FOSTER YOUTH POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION SUCCESS

A Project

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FOSTER YOUTH AND POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION SUCCESS

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Division of Social Work

Abstract

of

FOSTER YOUTH AND POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION SUCCESS

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Aarolind Hoskin

For some foster youth, pursuing post-secondary education becomes the pathway to a

better life. While many foster youth face challenges on their academic journey and may

lack the supports needed to excel academically, many push through their challenges to

succeed. The purpose of this research study was to investigate foster youth's supportive

factors during their pursuit of post-secondary education. This research study is a cross-

sectional qualitative study consisting of in-person interviews and received participation

from 7 students who were in the Guardian Scholars Program at California State

University, Sacramento. This study found that former foster youth attributed their

success in higher education to supportive people, financial support, programs, being

perseverance and success driven, and their intrinsic motivation. This study also found

that foster youth experienced challenges while on their academic journey, provided

recommendations to ensure success amongst foster youth, and provided advice to foster

youth who are currently interested in higher education. This research study has

implications for understanding the supportive factors that have contributed to foster

youth's educational success in order to implement more of these factors at the micro,

mezzo, and macro levels.

_____, Committee Chair
Jennifer Price Wolf, PhD

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

There are about 400,000 youth placed in foster care due to issues of child abuse, neglect, behavior issues, and/or incarcerated parents (The Annie E. Casey Foundation as cited in Neal, 2017). For some foster youth, pursuing higher education becomes the pathway to a better life (Coles 2013, as cited in Phillips, Powers, Geenen, Schmidt, Winges-Yanez, McNeely, & Bodner, 2015). Unfortunately, with only 50% of foster youth graduating high school, pursuing post secondary education becomes out of reach (Salazar 2013, as cited in Morton, 2018). Research has shown that foster youth who graduate college are more likely to lead healthier lives, receive pension and health benefits, and be more active citizens (Miller, Benner, Kheibari, & Washington, 2017). Fortunately, the majority of foster youth aspire to attend college (Kirk & Day, 2011). In one study, over 70% of foster youth aged 15-19 expressed their desire to attend college and 19% expressed interest in pursuing graduate school (McMillen, Asulander, Elze, White, & Thompson as cited in Day et al., 2012).

Although many foster youth want to pursue higher education, they face significant barriers. Due to the high mobility of home placements, foster youth experience gaps in schooling, which make their professional and academic success more challenging (Kinarsky, 2017). On average, foster youth may move homes as many as three times per year, which usually results in a change of school (Julianelle, 2008; McNaught, 2009 as cited in Kirk & Day, 2011). Foster youth lose roughly 4-6 months of educational progress

every time they move schools (McNaught, 2009 as cited in Kirk 7 Day, 2011). The constant mobility of home placements usually causes educational instability and impacts educational success. As a result, foster youth are behind academically compared to their peers (Noonan, Matone, Zlotnik, Hernandez-Mekonnen, Watts, Rubin, & Mollen, 2012). These barriers to education, including the structure of the foster care system, lack of relationship, housing instability, mental health issues, and financial problems, can keep foster youth from achieving success.

<center>**BARRIERS**</center>

Foster Care System

The foster care system was created to provide temporary housing to youth who are unable to live with their biological families ("Foster Care," n.d.). During this time children may live with family members, foster families, group homes, residential care facilities, or emergency shelters ("Foster Care," n.d.). The overarching goal is to return the child back to their biological home in safe and stable conditions. Unfortunately, some foster youth have negative experiences with their biological families and deal with rejection from family members they thought would be there for them (Morton, 2015). As a result, foster youth develop distrust for caseworkers, foster families, society and the system (Morton, 2015; Quest, Fullerton, Geenen & Powers, 2012). Some youth stated their distrust for the system originated from a lack of control they had over their home and school placements (Quest et al., 2012). Foster youth mentioned the lack of collaboration between themselves and caseworkers; many felt caseworkers worked for

the youth instead of with the youth (Quest et al., 2012). Youth tried to gain a sense of power over their situations which resulted in them making decisions that were not in their best benefit (Quest et al., 2012). They needed guidance and support from adults who looked out for their best interest, however developing positive relationships with adults they could trust did not happen easily. Foster youth experience high mobility with placements therefore developing positive and consistent relationships can be challenging within the foster care system.

Relationships

Many foster youth refrain from developing positive relationships with adults in their lives (Morton, 2015). This is due to foster youth being continuously let down by people they thought would support them (Quest et al., 2012). Caseworkers would promise the completion of certain tasks that were important to the youth, but would fall through (Quest et al., 2012). Foster youth also struggle with balancing the relationships with their biological families in the midst of living with different foster families (Quest et al., 2012). With each new placement foster youth must navigate the house rules, community, and build rapport with their new foster family (Morton, 2015). Many foster youth decide against developing relationships with foster families because they know it is only a matter of time before they move to another home. When foster youth's needs such as housing are not met it can create barriers during their educational pursuit (Neal, 2017). Likewise, the environment in which foster youth are exposed to greatly impacts their ability to achieve their academic goals (Neal, 2017).

Housing

Foster youth who are transitioning out of care face a unique set of housing

challenges that are different from the challenges of non-foster youth (Salazar, Jones,

Emerson, & Mucha, 2016). The placement challenges that foster youth experience impact

their ability to prepare for independent living (Morton, 2015). It is more difficult for

youth who age out of the foster care system to find and maintain stable housing, as they

lack the financial knowledge and resources to enter the housing market (Courtney &

Dworsky as cited in Berzin, Rhodes, & Curtis, 2011; Berzin et al., 2011). These youth are

more likely to experience homelessness, reside in poor neighborhoods, or return back to

their biological families (Berzin et al., 2011). Many foster youth who transition to

adulthood feel unprepared to make decisions regarding housing and lack the social

supports to make these decisions (Kirk & Day, 2011). Research has indicated that only

56.9% of foster youth alumni feel prepared for independent living (Morton, 2015). The

housing challenges foster youth face during their transition to adulthood can cause health

problems, depression or other mental health issues, and impact employment options

(Berzin et al., 2011). Due to their housing challenges, the educational success of foster

youth also becomes in jeopardy.

Secondary Education

It is well known that foster youth are behind academically compared to non-foster

youth. In fact, foster youth are less likely to complete high school and as few as one-third

graduate (McMillen & Tucker; Scannapieco, Schagrin, & Scannapieco as cited in Day,

Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012). Foster youth lose roughly four to

six months of educational development every time they are forced to change schools

(McNaught, as cited in Krik & Day, 2011). This is due to poor communication between

the foster care system and school districts, difficulty with transferring school records

including courses from previous schools, and grade retention (repeating the same grade)

(Day et al., 2012; Kirk & Day, 2011). Student's expressed their experiences with

transferring schools and having to repeat classes because their course credits would not

transfer (Morton, 2015). Likewise, they argued that the reason a lot of foster youth do not

graduate is due to grade retention. Another issue foster youth face in the educational

system is adults (including teachers, caseworkers, and foster families) underestimating

their abilities and lacking the necessary training to prepare them for high school

completion and college (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Watt, Norton, & Jones, 2013). These

issues put foster youth at high risk for high school drop out. These risks are even greater

for foster youth needing special education services.

Special Education

Foster youth who require special education services are at an even higher risk for

academic deficiency (Morton, 2015). As a result, these youth are given Individualized

Education Plans (IEP's), which serve as a guide to ensure academic success amongst

these students. While an IEP allows for students to be given support to meet their

academic needs, it can be hard for teachers to identify students due to high mobility

(Zetlin, 2006). Research shows that foster youth who require special education services

are more likely to move schools compared to their counterparts without these services

(Geenen & Powers as cited in Morton, 2015; Quest et al., 2012). Due to high mobility,

supports outlined in the IEP are often delayed once the student transfers schools (Morton,

2015). As a result, foster youth may go months without receiving special education

services (Morton, 2015). Research states that foster youth are overrepresented with IEP's

for special education services (Morton, 2015; Quest et al., 2012). Generally, foster youth

are given IEP's due to behavior or emotional disabilities (Morton, 2015). It iss important

that foster care and school systems assess if foster youth really need special education

services. Some youth argued that they were given IEP's due to behavior problems, which

resulted in a restricted learning environment (Morton, 2015). They felt that they should

be taught in an inclusive classroom instead of a special education classroom (Morton,

2015). While many foster youth receive special education services, limited research has

been done to determine if these services promote educational success (Quest et al., 2012).

Mental Health

Foster youth are at an even greater risk for mental health challenges (Morton,

2018). Many foster youth experience trauma as it relates to abuse, domestic violence in

the home, family loss, and multiple home and school placements. The trauma they

experience can lead to mental health challenges. Some foster youth suffer from Post

Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to the painful experiences they endured in the

foster care system (Morton, 2018). Many youth struggle with emotional regulation, which

results in troublesome behavior including acting out, suspensions, aggression, skipping

class and disengagement (Morton, 2018). Foster youth also experience emotional factors that interfere with their school achievement such as disempowerment, self defeat, and anger (Morton, 2015). Participants expressed their anger with feeling silenced in the foster care and educational system (Morton, 2015). All of these factors play a critical role in not only the mental well being of foster youth, but their educational success as well.

Post-Secondary Education

One of the greatest disparities in the educational system can be discovered amongst foster youth (Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011). Foster youth are less likely to attend college and only 4% obtain a bachelor's degree (Nixon & Jones, as cited in Kirk et al., 2011). This may be due to lack of support, resources, financial costs, housing challenges, and the stress foster youth experience (Kirk et al., 2011). Foster youth may be on their own in regard to applying and paying for college, as a result some will not apply due to the lack of resources available to them (Day et al., 2012). In addition to the financial stress, foster youth lack the social supports and independent living skills needed to graduate college (Kinarsky, 2017). The traumatic experiences foster youth go through can also interfere with their educational aspirations (Morton, 2018). Unfortunately, some college professor's lack the flexibility and understanding to make accommodations in the classroom (Morton, 2018). One student shared her experiences with needing testing accommodations in the classroom and not receiving the support from her professor (Morton, 2018). Foster youth expressed the importance of having teachers, who are not

only aware of their challenges and needs but are caring and willing to provide emotional and academic support (Day et al., 2012).

HYPOTHESIS

Despite these barriers, some foster youth are able to pursue post secondary education. It could be that foster youth who have positive supports and resources in their life are more likely to pursue post-secondary education. Positive supports and resources can include but are not limited to relationships, programs, useful interventions, collegiate resources, and professional advocacy. Foster youth could benefit from positive relationships with adults, mentors, peers, teachers, and caseworkers. Additionally, school and community involvement could allow foster youth to feel supported, resulting in academic and personal advancement. Further research is needed to determine if positive support systems result in foster youth attending college. While we know that supports play an important role, other factors may also play a significant role. We also need more literature on the in-depth aspirations of foster youth, as it allows us to further understand their motivations for pursuing post secondary education.

