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The Power of Community: How Foster Parents, Teachers, and Community Members Support Academic Achievement for Foster Youth

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ABSTRACT

Foster children have been identified as one of the most high-risk groups for academic failure in schools today. However, a small number of foster youth are beating the odds by achieving academically. How are they able to overcome tremendous barriers and succeed? This phenomenological study reports the findings of former foster youth and their P-12 education experience. In-depth interviews are shared, offering a rare glimpse into the challenging lives of foster youth and revealing the supports that contributed to their success. The significance of each support entity identified by the participants must be broadly shared. The support entities are family, school, community, and self-reliance. The insights of the foster youth show how family, teachers, and community can work together to support the academic achievement of foster youth.

KEYWORDS

Advocacy; at-risk students; foster children; high school students; student success

Foster children, a nearly invisible population, have been identified as one of the most high-risk populations of students in classrooms today (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2013). It is precisely this invisibility that produces much of the risk, because teachers and administrators often do not even know that one of their students is in foster care. Because they have been subjected to trauma, abuse, and/or neglect, foster children often manifest unexplainable and negative behavior in the classroom, creating complex challenges for themselves and those charged with their education. Without even the most basic information about these students, teachers and administrators are not equipped to assist the students, either emotionally or academically. If, however, the foster care system, school personnel, and community members can begin communicating about the presence and specific needs of students in foster care, the door can be opened to academic success for this population.

In December 2010, 427 foster youth in Oregon exited the foster care system as a result of reaching age 18 or 21 (H. Schatz, personal communication, February 24, 2011). Applying the findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study (Pecora et al., 2005), it is estimated that of these 427, 240 would earn a high school diploma (Pecora et al., 2005). In addition, the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study (Pecora et al., 2005) found that 28.5% of foster youth earned their graduate equivalency diploma (GED). Of the graduates, those with a traditional diploma and those with a GED, the same study found that 43 foster youth went on to participate in some form of postsecondary education (Pecora et al., 2005).

The importance of a college education in U.S. society is continually emphasized. Yet, for many children who have been in foster care, it appears to be out of reach (Salazar, 2013). Foster youth graduate from high school at substantially lower rates than those of their nonfoster peers. Approximately 50% of all foster children will graduate from high school (Bruskas, 2008). For those who do enroll in postsecondary education, only 3% to 11% of foster alumni complete a bachelor's degree (Casey Family Programs, 2011).

Many studies and articles address the negative outcomes for foster youth (Hass & Graydon, 2009; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Rios, 2008). This study explored a unique population of former foster youth in Oregon, focusing on precisely what experiences helped them overcome tremendous obstacles, achieve academic success, and enroll in postsecondary education. The study focused on answering the following essential research question: What help, tools, or strategies did college-enrolled foster youth use to support their academic goals?

This study is important for two reasons. First, it shares a unique view into the lives of foster youth, providing critical insights about how they overcame barriers to graduate from high school and enroll in postsecondary education. It is critical that these insights be shared broadly so that a network of community can be created to inform and empower those who are in a position to help foster youth toward academic achievement. Second, after a thorough review of the literature, it appears this study is ground-breaking in that it appears to be the first for the state of Oregon and the fourth in the nation to focus on the successful academic achievement of foster youth.

Review of the literature

Foster children and youth experience multiple barriers to academic achievement. 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, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Rios, 2008). Although the experience of each child in care is unique, these children and youth will experience several common challenges as they move through the education system. Among them are academic challenges attributed to abuse, neglect, mobility, over- and under-representation in special education courses and programs, and lack of preparation for the transition from care to independence.

In spite of these barriers to academic success, many foster children aspire to postsecondary education. In their 2003 study, consisting of 262 foster youth, McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, and Thompson (2003) found that 95% of the foster youth studied 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. To make this a reality, however, education and community support is needed. As stated earlier, it is crucial that these two entities engage in information exchange and collaboration to meet the needs of foster youth.

