and education is something that no one can take away from you.” Jennifer said, “I don’t want to be poor. I want to have a good life.” Andrew focused on academic success through determination. He said, “I don’t back down. I know what I want and I go after it. I keep myself focused on the objective.” Achieving a solid education was the vehicle to assert control over their lives and gain voice in what their future could look like. Pursuing post-secondary education provided hope for a future in stark contrast to their past. .

Implications

The findings from this study have implications for two specific areas, the Department of Human Services and the educational system. The previous research in this area has been focused on the symptoms, not the problem. Dramatic changes need to be made in the Department of Human Services and the educational system to address this marginalized population.

Department of Human Services.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) has failed foster youth in three specific areas: abuse in foster care placements, disempowerment through loss of voice, and poor academic achievement on the part of their clients.

DHS needs to identify and remove abuse from the foster care system. This must be the first priority. If foster care is not a safe environment for foster youth, educational improvement will be a difficult challenge, at best. After learning that 8 of my 11 participants were abused in one or more foster care placements, it is clear that attention is warranted to those whom the Department of Human Services certifies as foster parents. In addition, the participants shared that the abuse had continued for a while, yet there was no indication from the participants that their caseworker ever visited or asked questions that could have led to this discovery. In the majority of cases, it was someone outside the foster care system that uncovered the abuse and reported it. What I found to be reprehensible was the case of Emily, who had to fight for 18 months before she was removed from the home of her aunt, even when the police and caseworker saw, and documented, her bruises. It wasn't until Emily suffered a broken cheekbone that

something was done. Without holding DHS accountable for the foster parents they certify, abuse will continue.

Secondly, DHS needs to give foster children a voice in their future. DHS workers must be trained to address the anger in children and get to the root of the problem. If a child has moved to multiple placements, DHS must investigate and learn why the child is acting out. Additionally, children and youth must have a voice in their placement decisions, when age appropriate.

Thirdly, DHS must be accountable for the educational performance of foster youth in their care. If the system continues to produce dismal results as have been reported, DHS has failed and the system must be changed.

Educational system.

The educational system is the best hope for foster youth. This hope can be realized through training of inservice and preservice teachers in the unique needs of foster children/youth, strategies to help children with IEPs for emotional/behavioral issues, and by encouraging teachers to listen, watch for, and report abuse when appropriate.

The educational system could benefit from a focus on the training of inservice teachers and administrators in the unique needs of foster children. The literature points to a communication disconnect in which the teachers and administrators often do not know a child is in foster care, let alone understand their specific individual needs. I would encourage school districts to invite a representative from their local Department of Human Services county office to speak regularly on the needs of foster children. By

initiating a partnership with the county office, DHS, school districts and teachers can work together to support foster youth.

As a teacher educator, I have realized the need to train new teachers in serving foster children and youth before they reach the classroom. Specifically, information needs to be infused in courses and coursework so that teachers can be better prepared for what they will encounter in their classrooms. Training also needs to include communication with foster parents.

Lastly, teachers report the majority of abuse to DHS. When they see abuse occurring, they must take ownership to make sure the abuse is addressed and stopped. As teachers are the primary persons referring students for special education evaluation, training on the effects of trauma and abuse may be helpful. Appropriate supports and accommodations for children with IEPs for behavior should also be covered. In addition, we need to train teachers in identifying the anger issues in foster youth, and in working with administrators and counselors to make sure there is somebody to listen to these kids and find the cause of the anger. This will also give the children a voice. In my study, teachers were the highest percentage named as someone who gave the foster youth a voice and addressed their needs.

Teachers and the educational system are truly the best hope foster youth have for successfully entering college and becoming successful adults.

Recommendations for Future Research

I would recommend the following for further research. First, I would like to see a study conducted on current and former foster youth who did not go on to pursue post-secondary education. Specifically, I would like learn what prohibited this from

happening. Did they have access to the same resources that those who did go on to college? What barriers can be identified that prohibited them from pursuing post-secondary education? Are the barriers different from those identified in my study of those foster children that were able to go on? What supports did they have available to them? What individual characteristics, such as motivation, inner strength, and determination, can be identified?