POPULATION AND METHODOLOGY

The Guardian Scholars Program at California State University, Sacramento could provide insight into the support systems that help foster youth pursue post-secondary education. The Guardian Scholars Program provides mentoring, career counseling, academic advising, and financial assistance, among other things, with the goal of improving the lives of former foster youth. The Guardian Scholars Program provides

former foster youth with academic assistance that will prepare them to lead successful

lives and careers. The scholars enrolled in this program are embedded in a campus

community that supports their personal growth and development. The Guardian Scholars

would be a good fit for understanding post secondary education success being that the

scholars are enrolled in post secondary education. They could provide insight on the

support systems that allowed them to make it to college. Understanding the supportive

factors that have contributed to their collegiate success will allow professionals, agencies,

and communities to be more knowledgeable on the needs of foster youth. While it is

important to know the barriers, it is equally important to know the supportive factors so

they can be enhanced. By implementing what has worked well for former foster youth,

we are equipping foster youth to succeed in life and college.

In this study, I will investigate foster youth's post secondary education success,

utilizing members of the Guardian Scholars Program at Sacramento State. This research

study is a cross-sectional qualitative study consisting of in-person interviews. The

interviews will be one-time in-depth and semi-structured utilizing a convenience sample.

My research question asks, what supportive factors do former foster youth attribute to

their success in post-secondary education?

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Accessing post secondary education can be challenging, especially for foster youth. Foster youth navigate different systems such as housing instability, school changes, family issues, and also have to work through traumatic experiences. While statistics and literature tend to highlight the barriers and challenges foster youth experience, it is equally important that we highlight the support systems and resiliencies that could contribute to foster youth post secondary educational success. This study will examine how foster youth overcame educational and personal barriers to pursue higher education. This review will examine several potential supportive factors that could contribute to collegiate pursuit including aspirations, supportive factors, programs, interventions, collegiate resources, resiliencies, and how social workers and other professionals can be of support. This review will also highlight important theoretical perspectives, including the empowerment approach, resiliency theory, and social capital, all of which have informed this study.

Addressing the Need

Several factors have been identified as crucial to educational success for foster youth. Literature suggests that trainings designed for teachers and administrators are highly suggested as a way to improve educational success amongst foster youth (Gallegos, White, 2013; Noonan et al., 2012). Research supports the notion that professionals who work with foster youth need to be knowledgeable about their

educational and personal needs (Gallegos & White, 2013). They argue that teachers and

educators should be trained on appropriate strategies and interventions that would be

beneficial for foster youth's educational outcomes (Gallegos & White, 2013). They even

suggest that trainings on these strategies and interventions could limit the amount of

disciplinary actions that are taken out on foster youth. A program called Michigan

Educational Opportunities for Youth in Care (MEOYIC) provides trainings to counselors

who interact with foster youth in the school system (Kirk & Day, 2011). As a result of

these trainings, counselors feel more equipped to engage with foster youth and schools

(Kirk & Day, 2011). Limited research has been completed to determine if trainings for

teachers specifically have made an impact on the lives of foster youth.

     To promote educational success amongst youth in foster care, schools must create

a caring environment (Vacca, 2008). In order to create a caring environment where foster

youth can learn, build relationships, and be supported, it is argued that schools must

promote school stability and organized transitions (Strolin-Goltzman, Woodhouse, Sutter,

& Werrback, 2016). School stability, such as set schedules, boundaries, and supports in

the classroom, also appear to help foster youth succeed in school (Strolin-Goltzman,

Woodhouse, Sutter, & Werrback, 2016). More research is needed on the perceptions that

school staff have on foster youth, because it can impact the school environment making it

more positive or negative (Vacca, 2008). My research study investigates the challenges

and support systems while inquiring about recommendations for change within the

educational and foster care system. This may allow for foster youth alumni to address the

perceptions school staff have on foster youth and the impact it had on their educational success. While ensuring a caring and stable school environment can be difficult, as it requires collaboration between multiple systems, it has been shown to improve academic success for foster youth (Graham, Schellinger, & Vaughn, 2015).

To improve academic success amongst foster youth who are transitioning out of foster care, more services and supports need to be established. Literature suggests that more personal and financial supports can assist foster youth (Graham et al., 2015). These supports include: employment, housing, medical care, education, mental health services, and other individualized needs (Graham et al., 2015). It is also recommended that services be provided to youth beyond 18 years old (Graham et al., 2015). This is important because there are many foster youth who transition out of care or are anticipating transition and do not know how to prepare for independent living. It is suggested that transition services be assessable and available for youth many years after they have exited care as this will allow foster youth to access services when they are ready (Gallegos & White, 2018). As noted earlier, the collaboration between multiple organizations is essential to ensure that foster youth are equipped and prepared to handle life's experiences (Graham et al., 2015).

Advocacy from government systems and individuals that interact with foster youth is essential to not only their academic success but their personal growth as well. The juvenile court system plays a critical role in the lives of foster youth by helping them take responsibility for their futures (Buss, 2010). Engaging foster youth in the decision

making process allows them to experience self-advocacy which is an essential skill for

adulthood functionality (Buss, 2010). A judge's responsibility to promote youth's voice

and give attention to their questions and viewpoints is important (Buss, 2010). This

allows foster youth to value their participation and feel power over their own life.

Conversely, there is skepticism regarding involving youth in the ongoing court process as

it may encourage foster youth to be dependent on the system therefore, more research is

needed to understand this argument (Buss, 2010). Furthermore, the encouragement and

accountability from adult mentors, such as foster parents who believed in the importance

of an education, is something that is very important to foster youth (Strolin-Goltzman et

al., 2016). Having foster parents that encouraged youth about school made a positive

impact on their educational success (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016).

Educational Aspirations

In spite of the challenges foster youth experience, many foster youth aspire to

attend college (Kirk & Day, 2011). Research shows that foster youth have amazing

qualities that prepare them for educational success such as determination, being goal

oriented and educationally driven (Hines, Merdinger, & Whatt, 2015). Participants in one

study expressed interest to attend college, become nurses, or give back to their

community no matter the obstacles (Hines et al., 2015). It is important that we highlight

the aspirations of foster youth because just like non-foster youth, foster youth have goals

and dreams they desire to accomplish. Every foster youth has their personal reasons for

choosing to attend college. These reasons serve as a guide and create the foundation for

one's future success. Unfortunately, there is little research on the educational aspirations of foster youth, which may be due to the low number of foster youth that actually pursue post secondary education. It is important to recognize that many foster youth do aspire to attend college. To fill this gap, my research study will provide more information on the educational aspirations of foster youth by asking them their reasons for pursuing post secondary education. By understanding former foster youth's educational aspirations we may better support them in meeting their educational goals.

Motivations

Foster youth interested in pursuing post secondary education have their personalized reasons for doing so, one reason being their own motivations and beliefs (intrinsic) and/or an outside form of gratification (extrinsic). Foster youth attributed their want for higher education to the challenging experiences of their past (Neal, 2017). They turned those negative and painful experiences into their strength to succeed (Salazar et al., 2016). Participants expressed their desire to have a better life for their future children, a life that was different from their own (Neal, 2017). They wanted to "break the cycle of hopelessness" and create new opportunities for themselves and future generations (Neal, 2017). Another study, utilized the quote "smooth seas do not make for good sailors" (Watt et al., 2013). This means if everything in our lives happened perfectly, we would not know how to handle the troubling times in fact, it is through the troubling times we become our best selves. Theory of resistance can be used to explain this point, meaning ones resiliency comes to light during their most challenging moments.

The determination to be better than their parents or other parental figures was the driving force behind some foster youth's need for educational success. Many foster youth want to achieve things that others in their life had not been able to achieve, like getting a college education (Salazar et al., 2016). Some foster youth's motivation came from the desire to prove to their families member they could succeed (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005). Other's motivation came from a desire to not be associated with the negative expectations of being in foster care (Hines et al., 2005). Many believed pursuing post-secondary education ensured stability for their future. The determination to be different allowed many foster youth to see the importance of getting an education and the impact it can have on one's life (Neal, 2017). The literature tends to highlight former foster youth who are currently enrolled or planning to pursue post secondary education. More research is needed on the goals of foster youth who decided against pursuing post-secondary education. Moreover, it is still important to know the motivations foster youth have for pursuing post secondary education because it allows us to understand the impact an education can have on ones life, and allows us to appreciate foster youth's work ethic and resilience.

Often times, the belief another person has in us inadvertently allows us to believe in ourselves. Research shows that campus support programs are beneficial for foster care alumni (Watt el al., 2013). Former foster youth shared how caseworkers, attorneys, and other caring adults believed in them, which encouraged them to believe in themselves (Watt et al., 2013). Foster youth also mentioned the importance of being determined,

having a positive attitude, working hard, creating opportunity even through adversity, and

making healthy decisions (Salazar et al., 2016). These decisions included abstaining from

drugs, creating boundaries with family members, and blocking out anything that hindered

them from reaching their goals (Salazar et al., 2016). Furthermore, foster youth also

enjoyed the admiration and praise that came with getting good grades in school or having

good behavior. One participant explained the gratification she would feel when her aunt

would admire her poems and often encouraged her to perfect her craft (Hines et al.,

2005). Another participant shared the role her foster parents played in her education by

celebrating her successes (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). This allows us to believe that

the encouragement and accountability from foster parents and other important adults has

the power to impact foster youth's education in a positive way. While these findings are

not representative of all foster youth, it does provide some insight on the experiences that

motivated foster youth to pursue post-secondary education. More in depth information is

needed on the strengths and skills of former foster youth and the support systems that

impacted their educational pursuit. My research study will highlight these points and

bring to light former foster youths experiences in a way that is empowering and strengths

based.

Positive Relationships

Having just one caring, loving, and supportive adult can make a huge difference

in a life, especially in the lives of foster youth. Research utilizes the term "very important

person" which can include but are not limited to foster parents, mentors, caseworkers,

older friends, teachers or foster parents (Day et al., 2012; Duke, Farrugguam & Germo, 2017). Participants in various studies have explained the significance of having these adult relationships and how they have contributed to their educational success (Day et al., 2012). Foster youth gave examples of adults helping them find jobs, giving them money when they were in need, advocating on their behalf, and encouraging them to persevere through their circumstances (Duke et al., 2017). Additionally, foster youth admitted to having adults in their life that provided emotional support and academic preparation and motivation (Neal, 2017). Foster youth explained the importance of having adults who were consistent, as it promoted educational resiliency (Neal, 2017). Many youth explained that while dealing with housing and educational instability, a consistent adult made a positive impact on their life and allowed them to excel academically and fulfill their goals (Neal, 2017).