Resiliency as support for academic success

Researchers have found resiliency to be a major characteristic present in foster youth who have achieved academic success (Hass & Graydon, 2009; Hines et al., 2005; Rios, 2008; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Benard (1991, 1993) provides a definition and framework with which to understand and identify resiliency.

Benard (1991) defined *resiliency* as a set of environmental protective factors in the family, schools, and community. The specific categories identified are social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, sense of purpose, and future (Benard, 1991). These categories are further expanded through the lens of family, school, and community. The family factors identified are 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 children who are resilient. Benard (1993) identified these as social ability, capacity to solve problems, independence, and sense of purpose.

Samuels and Pryce (2008) explain Bernard's (1993) ideas about personal strengths through the lens of survivalist self-reliance. They identified three specific interconnected components of survivalist self-reliance: "premature conferral of adult status and independence, growing up without your parents as a developmental task, and survivor pride and disavowing dependence" (p. 1202). They

found that when foster youth are faced with substantial obstacles, they hone their independence and avoid dependence on others because they view dependence as vulnerability. Hines et al. (2005) reported all 14 participants in their study were found to be independent and self-sufficient. However, though they value independence and self-sufficiency, foster youth did credit family as an important support in their lives.

Family support

Hass and Graydon (2009) conducted research focused on the potential sources of resiliency in foster youth who had been identified as academically successful. Youth were identified as successful if they had completed a vocational or postsecondary program, or were in their junior year at a 4-year college or university (Hass & Graydon, 2009). When asked where they received most of the help or support in their lives, 38 of the 45 indicated that an individual or individuals were responsible for helping them the most. Eleven of the 24 in Rios's (2008) study credited foster parents, described as authoritative, as the reason for their academic success. In addition, 14 participants referred to biological relatives as providing support (Rios, 2008).

School support

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. Reflecting on resiliency in his school, principal Martin Krovetz (1999) observed first-hand 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 (Krovetz, 1999).

Teachers and administrators who worked to make a difference were acknowledged in Hines et al. (2005). In their 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) and Merdinger et al. (2005) 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. Foster youth went on to say that they remembered these influential teachers by name and described how they went out of their way to advocate for or intervene on behalf of the foster student. In addition, 55.1% of the 216 participants in the Merdinger et al. (2005) study received some type of college advising while in high school, 65.3% were enrolled in college preparatory courses, and 65.7% participated in extracurricular activities.

Community supports

Two studies, Hass and Graydon (2009) and Rios (2008) found that mentors in the community were identified as important sources of support for successful foster youth. Of the 44 participants in the Hass and Graydon (2009) study, 23 or 63% identified a mentor in the community, and Rios (2008) found that 42% of 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.

The literature, though still sparse on this subject, clearly points to specific supports evident in the lives of academically successful foster youth. With strong research as a foundation, this study sought to contribute to the growing research base and to see whether a hermeneutical phenomenological

study would confirm, contradict, or add to these early findings. To this end, participants were asked a series of questions designed to elicit their view of exactly what helped them succeed academically.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this phenomenological research was to explore the lived experiences of foster youth enrolled in a postsecondary institution upon high school GED or traditional diploma completion. Specifically, the goal was to answer to the following research question: What help, tools, or strategies did college-enrolled foster youth use to support their academic goals?

Method

The lived experiences of 11 participants were explored through in-depth interviews, seeking meaning to gain understanding of the supports that affected their ability to enroll in postsecondary education. Interviews began after approval was obtained from the institutional review board. The interviews utilized open-ended questions; each participant was asked the same questions. They began with background or demographic questions about (1) age, (2) race/ethnicity, (3) religious preference, (4) number of years in foster care, (5) number of placements while in care, (6) reason for move from one foster placement to another, (7) original reason for placement in foster care, (8) number of high schools attended, (9) GED or traditional diploma earned, (10) year in college, (11) current and/or ultimate educational goal, and (12) current postsecondary institution. Questions then moved to a guided conversation around the following three questions: (1) What was your experience as a foster child? (2) What was your experience with education as a foster child? (3) What situations have typically influenced or affected your academic success as a result of being in foster care? All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed to text. Each interview spanned an average of 90 minutes in length.