The second study I would recommend would look at current and former foster youth who went immediately from high school to a four-year college or university. Again, I am interested to learn the perceived and experienced barriers and supports to learn if those were different from the participants in my study who are enrolled in a community college.

The third study I would recommend would be an exploration of the abuse that is occurring in foster care placements. Specifically, I want to learn how prevalent this is, and if this is a significant reason for the low academic achievement rates for foster youth.

The fourth study would be an evaluation of every student currently in foster care that has an IEP for emotional/behavioral issues. I want to understand the root cause for that IEP and to see if current or previous abuse in a foster care placement is to blame. In addition, I want to determine if abuse is occurring that has not been identified and reported.

Conclusion

Substantial systemic barriers exist in the path to academic success for foster youth. These barriers have been overcome by some, by accessing supports they had at their disposal. However, not all have access to the needed supports to overcome barriers.

The stories of foster youth vary. However, many similarities were discovered. Of these discoveries, the abuse that occurred within the foster care system was shocking. We as a society decide to remove these children from their parents/guardians and have them raised by society. In doing so, we have said that we, as a society, can provide the safety that was not in their home. However, eight of 11 participants experienced abuse in one or more foster care placements, the very homes that we told these children would be safe for them. Society is failing these kids.

The findings in my study were at times consistent with the literature, and in other cases clearly showed that the problem is much larger than originally thought. In addition, the literature gave a general picture of what foster children 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. Foster youth showed resiliency through the support of their community, school, and family. Listening to these experiences and hearing the hope in their voices, I was humbled by their strength.

As a society, we should all be ashamed of our failure to care for foster children. The barriers to a college education for foster youth must be removed from their path and the supports to a college education must be strengthened and expanded. It is only then that the most vulnerable population of students in our classrooms today can stand academically side-by-side with their non-foster peers.

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Appendix A

Guided Interview Questions

Background

What is your name?

How old are you?

Gender?

What race / ethnicity do you identify as?

How long were you in foster care?

Do you have siblings?

If yes, were you placed in foster care together?

What high school or high schools did you attend?

Where did you live during your high school years (in kinship foster care, a group home, a non-relative placement, etc.)?

Were other children living in the home?

Where do you live now?

What college do you attend?

Have you attended other educational institutions since high school?

Which ones?

What year are you in college?*

What are your current and ultimate educational goals?

Do you have a religious preference? If so, how do you identify yourself?

Guided Conversation

What was your experience as a foster child?

What was your experience with education as a foster child?

What situations have typically influenced or affected your academic success as a result of being in foster care?

What advice or suggestions would you like to share with current foster youth?

Appendix B
Letter to Director

September 16, 2011

XXXX
Director, Independent Living Program
State of Oregon Department of Human Services
Salem, OR 97301

RE: Letter of Intent for Doctoral Research Study

My name is Brenda Morton and I am a Doctoral student at George Fox University as well as a faculty member in the School of Education. I am in the process of conducting research for my dissertation this fall semester, 2011. My dissertation topic is focusing on foster youth who have successfully completed high school and are currently enrolled or have plans to enroll in a community college or four-year college or university this fall. By utilizing qualitative interview methods, I hope to gain the perceptions of former foster youth about their K-12 academic experience. To date, there are only two studies in the United States that has focused on the perceptions of foster youth. These include Steven Rios (2008) and Merdinger, Hines, Lemon, and Wyatt (2002).

My specific research questions are:

What do former foster youth perceive as the internal and external factors that contributed to their academic success and college enrollment?

1. What are the perceived internal and external challenges that college enrolled former foster youth experienced in their K-12 education?
2. What help, support, tools, or strategies did college enrolled former foster youth use to overcome these internal and external challenges?