A foster parent or relative guardian has the power to make a foster youth's life one that is filled with success and stability. Foster youth have appreciation for foster families who take an active role in their life, such as driving them to meetings and school, teaching them manners, and keeping them on track (Neal, 2017). Foster youth also value a foster family who is loving. For example, one participant explains finally receiving the love she's been looking for all her life with her foster family (Hines et al., 2005). Unfortunately, this is not a representation of all foster youth's experiences. More research is needed on foster families who may not take a positive interest in the lives of foster youth. Understanding why foster families choose to engage or disengage in a positive

relationship with foster youth can help us create change within the foster care system and create placements that are safe, loving, and supportive. Additionally, foster youth expressed the importance of having positive relationships with their caseworkers and counselors. In some cases counselors became a refuge for foster youth by being someone they can talk to in times of need (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). The same can be said about caseworkers, foster youth expressed the importance of having caseworkers that were involved and open to their experiences (Strolin-Goltzman, Woodhouse, Suter, & Werrbach, 2016). Having a positive and supportive relationship with a caseworker is vital to the success of foster youth (Quest et al., 2012). This supports social capitol theory, which states that resources provided by relationships are beneficial for growth and adjustment amongst foster youth (Duke et al., 2017). While more research is needed to determine the impact of these adult relationships, which my research study may address, we do know that foster youth benefit from having positive adult figures in their lives.

Moreover, foster youth rely on schools to provide them with stability and the relationships they have with their teachers and peers can impact their educational success. Foster youth expressed appreciation for involved teachers who provided them with one on one tutoring outside of class, transportation to school, and making sure all their credits were fulfilled (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). The high expectations of teachers allowed foster youth to demand greater of themselves (Neal, 2017). While this is not representative of all teachers, more research is needed on teachers who have foster youth as students. There is limited research on why some educators take the extra step to be

supportive with foster youth, understanding their reasoning's can encourage other teachers to do the same. Furthermore, the interpersonal relationships foster youth develop with their peer's impacts their educational experience (Salazar et al., 2016). It is important that foster youth develop significant relationships with youth who have overcome similar experiences (Kinarsky, 2017). Their ability to connect with other people and have strong, supportive, and positive relationships is essential to their educational success (Salazar et al., 2016). It is important to know that foster youth believe positive relationships have attributed to their success. As individuals and professionals who engage with foster youth, we can now understand our impact on their life. By understanding their experiences and beliefs regarding relationships, we can be more cognizant of our role, making sure we are consistent, caring, and resourceful, so that we may impact their life in a positive way.

Programs

Program involvement, whether school based or community based, can impact the lives of foster youth in monumental ways and can encourage them to pursue post secondary education. School based extra-curricular programs are very beneficial for foster youth; such as clubs or sports including student government, chess club, cheerleading, or band (White, Scott, & Munson, 2018). School based programs are especially important as they build on academic skills during the summer or after school (Gallegos & White, 2018). Other programs like Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Twelve Together and other literacy, tutoring, and mentoring programs benefit foster youth as well

(Gallegos & White, 2018). These programs promote educational completion and resiliency while providing consistency and support to students (Gallegos & White, 2018). The hypothesis was well supported as it stated that extra curricular involvement was associated with educational outcomes (White et al., 2018). This may be due to foster youth's motivation to remain in their respective programs, thus causing them to academically stay on course (White et al., 2018). More research is needed on school official's perception on the impact of school-based programs on foster youth, this will allow for the implementation of more programs that encourage educational development. It is also important to note that while extracurricular participation is associated with high school completion; it is not associated with starting college (Scott et al., 2018).

Other programs in the educational system that focus on restorative justice have a positive impact on students. A program called Project STATUS is a school-based program that was created to minimize delinquency and dropouts (Greenwood, as cited in Gallegos & White, 2013). While Project STATUS is not targeted for foster youth, it could encourage foster youth to network and build school community (Gallegos & White, 2013). Many foster youth look to their peers for guidance and inspiration as it pertains to involvement in different programs (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016), so it is important that programs promote positivity, educational resiliency, and are strengths based. Another school-based program called School Transitional Environmental Program (STEP) was created to provide socio-emotional support to foster youth, in this program the homeroom teacher also takes on the role as a guidance counselor (Gallegos & White, 2013). Due to

the involvement in this program, participants reported an improvement with attendance, a

decrease in dropouts, and an increase in academic success (Gallegos & White, 2013). It is

essential that we know foster youth consider program involvement as a supportive factor

that can impact their success in post-secondary education.

Programs that are catered towards transitioning youth and foster youth alumni are

also very important. A summer program called Michigan Educational Opportunities for

Youth in Care (MEOYIC) provides support for foster youth within a campus

environment and celebrates resilience as youth prepare for the college experience (Kirk &

Day, 2011). Many of the participants spoke positively of the program because they

learned about campus community, scholarships, and career options (Kirk & Day, 2011).

Likewise, another campus support program called Foster Care Alumni Creating

Educational Success (FACES) was created to provide resources, support and

opportunities to foster care alumni (Watt et al., 2013). Alumni enrolled in this program

received scholarships, employment, tutoring services and mentors (Watt et al., 2013). In

both of these programs foster youth got to listen to keynote speakers and speak to former

foster youth enrolled in these programs (Kirk & Day, 2011; Watt el al., 2013). Foster

youth enjoyed listening to others reflect on their life experiences and appreciated the

perspective and the presence of foster care alumni, as it allowed them to see first hand

that attending college was achievable (Kirk & Day, 2011; Watt el al., 2013). The

strengths perspective was the foundation of these various programs; it created a paradigm

shift especially for foster youth (Watt et al., 2013). Research suggests the possibility of

doing a more longitudinal study, as it would allow for researchers to examine the effects of their program on high school completion, college enrollment and their collegiate experience (Kirk & Day, 2011).

Interventions

Interventions are actions taken by professionals to help individuals meet their needs. School based interventions are extremely important as they can promote success in the lives of foster youth. Due to an increase in suspensions and disciplinary infractions amongst foster youth, The Zero Tolerance Task Force recommends a restorative justice approach as a prevention strategy in schools (Skiba, Reynolds, Graham, Sheras, Conoley, & Garcia-Vazquez as cited in Gallegos & White, 2013). By taking a more restorative approach school staff are creating a supportive environment where foster youth can thrive (Gallegos & White, 2013). An example of this is highlighted in an intervention model called Better Futures, which consists of a summer institute on a college campus, peer coaching, and mentoring workshops with the purpose of preparing foster youth for post secondary education (Phillips et al., 2015). The summer institute allows foster youth to participate in informational sessions and panel discussions that cover topics such as graduating high school, applying to college, financial aid, and college support programs (Phillips et al., 2015). The Better Futures Model was created from the "My Life Self Determination Enhancement Model" and is experimentally validated as effective for increasing post secondary education participation (Powers, Geenen, Powers, Pommier-Satya, Turner, & Dalton as cited in Phillips et al., 2015). Many foster youth reported

enjoying the Better Futures project, receiving adequate preparation for post secondary

education, and obtaining information and support that will help them meet their

educational and life goals (Phillips et al., 2015). Recommendations for future research

include finding out if these services and recourses are available to foster youth once they

enroll in college. It is important that foster youth receive adequate support and

preparation prior to entering college, however these supports need to be available once

they are a student as well. My research study will fill this gap but asking former foster

youth the resources and services they receive that is helping them succeed in college.

It is well known that foster youth face a plethora of challenges during their pursuit

of higher education (Morton, 2018). Limited research has been done to understand why

some foster youth are unsuccessful during their collegiate journey; therefore to fill this

gap researchers have begun speaking directly with foster youth to understand the barriers

they face during their collegiate pursuit (Morton, 2018). It is important to listen to the

voice of foster youth because they are experiencing fist hand life's challenges that have

impacted their educational and life success. As a result, professionals can implement

appropriate interventions that will have a positive impact on their life and promote

educational achievement. Kidspeak created an event designed for foster youth in high

school who were given the opportunity to speak to policymakers about educational

barriers and suggestions for improving those barriers (Day et al., 2012). Foster youth got

the opportunity to let their voices be heard and discussed topics including mental health,

adult relationships, high school, home life, and housing (Day et al., 2012). The

participants reported positive feelings with speaking at the event because they were

listened too by leaders in the community (Day et al., 2012). Many times foster youth are

plagued by the voice in their head that tells them they cannot do it or they aren't good

enough (Watt et al., 2013). By allowing foster youth to speak out and let their voices be

heard we can promote self esteem, confidence, public speaking skills, and allow them to

engage with the system in a positive way (Day et al., 2012).

      Shifting gears to focus on interventions that could benefit foster youth on a micro

level, it is important to recognize therapeutic based interventions and trainings as a

resource. These interventions include but are not limited to Family Based Therapy,

Multisystemic Therapy, and the Nurtured Heart Approach. Family Based Therapy

focuses on improving parental skills, problem solving and family interactions

(Greenwood as cited in Gallegos & White, 2013). Multisystemic Therapy is a more

intensive approach that focuses on empowering parents to effectively address problems

within their families (Greenwood as cited in Gallegos & White, 2013). These

interventions could be most useful with foster families to allow foster youth to feel

supported and success oriented (Gallegos & White, 2013). Another useful intervention

that can be utilized for the benefit of foster youth in school and home is the Nurtured

Heart Approach (NHA). The purpose of NHA is to promote parent-child well-being buy

energizing positivity instead of negativity (Hektner, Brennan, & Brotherson, 2013). With

NHA the parent or teacher recognizes when a child is engaging in behavior that is

positive and desirable (Hektner et al., 2013). While this intervention is not specifically

targeted for foster youth, it could however be most successful with foster youth in home and school. If foster youth and foster families are provided with these interventions it could allow for a more stable, positive, and safe environment for foster youth. In terms of future research, more research is needed on the interventions that foster youth believe provided support and addressed their needs. While it is important to know what professionals believe as effective interventions, we have to acknowledge the voices of foster youth because theirs are the most important.