Context and participants

The study was conducted in the state of Oregon, focusing on current and former foster youth who had graduated from high school, were pursuing a postsecondary 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 (6 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 age 23 years 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. Although 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 being explored (Creswell, 2007). All participants were age 18 years or older, with the oldest participant age

20 years at the time of interview. Soliciting from this participant pool allowed similar characteristics, common experiences, and themes to emerge (Creswell, 2007).

Data collection and analysis

Once all data had been collected, transcribed, and organized, Creswell’s (2007) phenomenological analysis and representation steps were followed. These included (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 the textural and structural descriptions (p. 159).

Following Creswell’s (2007) model, each participant transcript was read and significant statements the participants made about the phenomenon were highlighted. Significant statements were identified as statements mentioned more than one time, statements noted in field notes, and statements deemed important to the participant as identified through voice inflection and emotion. From this process, 89 significant statements were identified. Following the procedure for Creswell’s Step 3, these were sorted into topics or themes. These themes were then organized into four main categories and eight subtheme categories. Each participant was then given a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes. Once this was complete, a draft copy of the findings was sent to each participant for member checking purposes, with minor edits made to the final manuscript based on their feedback.

Findings

Overview of participants

Eleven participants were included in this study. Table 1 provides a visual display of the participants, compiled from the background and demographic interview questions listed above.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Characteristic	Finding
Gender	
Males	5
Females	6
Age at interview	
Mean	19.27 (<i>SD</i> = 1.00)
Race/ethnicity	
African American	2
White	7
Hispanic	2
Reason placed in care	
Abuse and neglect	8
Voluntary	3
Years in care	
Mean years	10.59 (<i>SD</i> = 5.89)
Number of placements	
Mean number	11.15 (<i>SD</i> = 5.49)
High schools attended	
Mean	3.54 (<i>SD</i> = 2.06)
Earned diploma or graduate equivalency diploma (GED)	
Traditional diploma	5
GED	6
Institution attending	
Community college	8
4-year institution	3

Themes

Analysis of significant statements yielded four main themes and eight subthemes. The main themes were family, school, community, and self-reliance. Subthemes were: foster parents, teachers and counselors, high school programs, caseworkers and Independent Living personnel, mentors, inner strength, motivation, and self-advocacy. These main themes and subthemes present the supports in the lives of foster youth that contributed to their academic success.

Family

When acknowledging their family, participants referred to their foster parent(s). Each participant had one foster parent(s) make a significant, positive contribution to his or her life. It is interesting to note that for the majority of participants, this family was the last family or placement assigned.

Supportive foster parents. The majority of the participants viewed the foster care system as a potential support. The foster care system was found to be a support and a barrier, depending upon the quality of the placement. Participants who had positive and negative placements were able to reflect on what made a particular home a positive placement for them. Samantha, who moved after 8 years in one placement, 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 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:

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. She 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." Wendy found an advocate in her foster parent when she needed it the most:

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 homes that helped boost them academically. One 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, "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, "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."

School

For the majority of the participants, school was not just a place they were required to go, it was an escape from their home. Whether 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 an abusive home environment. 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 benefited her and allowed her to escape:

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.

Supportive teachers and counselors. 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:

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 affected 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 4 years for her academic success:

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.

Tonya sought the help of her English teacher to assist her with editing a scholarship essay. She had never shared her story with a teacher before:

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 bawling 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 3 years."

Support from high school programs. 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 caseworker 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."

Two of the participants talked about 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:

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 [her foster parents] always attended every choir concert I went to. It was kind of sweet to know they were willing to help and show support."

Community

Personnel from the Department of Human Services (DHS) were identified as important community members. Specifically, caseworkers and independent living personnel were named as contributing support leading to academic success. In addition, several participants also had a trusted mentor in their life.