I am interested in conducting qualitative research using interview techniques with participants. The questions will be general and focused on their educational experience. Participants will be sharing information about the events and experiences in the school setting that either supported or created barriers to their academic success. It will be up to the individual participant how much they wish to share. I will be seeking 10-12 participants to interview two times for approximately 1 1/2 to 2 hours at each session. The participants I am seeking include individuals aged 18 or over, not currently in foster care, planning to attend a community college or 4-year college or are currently enrolled in either, and are recipients of the Chafee Education and Training Scholarship. Selected

participants will receive a stipend for their participation. All measures will be taken to maintain confidentiality throughout the research process, all documentation will be kept in a safe and secure location, and no names or identifying information will be shared in the study. Pseudonyms will be used.

Interviews will be conducted in a public setting, to include public library conference room, George Fox University library conference room or their college or university library to allow for privacy for the participant and to maintain confidentiality within the context of a public setting. Interviews will be audio recorded for transcription purposes.

I am requesting an email be forwarded to the potential participants inviting them to participate in the study. Any potential participant will then be given a consent form to read and sign, giving permission to participate in the study. Any identifying information about a participant will be kept confidential. Additionally, I will follow the George Fox University Institutional Review Board (IRB) policies and procedures.

Thank you for considering my request. If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Brenda Morton, Doctoral candidate
George Fox University
Newberg, OR 97132
bmorton@georgefox.edu
XXX-XXX-XXXX home
XXX-XXX-XXXX cell

Appendix C

Letter to Prospective Participants

September 22, 2011

My name is Brenda Morton and I am a doctoral candidate at George Fox University as well as a faculty member in the School of Education. I am in the process of conducting research for my dissertation this fall semester, 2011. My dissertation topic is focusing on foster youth who have successfully completed high school and are currently enrolled or have plans to enroll in a community college or four-year college or university this fall.

I am seeking former foster youth to participate in two interviews. The questions will be general and focused on your educational experience. I will be asking you to share information about the events and experiences within and outside the school setting that either supported or created barriers to your academic success. It will be up to you how much you wish to share.

I am seeking 10-12 participants to interview two times for approximately 2-3 hours total. I am specifically seeking include individuals aged 18 or over, not currently in foster care, planning to attend a community college or 4-year college or university or are currently enrolled in either, and are recipients of the Chafee Education and Training Scholarship. **Participants will receive payment for their participation.** All measures will be taken to maintain confidentiality throughout the research process, all documentation will be kept in a safe and secure location, and no names or identifying information will be shared in the study.

Interviews will be conducted in a public setting, to include public library conference room, George Fox University library conference room or your college or university library to allow for privacy and to maintain confidentiality within the context of a public setting. Interviews will be audio recorded for transcription purposes.

If you are interested, or would like more information, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Brenda Morton
Doctoral candidate, George Fox University
bmorton@georgefox.edu
XXX-XXX-XXXX cell

Appendix D

Participation Consent Form

Study title: Foster youth and post-secondary education: A study of the perceptions of internal and external factors leading to academic achievement

You have volunteered to participate in a research study. The researcher is Brenda Morton, a doctoral student at George Fox University. This study will include 10-12 participants who applied for the Chafee Educational Grant Scholarship for fall, 2011, and are 18 years or older.

You are asked to participate in two face-to face interview sessions, with each session lasting approximately 1 ½ to 2 hours. The interview questions will focus on your perceptions of your K-12 educational experience.

The recollection of past events could be emotional, and therefore, you will have the right to refuse to answer questions that you do not wish to answer. You may also ask to take a break during a session if needed.

The information you share will be kept confidential. Your name will not be shared; pseudonyms will be used to maintain your confidentiality.

If you have questions about this study, you may contact Brenda Morton at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

By signing below, you are agreeing to be interviewed for this study.

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study.

Signature of Participant

Printed Name

Date