Collegiate Needs

Foster youth who are in high school and are preparing to attend college need independent living assistance to help them navigate the transition from high school to college (Day et al., 2012). It is recommended that college campuses develop college education preparation for foster youth the summer prior to entering college and host campus tours specifically for foster youth/alumni (Jay Miller et al., 2017). One college at a Midwest university hosted a weeklong summer orientation at a college campus specifically for foster youth (Unrau, Dawson, Hamilton, & Bennett, 2017). Additionally, college campuses could also provide support during the application process and provide outreach to high school counselors (Jay Miller et al., 2017). This would allow for high school students to be prepared when they enter college, as they would have already received support in high school and experienced college life. During their first semester of college, it is important that foster youth alumni develop a graduation plan which creates a solid foundation for academic success (Unrau et al., 2017). While, the

graduation plan can be changed at any point in time (Unrau et al., 2017), it keeps the youth accountable for their education. While these are great recommendations to ensure collegiate success amongst foster youth, it is important that we remember to speak directly with foster youth as their opinions and suggestions are the most important. My research study acknowledges this by talking directly with former foster youth. All of this could ensure that foster youth are on the path towards academic success.

Former foster youth are also in need of financial and housing assistance, as many youth struggle with paying for college and securing housing during the academic school year and summers. Some colleges create programs that help foster youth identify funding sources such as Pell Grants, work study, scholarships, and voucher funds (Unrau et al., 2017). Other suggestions include providing tuition waivers for summer courses, offering scholarships designed for foster youth, waiving admission fees, and implementing emergency funds (Jay Miller et al., 2017). Another huge need for foster youth alumni is housing support, as many foster youth face challenges with securing housing during their college years. One program guarantees housing during the academic year to foster youth enrolled in their program and also provides housing during the summer/breaks for youth who do not have safe housing options (Unrau et al., 2017). In a similar study, two-thirds of foster youth reported receiving housing assistance during school breaks (Berzin et al., 2011). Providing housing and financial assistance to foster youth alumni is so crucial as it alleviates stress and provides comfort as they strive for college completion. Unfortunately, foster youth who may have dropped out of college due to insecure housing

options were not interviewed in some cross-sectional research (Unrau et al., 2017).

Therefore, foster youths opinions regarding appropriate measures college campuses can

take prior to foster youth dropping out of college are unknown.

It is essential that college campuses create a college atmosphere that welcomes

former foster youth and provides awareness to campus staff and organizations on the

ways they can provide positive support. Research studies have provided many

suggestions for college campuses in regard to supporting foster youth on their collegiate

journey. These suggestions include educating staff about the needs of foster youth,

creating alternative assignments in class to best fit the need of the student, and alerting

teachers when they have former foster youth in their class (Jay Miller et al., 2017). They

also suggested providing life-skills classes to youth (Jay Miller et al., 2017). One campus

support program requires incoming students to enroll in a first year seminar course that

addresses important life skills college students need to ensure academic success (Unrau et

al., 2017). Other recommendations can include providing peer mentoring, academic

support, employment opportunities, and food pantries (Jay Miller et al., 2017). While

these are not all the ways college campuses can provide support to foster youth alumni, it

does highlight some suggestions that have worked previously for former foster youth.

Moreover, it is important to know the academic needs of foster youth because that is how

we ensure their academic success. By providing foster youth with positive supports and

resources we are creating a college environment that supports their academic aspirations

and potentially increases the amount of foster youth that graduate college.

Resiliency

Resiliency is the ability to adapt or overcome adversity. It is important that we highlight the lived experiences and give voice to the personal narrative of former foster youth (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). Foster youth show amazing resiliency throughout their life and during their pursuit of higher education. Research aims to get a better understanding of educational resiliency and attending college through the perspective of former foster youth (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). While academic achievement is not the only way to measure resiliency it can be a significant milestone for foster youth (Hines et al., 2005). Many foster youth expressed interest in pursuing their Master's, PhD, or law degree after obtaining their bachelors (Kinarsky, 2017). It is important to reference one's ambitions with pursuing post-baccalaureate degrees because it exemplifies resilience. Foster youth have overcome many challenges; a participant in one study was quoted saying "I went through 14 years of abuse…4 years of college was a sign that I made it" (Amy M. Salazar et al., 2016). This quote speaks volumes as it shows the feelings of success foster youth feel when overcoming their traumas and using it as their strength to succeed. My research study will acknowledge the challenges foster youth experience but will also highlight their resiliencies and supports systems that aided their success.

Trauma has a profound impact on the educational success of former foster youth. In one study, participants explained their difficulty with persevering through college due to their mental health challenges (Morton, 2015). They explained struggling with

homework, finances, housing, and other issues that impacted their emotional well-being

(Morton, 2015). It is important to recognize these challenges because it shows the lengths

foster youth go through to achieve academic success. In this study, out of 11 participants

5 graduated and 2 were still in school (Morton, 2015). It is essential to highlight their

academic accomplishments because it shows their resilience, strength, and power within

themselves as they overcame challenges throughout their individual journeys. Some

foster youth even feel thankful for their challenging experiences because it made them a

better person (Quest et al., 2012). As they embarked on their individual journey's they

explained the importance of asking for help from others, whether that was advice,

services, or encouragement because it helped them get to where they were (Hines et al.,

2005). When talking about foster youth, literature tends to highlight the barriers and

challenges, which is needed to fully understand the issue in regard to foster youth

attending college. However, it is equally if not more important to highlight their

strengths, resiliencies, and supportive factors. My research study focuses on the

supportive factors, because understanding the positive aspects with foster youth attending

college allows us implement more supportive factors in the foster care system,

educational system, communities, and in our daily lives as we interact with foster youth.

     Foster youth alumni believed their strength to overcome adversity was vital to

their success in college (Salazar et al., 2016). Other characteristics like the fear of failure

and perfectionism were qualities former foster youth used to their advantage as well

(Salazar et al., 2016). Literature has found that educational success is impacted by foster

youths ability to make conscious changes in their life, be flexible and adapt to life's

uncertainties (Hines et al., 2005). This shows great resilience, as they did not allow their

circumstances to hold them back but used it as motivation to succeed in school. On the

contrary, there is little research on the outcomes of foster youth, which leads researchers

to believe that resilience is not a common phenomenon amongst foster youth (Hine et al.,

2005).

Moving Forward

Interagency collaboration, communication, and partnership amongst various

systems: education, child welfare, non profits etc., are vital to the advancement and

success of foster youth (Salazar, Roe, Ullrich & Haggerty, 2016). Collaboration and

communication amongst these systems and foster youth are important, especially when as

many as six to eight professionals can be involved in a single youth's case (Graham et al.,

2015). Research suggests that educational liaisons that work in the foster care system

serve as a link between the educational and child welfare system (Leone & Weinberg;

Havalchak, White, O'Brien, Pecora, & Sepulveda as cited in Gallegos & White, 2013).

Liaisons would act as an advocate for foster youth looking out for their unique needs

while monitoring their educational progress (Gallegos & White, 2013). Liaisons would

also be responsible for educating caseworkers and school personnel on the needs of the

foster youth (Gallegos & White, 2013). It is also suggested that child welfare information

be available in the school system like foster care status, caseworker contact, foster

parents, biological parents, visitation information, and mental health needs (Noonan et

al., 2012); this would allow for convenient access when advocating for foster youth. It is

critical that information is shared in a timely manner and that individuals are participating

in meetings in regards to foster youth (Vacca, 2008). It is important to recognize that in

some studies there may have been selection bias, meaning professionals who have certain

opinions are more likely to participate, which impacts the outcome causing it to favor

foster youth (Noonan et al., 2012).

      Shifting to a more macro perspective, it is important to incorporate individuals

who are in positions of power to collaborate amongst various systems, as they may have

influence at the macro level (Salazar et al., 2016). There are many policies that effect

foster youth who are transitioning from foster care to adulthood (Scott, 2013). Research

recognizes the resiliencies of foster youth and highlights the services and government

funding that has aided them (Scott, 2013). However, it also recognizes that there are

foster youth that have not been adequately served (Scott, 2013). Moreover, Title IV-E

requires child welfare agencies to engage in permanency planning, meaning that agencies

must connect all foster youth to a permanent family (Buss, 2010). Title IV-E requires that

the permanency plan be reviewed regularly and hearings be conducted at least once a

year (Buss, 2010). During these hearings they determine if the child is to be in long-term

foster care or "another planned permanent living arrangement" (APPLA) (Buss, 2010).

This also allows them to assess the steps the child welfare agency has taken to assist

transitioning foster youth (Buss, 2010). The Title IV-E program also gave $60 million

dollars to states to provide post secondary education and training for youth who are over

18 (Stott, 2013).

As discussed earlier in the chapter, the importance of pre-service and in-service

trainings related to cross system roles and policies and the needs and circumstance of

foster youth are highly important (Noonan et al., 2012; Gallegos & White, 2013). These

trainings should be available to educators and administrators as they interact and

implement schools based interventions (Gallegos & White, 2013). Research has found

that support is needed for foster youth in secondary education (Graham et al., 2015).

They suggest that caseworkers, teachers, and school staff develop a more positive

approach that promotes self-esteem in youth (Graham et al., 2015). It is critical that

teachers understand the unique challenges and experiences of foster youth that affect their

school needs because it can impact their educational success. Furthermore, foster youth

need access to support services such as tutoring so they can be academically prepared

(Graham et al., 2015). Schools have to provide opportunities for foster youth to receive

an enriched education that challenges their thinking and provides them with skills they

can utilize once the graduate (Vacca, 2008).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical perspectives that relate to my study include empowerment

approach, resiliency theory, and social capitol. Empowerment is the process of

recognizing power within individuals so they can improve their life (Gutierrez, 1994 as

cited in Pearrow & Pollack, 2009). The empowerment approach, created in a postmodern

era, was created to be a unifying framework in social work practice (Turner, 2011). The empowerment approach enables practitioners to explore the challenges and obstacles of oppressed individuals (Turner, 2011). It allows social workers and clients to stand together in solidarity (Turner, 2011). Empowerment practice in the foster care system is proving itself to be a promising method where caseworkers can support and advocate for the rights of foster youth (Steen & Buckey, 2014). Furthermore, it allows youth not only to empower themselves but also empower others (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016).

Secondly, resiliency theory incorporates a strengths based lens, looking at individuals that have experienced difficulty and recognizing those who have overcome adversity (Fergus & Zimmerman as cited in Army M. Salazar et al., 2016; Hass, Allen, & Amoah, 2014). Resilience in youth is sometimes determined by self-sufficiency, support systems, and success in education (Daining & DePanfilis; Jones as cited in Salazar et al., 2016). The term educational resiliency refers to educational success despite environmental conditions (Schroeter, Strolin-Goltzman, Suter, Werrbach, Hayden-West, Wilkins, Rock as cited in Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). Foster youth recognize the moments in their lives that led them to pursue post secondary education, appreciating those challenging experiences that motivated them to have a better life (Hass et al., 2014). Empowering foster youth and recognizing how resilient they are has the ability to impact not only their education but their life as well.