Supportive caseworkers and ILP personnel. Tanya credits her ability to stay in school and graduate to the support she received from her caseworker at DHS:

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 2 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.

Five of 11 participants pointed to support from Independent Living Program (ILP) personnel. For Emily, her ILP worker is a mentor:

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:

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, which opened doors to college:

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 struggled 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."

Mentors. The importance of mentors in the lives of youth cannot be overstated. Each participant shared he or she had at least one person in his or her life he or she 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:

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:

We all have that same look in the eye, ... there is an unspoken understanding between us. ... We all understand that everyone sitting in the room has gone through some shit and are still here and ... that is why I [had] instant acceptance by those guys.

Roberto and Andrew had consistency in their judge and caseworker for many years. Both talked about the support they received from these two important people in their lives. 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.

Self-reliance

Each participant faced tremendous challenges, before foster care and while in foster care. However, inner strength contributed to their motivation, resulting in self-advocacy with teachers and caseworkers.

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 postsecondary education as a way to step outside of the life they had led.

Roberto saw education as the key to a better future, saying, “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, “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 postsecondary education provided hope for a future that would be in stark contrast to their past.

Control and motivation. Reflecting in general on their experience with school while in foster care, four participants shared a common theme: school was the vehicle with which they could gain control over their lives. 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:

That is the one thing that he said: “These next 4 years will determine how your life will be. If you do good in school and go on to college or not, [it] 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:

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:

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.

Empowerment through self-advocacy. Participants shared stories of empowerment through self-advocacy. Although each participant approached this differently, each felt empowered to advocate for themselves with teachers and caseworkers, and found they received support in return. This was found through their work with caseworkers and teachers as they empowered themselves to seek support to become academically successful.

Jennifer said she really needed consistent feedback from her teachers. She set up weekly meetings with her teachers and sought daily feedback:

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 attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (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, "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, "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, "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.' "

Discussion

For the 11 participants, one-on-one relationships within family, school, and community were credited with assisting the participants in overcoming significant barriers to academic success. The foster youth pointed to a solid foster placement with a foster parent to whom they connected; a teacher they named as significant to their success; a mentor, caseworker, or Independent Living Coordinator who formed a relationship with them as the reason they were able to beat the odds and become academically successful. These findings align with Benard's (1991, 1993) theory on resilience. This study revealed that family, school, community, and self-reliance were evident in statements made by the majority of participants about their current and future education goals.

Family

Although the participants in this study had numerous foster care placements over the course of their time in care, each had one solid placement that made a significant difference in their life. It is interesting to note that for the majority of participants, their last placement is where this family was found. This is significant, in that this placement occurred during their high school years—a critical academic period, especially for those desiring to continue on to postsecondary institutions. Each found academic support, encouragement, and assistance from these foster parents in everything from after-school activities to college applications. Through their stories, it was clear that their definition of family has expanded to include those outside of biological connections. Statements such as calling their foster mother "Mom" were common. The relationship with foster parent(s) continued even after leaving care, included holiday gatherings, birthday celebrations, random dinners,

and a place to call home. For these 11 participants, a place to consistently look to as “home” afforded them the ability to forge significant relationships while also maintaining their own sense of independence and self-reliance. These relationships contributed to a feeling of security.

School

It was interesting to hear about the security that these participants found within the confines of the school walls. The ability to escape traumatic home life and be a “normal” student was found to be stress relieving. This finding highlights the need for a conversation within the school system about support for students during the summer months and other holidays when schools are closed for extended periods of time. Where will students go to find this security and relief?

The school environment, programs, teachers, and counselors were credited with providing much needed academic and emotional support to foster youth. It was powerful to learn that each of the 11 participants named one teacher in particular who made a difference in their life. This finding was consistent with the findings of Hass and Graydon (2009), Hines et al. (2005), Merdinger et al. (2005), and Rios (2008). One participant shared that he continues to send a birthday card each year to his 4th-grade teacher; the teacher he knows made the phone call to the DHS that ultimately saved his life. Teachers developed relationships with students, which allowed them to affect the lives of this vulnerable group. Their encouragement spurred dreams of college and caused participants to begin believing in their own ability to excel. Although the majority of teachers would see this as their job, the impact of individuals who connect with foster youth must be acknowledged.