Social Capitol is the resource and support individuals receive through relationships with other people. Research highlights the fact that human relationships can

bring about positive change within individuals (Coleman, 1998, p. 95-120). Social capitol

places value on individuals as resources they can utilize to achieve their goals (Coleman,

1998, p. 95). Research also highlights the importance of social capitol within a family

and in communities (Coleman, 1998, p. 109). Children need to have physical access to

adults in their family where there is connectedness (Coleman, 1998, p. 110). Moreover,

children may also develop social relationships with individuals in a community, which

can have a positive impact on their life as well (Coleman, 1998, p. 113). For foster youth

or transitioning youth, building or rebuilding relationships is essential (Jim Casey Youth

Opportunities Initiative as cited in Salazar et al., 2016). Research utilizes the term social

support and recognizes its importance for foster youth as they transition to adulthood

(Zinn, Palmer, & Nam, 2017). Child welfare agencies are even aiming to promote

positive relationships with family, non-parent adults, and mentors; policies are promoting

social connections as well (Zinn, Palmer, & Nam, 2017). Former foster youth that are

currently enrolled in post-secondary education recognize the importance of interpersonal

relationships as it impacts their success throughout the system unto college (Salazar et al.,

2016). Foster youth acknowledge the impact of human connection and value the presence

of strong and positive individuals, as it is essential to ones academic success (Salazar et

al., 2016).

Conclusion

My research question asks, what supportive factors do former foster youth

attribute to their success in post-secondary education? This review examined several

potential supportive factors that could contribute to collegiate pursuit including

aspirations, programs, interventions, collegiate resources, resiliencies, and how social

workers and other professionals can be of support. The literature acknowledged the need

for various supportive factors in the lives of foster youth. Positive relationships,

interventions, programs, and beneficial resources can impact foster youth's educational

and life success. Many foster youth aspire to attend college but unfortunately face

barriers during their pursuit. It is vital that we understand and implement what has

worked for former foster youth because that is how we increase the amount of foster

youth that pursue post secondary education.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Study

This research study will investigate foster youth's post secondary education success. The research question asks, what supportive factors do former foster youth attribute to their success in post-secondary education? This research study is a cross-sectional qualitative study consisting of in-person interviews. The interviews were one-time in-depth and semi-structured utilizing a convenience sample. This study was approved by IRB on Oct 24, 2018, IRB number 18-19-007.

Population

The population I am studying is former foster youth, meaning any youth who has been in foster care, no matter the length of time. My research question inquires about the supportive factors that helped foster youth attend college. This will allow for the foster care system, educational system and communities to implement more of these supportive factors, especially for youth currently in foster care or are transitioning out of care. While my target population is foster youth, other populations can benefit from this research such as at risk youth, homeless youth, or any youth experiencing challenges while pursuing their education. Populations that are not included in this study would be former foster youth who may have dropped out of college or are currently taking a break from college and non-foster youth.

The Guardian Scholars Program at Sacramento State was created to support former foster youth during their collegiate experience and increase the amount of college graduates. Students who are a part of the Guardian Scholars Program will have access to mentoring, academic advising, career advising, emergency funding, priority registration and many other resources. Guardian Scholars strives to provide financial advising to their scholars so that foster youth can graduate college with minimum or no debt. Additionally, they strive to provide their scholars with academic assistance so they can lead successful careers. The Guardian Scholars Program creates a family-like environment for youth where they can develop meaningful relationships with people whom they can identify.

The mission of the Guardian Scholars Program is to "improve the life and success rate of former foster youth by administering helpful services such as professional mentoring, academic advising, career counseling, financial assistance, scholarships, and community building events that are all essential for learning, growth, and success on a college campus. We are committed to doing outreach in the community and creating meaningful opportunities for current students at Sac State in order to improve the livelihood of foster youth students" ("Division of Student," n.d).

Sampling Procedure

I sampled members of the Guardian Scholars Program at Sacramento State utilizing a convenience sample. I started interviewing participants in the beginning of December 2018. I contacted the Guardian Scholars Program and asked if they would be willing to either post flyers or send out emails to their scholars requesting participation in

my study and they agreed. They sent out three emails to their scholars the first towards

the beginning of December, the second towards the end of January and the last towards

the beginning of February. In their email they stated, I was an MSW student interested in

learning more about foster youth experiences in higher education. They included that I

would be offering an incentive and attached the flyer I created.

Participants that were interested in my study emailed me directly to ensure their

confidentiality was protected. Once participants contacted me, I emailed them thanking

them for their interest in my study and scheduled a day/time and location to conduct the

interview. Participants chose a location they wanted to have the interview; if they had no

preference a private room was reserved on Sacramento States campus. All participants

were offered a $5 Jamba Juice gift card as a way to thank them for participating in my

study. To ensure that participants were not coerced into participating on the flyer it stated

that participation was voluntary. Also, during the interview when I read the participants

the implied consent form, it stated that participation was voluntary and they had the right

not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits

to which they were otherwise entitled. Conflicts of interest were managed by informing

participants that all information would be kept confidential.

Data Collection Procedure

The interview process began in early December and lasted until February. Each

interview lasted about 30 minutes. I allowed participants to choose a location for the

interview. However, if they did not have a preference interviews took place in a private

study room on Sacramento State's campus in either the library or the AIRC. There were

no human subject incidents. During the recruitment process, 7 participated and 1 reached

out to inquire about the research study but was uninterested in participating.

Data Collection Instruments

An interview guide was used during the interview process. The questions were

created to be open-ended and elicit longer responses from participants. The interview

guide asked the following ten questions: why were you placed in foster care; what are

some challenges you faced due to the foster care and educational system; what are some

things in your life that were helpful or supportive to you when you were in foster care;

why did you want to pursue higher education; what are some of your strengths/skills that

have helped you be successful in college; what support systems, services, and/or

resources do you currently have that is helping you in college; what has led to your

academic success and what are your career goals; how has the Guardian Scholars

Program helped you in college; what do you believe needs to be done in the foster care

system and/or educational system to help more foster youth pursue higher education; and

what advice would you give to other foster youth who are interested in pursuing higher

education. The interview guide can be found in Appendix B. These questions were

created after reviewing the literature and having a deeper understanding of the supportive

factors that allowed foster youth to pursue post secondary education. Demographic data

was also collected; each participant completed a hard copy. The demographic data

collected the following information: age (utilizing a scale), gender, race/ethnicity, age

entered foster care, number of foster care systems, and number of high schools attended.

The demographic questions were chosen to get a well-rounded view of the participant

and their environment, which can influence ones path towards educational success.

Data Analysis

After I recorded each interview, I transcribed them and took superficial notes. The

notes highlighted possible themes and patterns that stood out from each interview. Once I

transcribed majority of the interviews, I created an excel sheet to create more concrete

themes. On the excel sheet, I put possible themes on one side and the participants at the

top of the page. If the participant's interview highlighted a particular theme, I noted it on

the side of the excel sheet. If other participant's interview's highlighted the same theme I

put an "x" on their column. I continued this process, which allowed me to see which

themes were most common. If two or more participants had the same thing, I used that

theme for my results. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of my analysis I read

through each interview multiple times. I searched for key words and looked closely for

themes that may not have been identified easily. I also emailed all interviews to my thesis

advisor, who provided additional guidance regarding potential themes.

Chapter 4

STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This research study received participation from 7 students who were in the Guardian Scholars Program at California State University, Sacramento. Participants were asked a total of 10 questions regarding the supportive factors that have contributed to their success in post secondary education. In this chapter, I will discuss the themes that were found based on the interviews. I will also provide demographic data on the participants that participated in this research study. A total of five major themes and 14 subthemes were found. Themes were found based on analyzing the participant's responses to the interview questions. The themes that were most common throughout multiple interviews will be discussed in this chapter.

Demographic Data

Demographic factors were assessed during the interview process. These factors included gender, age, and race/ethnicity, age entered foster care, number of foster care placements, and number of high schools attended. In regard to demographic characteristics, the majority of the participants were female, including six female and one male participant. Four participants were between the ages of 15-24, two participants were between the ages of 25-34, and 1 participant was between the age of 45-54. There was a diverse group of participants including two Hispanic or Mexican, one Italian, two Black or African-American, and two indicating two or more races. In regard to the age participants entered foster care, four participants entered foster care as teenagers and

three participants entered foster care as children. Regarding the number of foster care placements, six participants had between one and four placements and one participant had between 10-14 placements. Lastly, for the number of high schools attended, six participants attended between one and four high schools and one attended between five and nine high schools. Below is a demographic table referencing the above demographic information.

Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics (N=7)

Characteristics	n (%)
Gender	
Male	1 (15)
Female	6 (85)
Age	
15-24	4 (57)
25-34	2 (28)
35-44	0 (0)
45-54	1 (15)
55-64	0 (0)
65+	0 (0)
Race/ethnicity	
Hispanic	2 (28)
Italian	1 (15)
Black or African-American	2 (28)
2 or more races	2 (28)
Age entered foster care	
0-12	3 (42)
13+	4 (57)
Number of foster care placements	
1-4	6 (85)
5-9	0 (0)
10-14	1 (15)
15-19	0 (0)
20+	0 (0)

Number of high schools attended	
1-4	6 (85)
5-9	1 (15)
10-14	0 (0)
15-19	0 (0)
20+	0 (0)

[a] Percentages in each category do no necessarily equal 100 due to rounding.

Themes

A total of four major themes, 14 subthemes, and six sub-sub themes were found.

These themes included supportive factors: supportive people (social workers, school

staff, family, peers), financial support, programs (Guardian Scholars Program, others),

perseverance and success driven, intrinsic motivation; challenges: struggling

academically, resources, unique cases; recommendations for change: more caring and

supportive people, research on foster families, outreach on school campuses; advice to

foster youth: don't give up, utilize resources; career goals.

SUPPORTIVE FACTORS

Supportive People

During the interview process participants attributed part of their success in post

secondary education to having supportive people in their lives. These supportive people

include social workers, school staff, families, and peers.

Social workers

When asked about challenges they faced in the foster care system one participant

said, "well I didn't really face any challenges. . . . I just had like really good social

workers that were always telling me 'oh there's this available to you or have you done

your college applications, have you filled FAFSA?' you know?" (Participant #1, Female).

Another participant noted having helpful and supportive staff in the group home was

beneficial, stating "the staff, even though the group home is shitty and the house was ugly

and the stuff that we had was ugly the staff made it worthwhile. I loved my manger of my

group home. . . . They would get me things that I needed for school even if the staff used

their own money they would still do it" (Participant #2, Female).

School staff

Many participants recognized school staff for being supportive throughout their

academic journey. One participant stated "The academic advising counselors, I really just

go in and check with them, they just kind of motivate me" (Participant #7, Female).

Another said "The school that I went to, the high school that I graduated from, there was

a really good college advisor and she was always like, you would always here her in the

announcements saying 'seniors, it's time to apply for graduation. Seniors! Seniors!' So I

was lucky enough to get through high school" (Participant #1, Female). Another

participant recognized her high school teacher for her academic success stating, "When

my chemistry teacher came along I got so close with her. She bought me my prom dress,

she bought me my plaque for graduation, my cap and gown, she gave me $100 one time

because I told her I wasn't eating she knew I was in a group home. She was kind of my

motivation to be a teacher" (Participant #2, Female).

Family

Many participants spoke about having family who were supportive and encouraging while pursuing their college degree. One participant spoke highly of her mother in law stating she was a powerful woman who made sure she handled her business. She also spoke highly about her fiancé who supported her goals and dreams and encouraged her to work towards them (Participant #6, Female). Another participant spoke about having a supportive foster family stating, "You know the family I was placed with was awesome, they really were. I was placed with my sister and we don't have like the best relationship but the family was so adamant about us staying together. And they were going to get us enrolled in school and they were taking us to the gym everyday and they were teaching us how to cook (Participant #5, Female). Likewise, another spoke positively about her father stating, "My dad has always stressed the importance of school and he was just really telling me that 'your education is one thing that somebody can never take away from you.' And so I think just my dad continually pounding it in to me and I finally got it" (Participant #7, Female).

Peers

Participants also discussed being amongst peers that were also on the path towards academic success. One participant spoke about being on a college campus and being surrounded by peers whom were striving towards their goals. She gave an example of studying in the library and seeing other students study motivated her to accomplish her work (Participant #6, Female). Likewise, another participant noted, "The school that I

went to and the friends that I had there, they were serious about their academics and so I just felt like okay, I'll just do what they do" (Participant #1, Female).

Financial Support

Some participants talked about having financial support such as grants or scholarships to help them fund their education. One participant said, "Scholarships that I've gotten, it just kind of reminds me that somebody does see that I'm doing and trying. So those are the things that motivate me too (Participant #7, Female). Another noted, "The Chafee grant because that helps me with books and for rent. And another one is the Foster Youth Education Fund, they're also very helpful" (Participant #1, Female). One participant credited the Guardian Scholars Program who provided her with additional funding stating, "Somehow I just found GSP and they gave me like $1,000 a month and free food and help with my books" (Participant #5, Female).

Guardian Scholars Program

Many participants spoke positively about the Guardian Scholars Program at Sacramento State, for being resourceful and supportive. When asked how the Guardian Scholars Program has helped them one participant said "Guardian Scholars has helped me by school supplies, books, scantrons, helping financial aid problems, book loans and they have events where you can like connect with people and make your own community" (Participant #4, Male). Another participant said, "It's just been nice to have kind of a family community. To be like oh you went through that too kind of thing and now we're trying to navigate higher education" (Participant #3, Female). Other

participants spoke kindly about the staff saying "She's [Guardian Scholar's Staff] anything Cal Works she's on it, career center she's on it, tutoring she's on it like anything that I need I know that I can go in there (Participant #5, Woman). Likewise another stated, "They've helped be a lot because I know that there was this one time I wasn't able to buy books because I didn't have the money for it. So I went to Alex and Alex was able to get me an emergency fund and that really helped out a lot (Participant #1, Female).

Other Programs

Participants in this study also talked about being involved in other educational programs that helped them in many ways during their collegiate journey. One participant spoke about being involved in programs that have helped him stating "Guardian Scholars MLK Center – Martin Luther King Center, Unique Program, that's the people that help out with events around campus, and I'm also a brother of Iota Phi Theta" (Participant #4, Male). Another participant talked about being involved in the SEED program, which will help her pursue her next steps upon graduating college (Participant #6, Female). Likewise, another participant shared her experiences with being involved in other programs stating, "So I'm the vice-president of our business honor society on campus it's an international society but I'm for the one representing on campus" (Participant #7, Female).

Perseverance and Success Driven

Many participants spoke about their perseverance during their educational pursuit including never giving up when things got challenging. One participant said "I don't give

up you know. I'm kind of that go-getter person that even when it gets tough I want to be able to finish what I start" (Participant #7, Female). Another participant discussed her determination to do well in school stating, "As I said, I failed a lot of math classes in high school and junior high and stuff so when I came here I was like I have to make the effort to go to office hours. I have to make the effort to go to math lab just to get a good grade. So I'm very motivated and just like getting things done. I think something I came with is like do the work okay you want something do the work to do it. Because it's so easy for me to like get afraid and feel like I can't do something but if I just push myself out of the comfort zone, it's like well we're going to do it now" (Participant #3, Female). Lastly, another participant discussed her drive to attend school no matter one saying, "I was the only one in the group home for the two years that would be on top of my homework, would fight with the staff because of my homework, and always into school no matter what. I didn't care what happened in that house I always went to school" (Participant #2, Female).

Intrinsic Motivation

Throughout the interviews many participants discussed their motivations for pursuing post-secondary education. Many shared their want for a better life not just for themselves but also for others. One participant stated, "I wanted to pursue higher education, it wasn't for myself. It was to be an example to my nieces and nephews. Plus you know, I'm a person in a wheelchair and usually people in wheelchairs they don't pursue higher education because you don't have to. You don't really have to get a job. I

thought that I would be an example to my nieces and nephews and others that are in

wheelchairs and are out of wheelchairs" (Participant #4, Male). Another said, "I knew

that living in the group home life and afterwards it was just gonna be like where was I

going to go? Who was I going to live with? There was no point in living on the street so I

continued to pursue my education to get myself the life that I wanted. If I was to ever

have kids to give them the life that I wish I had when I was younger" (Participant #2,

Female). Furthermore, another participant stated, "Just because it's something that no one

in my family has done. Once I graduate I'll be the first one to have done it out of all my

siblings" (Participant #5, Female).

<div align="center">**CHALLENGES**</div>

Struggling Academically

Due to being in the foster care system, some participants struggled with their

academics in school. One participated stated, "I was in foster care for about three years

maybe a little bit more and I was constantly being move around so math became a very

difficult subject…" (Participant #3, Female). Likewise, another participant talked about

getting all F's in her classes during her sophomore year of high school (Participant #6,

Female). And lastly, another participant discussed graduating high school stating "When

I left high school, I graduated by the skin of my teeth; I was in continuation for the

beginning of my senior year" (Participant #5, Female).

Resources

Participants also discussed their experiences in foster care and how they lacked basic resources. One participant stated, "First it's hard to get your way through college anyway unless you have the resources. And for some people it's hard to find that, you have to really look" (Participant #4, Male). Another stated, "Like they would give us an allowance every three months to get clothing but sometimes it would go longer than that. A lot of girls when they come into the group home they don't have a lot and the stuff that they buy us like shampoo and stuff is from the 99 Cent store and it would like break or make my hair hard so I would always have to try and save up to buy my own stuff cause they wouldn't really give us nice things, but yeah" (Participant #2, Female).

Unique Cases

Some participants also discussed their experiences in foster care and not experiencing many challenges or being grateful for the challenges they did experience. These cases were unique and did not conform to the theme. One participant stated, "Well I didn't really face any challenges. I was lucky…" (Participant #1, Female). Another stated, "I mean I don't tell my mom this but I always want to, like that couple of months that I spent in foster care has actually like it's probably the only reason that I was able to go to college" (Participant #5, Female).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

More Caring and Supportive Staff

When asked what they believed needed to be done in the foster care system and/or educational system to help more foster youth pursue higher education some participants expressed the importance of having caring and supportive staff within the school system and throughout organizations that help foster youth. One participant stated, "Soooo much, so much needs to be done. One they need more caring staff because there is a lot of staff who do only go there to collect a check. There was a couple staff in my group home that didn't give a shit about us, wouldn't check up on us cause you're supposed to check all the rooms within every 30 minutes to see what's going on, if everybody's ok and doing what they're supposed to be doing" (Participant #2, Female). Another participant expressed the importance of support and flexibility within the school system stating "I think there should be something that solves that problem where foster youth if they're in and out of placements and going to different schools there should be more flexibility towards them. Be like 'oh well it's ok you didn't take this class. We see that this class you took over there is the same thing as that.' That way they don't have to be in school for a while" (Participant #1, Female). Another participant expressed that foster youth do not need to be reprimanded, suspended, or put in detention for bad behavior and that foster youth did not chose to be in the situation they are in (Participant #6, Female). Likewise, foster youth just want people to pay attention to them but they don't always do that (Participant #6, Female).

Research on Foster Families

Participants also expressed the importance of social services agencies conducting research on foster families to determine if they are fit to look after children. One participant stated "Just in the foster care system there's a lot of room for abuse whether it be mental or physical so maybe I don't know a better research process of the people. Because it's really easy for foster parents to lie and then like treat kids poorly from my experience" (Participant #3, Female). Another participant believed that foster agencies need to do a better job of checking families to make sure they are fit to look out for the well-being of the child and suggested potential foster families take a psychology test (Participant #6, Female). This participant went on to say that some foster families take children in for not so good reasons and stated that a lot of times agencies are so adamant about putting a child in a home but not with a family (Participant #6, Female).

Outreach on School Campuses

Another recommendation that participants expressed was outreach on school campuses to educate foster youth about college and the resources that are available to them. One participant stated, "Outreach! Outreach so the youth can know about…outreach in middle school and in high school so kids can know about Guardian Scholars, can know about CYC – City Youth Connections, they helped pass bills like AB12. I haven't been in it in a long time so I don't know other bills they've passed but that one because I was the one that helped do that too. They need to know about ILSP - Independent Living Skills Programs, whatever one that's inside their city, they the one

that help you get into college, they the one that help you get a job and you know they help with job training and help you write a resume. So just a lot of outreach needs to be done and a lot of educational what is out there for them" (Participant #4, Male). Another participant stated "I mean I learned about all these opportunities in college, I don't remember learning about these opportunities while I was in the system. If we can improve somewhere that's where we can improve because like I said I went in when I was 13, my sister was 15, my little brother was 11, and then I had a baby brother he was like 3 or something. And for my sister unfortunately she ended up on a different life path, she's actually serving at Chowchilla a life sentence right now. So I honestly feel like if that opportunity would have been presented to her like 'hey, you know I know it's gonna be a rough three years but as soon as we get the opportunity let's get you into school. They have all these benefits. You don't have to like struggle, it's gonna work itself out, you can work yourself out of this situation.' I think that if they would've you know hammered that into us then a lot of people can see a light at the end of the tunnel" (Participant #5, Female).