Community

The importance of an attentive caseworker was found to be a support to academic success. The shared experience of Roberto, in particular, made this theme clear. For Roberto, there was security in knowing that his caseworker could be relied upon to offer support, advice, and encouragement, allowing him to cross the high school graduation finish line. The ability to stay in care until age 21 was also significant, as it eliminated the possibility of facing homelessness for Tanya as a high school senior. Additionally, Independent Living programs provided participants with access to resources that were absolutely crucial to pursuing postsecondary education. Assistance with transition from care to independence is a gigantic step in the lives of foster youth. Now living on their own, or in a dorm, former foster youth needed help to meet the expectations. Last, mentors from the community played a large role in creating a support network. Individuals outside the foster care system provided an additional perspective and an escape from foster homes that were less than ideal. Each mentor found a way to stand in the gap and provide a voice to foster youth who had found their voice silenced. The example set by the mentors helped develop self-reliance in positive ways, reinforced self-worth, and built confidence.

Self-reliance

The personal strength and determination that participants articulated and demonstrated through their experiences correlates with Bernard’s (1991, 1993) theory of resiliency through a sense of purpose and future. The participants found support from their family, school, and community, but for these 11 participants, the ability to be self-reliant was crucial. Participants shared their need to be strong and independent. These two were often linked. Additionally, participants shared their feelings of love and gratitude for family, teachers, and counselors who helped them develop self-reliance by providing a support network. This finding was consistent with Hines et al. (2005), who found that “individual attributes, including assertiveness, independence, goal orientation, persistence” were just a few of the significant factors in successful foster youth (p. 391). This is also consistent with Samuels and Pryce (2008) who found survivor pride and disavowing dependence as strong dispositions in

foster youth. It is important to point out that disavowing dependence is not a negative trait or negative view toward family, school, or community support; foster youth coveted these relationships as they allowed them to grow.

The findings from this study illuminate the importance of a community of support surrounding foster youth. Although being in or coming from the foster care system creates many barriers, the reflections on their experiences and who they are becoming were surprising. Byron, summing up his experience in the foster care system, said, “Ultimately, I would not change anything because I do like who I am.” Ben, Roberto, Andrew, and Dianna shared this same sense of pride. So, how is it that individuals can endure what these participants did and still find peace with themselves? Samuels and Pryce (2008) point to using this pain to strengthen their self-reliance. This is how they survive.

Conclusion

Although the literature gave a general picture of what foster children are experiencing, the voices of foster youth about their lived experiences provide a unique look behind these topics and statistics, revealing the rest of the story. The findings from this study underscore the importance of one-on-one relationships between foster youth and family, school, and community. Additionally, the information gap that exists between the child welfare system and school personnel must be addressed. Nonfoster peers enter the classroom with some type of support. This can be two people coparenting, a single parent, grandparents, or extended family members who surround the student to support and celebrate academic growth. For foster children and youth, this definition of support must be redefined to include foster parent(s), caseworkers, Independent Living personnel, teachers and counselors, and mentors. To this end, it is crucial that all members embrace this nontraditional definition through communication, invitation, and partnership to ensure that the support needed is in place for the foster child/youth.

The study also revealed the strength and determination of foster youth to overcome trauma, abuse, and neglect, and meet their academic goals. Each participant acknowledged the importance of education as providing hope for the future. It is imperative that the struggles foster children and youth face and the ways in which some are able to overcome are shared with a larger community. The former foster youth in this study showed resiliency through the support of their community. Through collaboration and clear lines of communication, a community of support can be developed, resulting in the academic success of the most at-risk students in classrooms today.

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