ADVICE FOR FOSTER YOUTH

Don't Give Up

When asked what advice would they give to foster youth who are interested in pursuing post-secondary education many participants said don't give up. One participant said "I think that no matter what happens in the group home, no matter how stressed you are, how mad you can get at the other girls, boys, or the staff there to keep going. . . . I

think that you need to have the motivation to go to school because without it, I promise

you the system is not going to do it for you (Participant #2, Female). Another stated

"Know that the road won't be easy. Know that you may have pitfalls but you can

overcome them. Know that resources and connections are viable and needed for your

success in college and after college. Know to take it semester by semester, don't put too

much on yourself that you can't handle. Just take one step at a time and know that it is a

journey" (Participant #4, Male).

Utilize Resources

Participants also expressed the importance of utilizing the resources around them

to their advantage. One participated stated "There's free money out there! It's really easy

to think you can't do college because you can't afford it but when are that low income

there's all these grants and scholarships. There's so much free money out there, you can

do it you just have to have the motivation and the drive to succeed. There's so many

resources on campus to help, so much financial and mental help that you can get. It's

possible you just have to want it and do the research, find people to help you with the

research. They're out there out there!" (Participant #3, Female). Likewise, another stated

"I would just like to say to the ones that have a horrible experience in foster care, just let

them know the resources that are available to them and how they can use those resources

to their advantage" (Participant #1, Female).

Career Goals

When asked about their career goals, all participants wanted a career in a helping profession. Participant #1 stated, "My career goals are to become a Child Life Specialist and I would want to work at a children's hospital" (Participant #1, Female). Participant #2 stated, "I changed it to be a teacher because throughout my life there weren't that many great teachers, some people just like to collect their check and leave. . . .I want to be a teacher that empowers people" (Participant #2, Female). Participant #3 stated "My career goals, so I haven't figured out what I'm doing I have a couple ideas. Camp director and or kind of doing, I forgot what they were called but I would go to different national parks and kind of write up an evaluation. Kind of packet for them to be like this what you can improve on, just give them suggestions. I thought that sounded really cool, I get to travel and I get to be in nature, I love being in nature" (Participant #3, Female). Participant #4 stated "So I got my AA in child development and eventually I want to be a youth counselor. That's one of the reasons why I wanted to go to college as well because I wanted to reach back to the youth" (Participant #4, Male). Participant #5 stated "I wanna graduate and then get into the Master's Degree for Social Work and work in corrections as a social worker in the prisons or work in the health care field as a clinical social worker" (Participant #5, Female). Participant #6 wanted to work with animals to ensure they are being protected. Furthermore, participant #7 stated "And my career goals, so I really wanna do something that helps the community and I'm trying to figure out. But just something that has to do with either improving the systems itself or I don't know

improving physically like housing or something. So I volunteer with Habitat For

Humanity and I really want to pursue just doing something like that. Yeah, you know just

improving the communities" (Participant #7, Female).

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, I examined foster youth's post secondary educational success, utilizing members of the Guardian Scholars Program at Sacramento State. My research question asked, what supportive factors did former foster youth attribute to their success in post-secondary education? I hypothesized that it could be that foster youth who have positive supports and resources in their life are more likely to pursue post-secondary education. This research study was a cross-sectional qualitative study consisting of in-person interviews. The results showed that foster youth who pursued higher education attributed this success to having more supportive factors in their life. These supportive factors include but are not limited to: supportive people, financial support, programs, perseverance and success driven, and intrinsic motivation. The results also discussed challenges, including: struggling academically; resources and unique cases; recommendations for change; more caring and supportive people; research on foster families; outreach on school campuses; advice to foster youth; don't give up; utilize resources; and career goals.

RESULTS AND LITERATURE

Supportive People

During the interview process participants attributed part of their success in post secondary education to having supportive people in their lives. These supportive people included social workers, school staff, families, and peers.

Social workers

Many participants in this study expressed the importance of having social workers in their life that helped them stay on track academically. Many participants in this study valued social workers that reminded them about FAFSA, college applications and bought them school supplies. Previous research also showed that having caseworkers (social workers) that were involved in the lives of foster youth was vital to their success (Quest et al., 2012). Likewise some social workers became a safe place for foster youth to talk to in their times of need (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). It's important to recognize that having a positive relationship with social workers is not always something that happens with foster youth. In some cases not having a positive relationship can cause them more problems, which can impact their educational success, living situation, mental health, and relationships with adults and the system. The literature recognizes that social workers can impact the lives of foster youth by being actively involved in their life, likewise social workers can also make foster youth's lives more challenging but not be actively involved in their life. As a result, it is important that we focus on fostering successful social worker/foster youth relationships.

School staff

In this research study, many participants discussed having school staff who made sure they were doing well in school. Participants stated school staff would remind them to apply for graduation or help them with expenses for school. Likewise, research supports the idea that school staff like teachers can really make a positive impact in foster

youths lives. One study talked about teachers who would provide after school tutoring, transportation, and making sure credits were fulfilled to ensure that foster youth were on the path towards academic success (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). The literature even stated that teacher's high expectations made foster youth demand greater of themselves (Neal, 2017). In order to get more research regarding the impact teachers have on foster youths educational success, my research study could have interviewed teachers as well to understand their perspective on this issue.

Family

Research has shown that foster youth appreciate foster families who play an active role in their life (Neal, 2017). Foster youth value families who are caring and show them the love they may or may not have received with their biological families (Hines et al., 2005). Likewise participants in my research study spoke about having a foster family who were supportive of youth's educational goals and taught them life skills that were essential to their overall well-being. However, it's important to recognize that all foster youth's experiences are not the same and some foster youth do not have good experiences with foster families.

Peers

Participants in this research study also discussed being amongst peers who were like-minded and had the same educational goals as themselves. They spoke about the importance of being surrounded by friends who were educationally driven as it motivated them to do the same. Research has shown that the educational experiences of foster youth

are impacted when they develop interpersonal relationships with their peers. I think my study results are similar to the literature because a lot of research directly interviews foster youth, as I did in this study. I believe as human beings we yearn for human connection and relationships and foster youth desire this as well.

Financial Support

Some participants discussed having financial support such as scholarships or grants to help them fund their education. Other participants talked about getting funding through different government programs or educational programs at various colleges. Research has explained the need for funding for foster youth that can help them pay for tuition and housing. Foster youth may receive funding through Pell Grants, work-study, or voucher funds (Unrau et al., 2017). It is known that foster youth may receive emergency funds or have certain fees waived, however foster youth need to know more about this process. Both the literature and my research study discuss different funding options but neither goes in depth about how foster youth can access these options.

Guardian Scholars Program

The Guardian Scholars Program was not identified throughout the literature. However, throughout my research study the results show that foster youth benefit from having programs specifically designed for them. Participants enjoyed being amongst peers who had similar experiences to their own. They also benefited from having resources provided to them through Guardian Scholars such as school supplies, hygiene products, food, book loans and other supports that aided them on their educational

journey. Guardian Scholars provides former foster youth with a community of people who are on the same academic journey and with people they can identify with. More research is needed on The Guardian Scholars Program specifically research that examines program benefits, resources provided, financial components, any challenges, and how to create more of these programs, as they are a positive support for former foster youth who are pursuing post-secondary education.

Other Programs

The literature thoroughly discussed the importance of having school based or community based programs as they can impact foster youth's lives personally and educationally. Various studies discussed the significance of school-based programs during secondary education that promote extra-curricular involvement (Gallegos & White, 2018). When foster youth are involved in extra-curricular activities they may experience consistent support from staff, build relationships with their peers, and stay on track with their academics. Another study, discussed a program called Foster Care Alumni Creating Educational Success (FACES) which is a college support program designed for foster youth alumni (Watt et al., 2013). This program provided scholarships, tutoring, employment, and mentoring services to former foster youth (Watt et al., 2013). Likewise, participants in my research study were also apart of different programs that supported them during their high school and college years. I believe these results are similar between the studies because the results reflect foster youths experiences. I believe

in order to get better data we could examine the impact of school-based programs during secondary education and assess if it impacts foster youth attending college.

Perseverance and Success Driven

The literature discussed foster youth's ability to push through and overcome their challenges as they were pursuing their education. The literature acknowledges this positive trait also referred to as resiliency. In my research study many participants spoke about their perseverance and determination while enrolled in college. Many participants pushed themselves during their academic journey even when things got challenging and established a 'get it done' mindset. One research study in particular highlights foster youth's ability to make conscious changes in their life in order to be successful in school (Hines et al., 2005). The same holds true for participants in my research study. These results are common across many studies' that examine foster youth and education. I believe foster youth develop these positive characteristics due to the challenges they may have experienced throughout their life and choose to make a conscious effort to be better.

Intrinsic Motivation

Many participants in this research study discussed their motivations for pursuing post-secondary education. For many participants their motivations came from wanting a better life for themselves or for their family. For others they were the first in their family to attend college and they wanted to show others that it was possible. The literature also supports this and in one research study in particular participants discussed wanting a

better life for their future children and they knew that it started with them (Neal, 2017).

Others wanted to be better than their parents and wanted to prove to everyone they could

succeed. These results are similar across many research studies and it shows that foster

youth have their own motivations for excelling in school and wanting a successful life.

Struggling Academically

Research examines and acknowledges the fact that many foster youth struggle and

are behind academically when compared to their peers. Research states that foster youth

lose roughly four to six months of educational development each time they change

schools (McNaught, as cited in Kirk & Day, 2011). Participants in my research study

discussed struggling in high school to pass their classes partly due to constantly changing

schools. One research study discussed the challenges that come with foster youth

changing schools including having to retake classes because units were not transferable

and grade retention (repeating the same grade) (Day et al., 2012; Kirk & Day, 2011). In

order to solve this issue the school system and the foster care system need to work

together and make the necessary changes because the literature has made

recommendations so that foster youth can do better in school.

Resources

Participants in this research study discussed lacking resources including financial

resources, basic needs and relational supports. Specifically for foster youth in group

homes, they lacked the resources to buy hygiene products, food, and other necessities. In

regard to education some participants expressed difficulty with navigating different

educational systems due to a lack of resources. The literature supports this and states that some foster youth will not apply for college due to a lack of resources available to them (Day et al., 2012). In order to get better results regarding barriers with accessing certain resources we need to talk directly with foster youth and make the necessary changes so that these youth can access services easily and effectively.

Grateful for Adversities

Some participants in this research study discussed feelings of gratitude for having to endure challenging experiences. Some believed that the reason they were able to make it to college was due to their challenges as it allowed for beneficial opportunities to come their way. The literature vaguely talks about foster youth being grateful for their adversities, however some research studies highlight it as a reoccurring theme. One research study discussed how foster youth were thankful for their challenging experiences because it made them a better person (Quest et al., 2012). More research is needed to examine if foster youth are grateful for their experiences in foster care or if they believe it hindered their personal and academic development.

More Caring and Supportive People

Participants in this research study discussed the importance of having caring and supportive staff members within the educational system. These include having staff that genuinely care about these youth, flexibility within the school system especially for youth who change schools, and more restorative justice approaches instead of punishments for bad behavior. Literature supports having trainings for staff so they can develop more

positive approaches that promote self-esteem in youth (Graham et al., 2015). It is

important that staff understand the unique challenges and experiences of foster youth that

affect their school needs because it can impact their educational success. In regard to

restorative justice approaches to combat bad behavior, some research studies recommend

that schools take a restorative approach, which can create a supportive environment

where foster youth can thrive (Gallegos & White, 2013). More research is needed on

Zero Tolerance policies vs. restorative justice interventions to examine the effects of both

and to see if restorative justice interventions prove to be in the best interest of foster

youth's educational success. In order to examine this, my research study could have also

interviewed staff at different elementary, middle and high schools to examine if Zero

Tolerance policies or restorative justice interventions promote educational success.

Research on Foster Families

Limited research has been conducted to determine if foster care agencies examine

foster families before they place children in their care. Many participants in this research

study suggested that foster care agencies develop an assessment or psychology tool to

assess if foster families are fit, due to the amount of abuse that happens in the home. I

believe foster care agencies need to analyze their system and invite foster youth to join

the conversation in regard to what is in their best interest. It is not enough for foster care

agencies to just place children in homes, children need to be placed with families that are

loving, supportive, and caring while looking after their emotional, mental, physical and

educational well-being.

Outreach on School Campuses

Research highlights the importance of interagency collaboration, communication, and partnership amongst various systems: education, child welfare, and non-profits to promote educational advancement amongst foster youth. One thing that participants in this research study discussed was the importance of outreach on school campuses so that foster youth can be aware of all the resources, financial aid, and supports that are available to them. The literature supports this and emphasized the need for educational liaisons to serve as a link between the foster care and educational system (Leone & Weinberg; Havalchak, White, O'Brien, Pecora, & Sepulveda as cited in Gallegos & White, 2013). One of the tasks of liaisons could be to educate foster youth on the resources but also hold resource fairs, college fairs and educational summits so that foster youth can be prepared. More research is needed on the different platforms foster youth can go about accessing this information and if outreach on school campuses are effective in promoting collegiate enrollment amongst foster youth.

Advice for Foster Youth

Many participants in this research study advised foster youth who are currently interested in pursuing post secondary education to utilize their resources and never to give up. However, this theme was not previously identified in the literature. I believe more research should look through the lens of former foster youth because they are the ones who can provide the most guidance to foster youth who are currently in the system.

Career Goals

In this research study, all seven participants were pursuing degrees that allowed them to give back to the world in one way or another. The literature does not highlight the specific career goals of former foster youth like this research study did, however it does highlight the fact that former foster youth are pursuing post-secondary education. Research recognizes that despite any challenges foster youth may have faced they are overcoming it and succeeding. While all participants in this research study majored in careers like counseling, teaching, social work, and health related professions amongst others, the fact that foster youth are attending college and pursuing a degree that brings them happiness and fulfillment is all that matters.

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MICRO, MEZZO, AND MACRO IMPLICATIONS

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Micro

By understanding that supportive factors can impact whether or not foster youth pursue post secondary education can result in more supportive factors being created at the micro level. Social workers, educators, caseworkers, foster youth liaisons, counselors and all professionals that interact with foster youth, have a responsibility to make sure that foster youth are being supported in a way that promotes personal and academic development. Especially individuals that work in the foster care system and educational system, it is their responsibility to advocate on the behalf of foster youth, ensure they are receiving the quality education they are entitled to, and to make sure these youth are a part of the conversation regarding any decisions that are made on their behalf. The study

contributes to the field of social work, because as social worker we will interact with foster youth whether that is in the school system, foster care system, mentoring, counseling, or through community organizations. If we are aware of what can contribute to foster youth doing well academically and pursuing post-secondary education we can create more of that.

Mezzo

By understanding that supportive factors can impact whether or not foster youth pursue post secondary education can result in more interventions being created with our families and communities. Organizations that cater to foster youth can engage in more outreach to educate foster youth on the resources and services that may be beneficial to them. Foster care agencies can also do more work with foster families to promote healthy, supportive, and caring relationships. As social workers, when working with foster families or community based organizations it's important to evaluate the work and determine if it is effective and really in the best interest of these youth.

Macro

At the macro level it is important that government agencies and policymakers listen to foster youth and ask them what they believe should be done. It can become routine as people in these positions to make decisions on the behalf of foster youth without consulting foster youth, however, it is important that foster youth are at the table as well. By understanding the supportive factors that impact foster youth's post-secondary educational pursuit we can incorporate these findings into policies. It is also

important that foster youth are educated on their rights as it pertains to their education

when it comes to decision-making. As social workers, if we engage in macro level work

with foster youth it is vital that we remind ourselves to have conversations with foster

youth as we are creating or changing policies.

LIMITATIONS

This research study's sampling population included members of the Guardian

Scholars Program at Sacramento State. As a result, the results are reflective of youth who

are pursuing college. The results do not reflect foster youth alumni who did not pursue

college, may have dropped out, or are not enrolled in the Guardian Scholars Program.

The results could have been more effective by talking with alumni who didn't pursue

college maybe because of the lack of knowledge regarding the resources, services, and

supportive factors available to them. This study could have gathered more information on

why some foster youth did not pursue college, which would allow for further change and

intervention to take place. Likewise, talking with foster youth who may have dropped out

could also help us understand what needs to happen at the micro, mezzo, and macro level

to limit the amount of drop outs.

This study could have been more rigorous by interviewing educators, caseworkers

that work in the foster care system and foster families. Each of these people have a

different perspective that can impact intervention and can aid future research. Only the

individuals who work day to day in these various settings truly know the challenges and

supports that impact foster youth. By interviewing these different people could have

allowed for a better well-rounded research study. Future research studies should do a study based on interagency collaboration where many systems come together including foster youth to come up with effective methods that promote educational pursuit amongst this population.

Potential researcher biases that occurred during this research are engaging in conversation with participants during the interview process. Instead of asking the interview questions and allowing them to answer without input, I engaged in commentary, which could have affected their responses to lean more towards the viewpoints of the researcher. Another one is confirmation bias, after reviewing the literature and recognizing supportive factors that are most common it could be easy to notice those same supportive factors in this study's results. And lastly, some questions may have been leading by assuming that participants had certain experiences when in fact they may not have.

FINDINGS

This research study aimed to discover the supportive factors that former foster youth attribute to their success in post-secondary education. A total of four major themes, 14 subthemes, and six sub-sub themes were found. The supportive factors that foster youth attributed to their success were supportive people (social workers, school staff, family, peers), financial support, programs (Guardian Scholars Program, others), perseverance and success driven, and intrinsic motivation. As social workers, teachers, caseworkers, policymakers, counselors, foster parents, and mentors we have to remember

that foster youth are depending on us. In many cases, they did not ask for the adversities

that have come into their lives so it is our responsibility to provide support within our

given professions. It is important to build meaningful and supportive relationships with

foster youth, educate them on the resources available to them, advocate on their behalf,

and speak to the greatness that is inside of them. While they may experience some

challenges on their educational journey, if they have supportive people in their lives,

beneficial resources and services put in place, and the motivation to succeed it can all

positively impact their post-secondary educational pursuit.

Appendix A

IMPLIED CONSENT FORM

Foster Youth Post Secondary Education Success

My name is Aarolind Hoskin, and I am a master's student at California State University, Sacramento, Social Work Department. I am conducting this research study to research supportive factors that help foster youth pursue post secondary education. If you volunteer to participate, you will be asked to partake in an in person interview. Your participation in this study will be 1 session for 30 minutes.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can choose not to have the interview recorded. There are some possible risks involved for participants. These risks are not anticipated to be any greater than risks you encounter in daily life. There are some benefits to this research, particularly by analyzing your supportive factors for pursuing post secondary education you are acknowledging your personal and educational resiliency. This research study can empower foster youth and other at risk populations.

An incentive for a $5 Jamba Juice gift card will be offered for participating in the study. I will provide the incentive to any participant who begins the interview process, no matter if you complete the interview or not. You will receive the incentive from me at the end of this interview.

It is anticipated that study results will be shared with the public through presentations and/or publications. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Measures to insure your confidentiality are while some demographic data will be collected, directly identifiable information such as your name will not be. All recorded interviews will be locked in a password protected phone. Raw data containing information that can be identified with you will be destroyed at the conclusion of all interviews .The de-identified data will be maintained in a safe, locked location and may be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from you. Raw data will be destroyed after a period of 3 years after study completion.

Please contact Sacramento State's Student Health and Counseling Services at (916) 278-6461, if you are in need of support. If you have any questions about the research at any time, please contact me at aarolindhoskin@csus.edu or Jennifer Price Wolf, wolf@csus.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research

project please call the Office of Research, Innovation, and Economic Development, California State University, Sacramento, (916) 278-5674, or email irb@csus.edu.

Your participation indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Please keep this form as your copy.

Appendix B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why were you placed in foster care?
2. What are some challenges you faced due to the foster care and educational system?
3. What are some things in your life that were helpful or supportive to you when you were in foster care?
4. Why did you want to pursue higher education?
5. What are some of your strengths/skills that have helped you be successful in college?
6. What support systems, services, and/or resources do you currently have that is helping you in college?
7. What has led to your academic success and what are your career goals?
8. How has the Guardian Scholars Program helped you in college?
9. What do you believe needs to be done in the foster care system and/or educational system to help more foster youth pursue higher education?
10. What advice would you give to other foster youth who are interested in pursuing higher education?

Interview Demographic Data

- Gender
- Age
    - 15-24
    - 25-34
    - 35-44
    - 45-54
    - 55-64
    - 65+
- Race/Ethnicity
- Age entered foster care
- Number of foster care placements
- Number of high schools attended

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