



Perceptions of Transitional Living among Foster Youth: A Secondary Analysis

Tracey Marie Barnett McElwee, PhD, LMSW^{1*}, Laura Danforth, PhD, LCSW¹, Lillian Wichinsky, PhD, LMSW², & Howard Turney, PhD¹

¹School of Social Work, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2801 South University Ave, Little Rock, AR 72204, United States.

²University of Nevada, Reno 1664 N. Virginia Street Reno, NV 89557, United States.

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***Corresponding Author:** Tracey Marie Barnett McElwee, PhD, LMSW, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2801 South University Ave, Little Rock, AR 72204, United States. E-mail: tmcelwee@ualr.edu

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Abstract

Based on calculations from the U.S. Department of Education, there were an estimated 1.3 million homeless children in U.S. public schools during the 2014-2015 school year. This secondary analysis of qualitative data findings reveals the perspectives of eight foster youth regarding their time spent in a transitional living program specifically designed for foster youth. To our knowledge, this is the first study to conduct a secondary analysis of program evaluation data on the perspectives of foster youth regarding their time spent in a transitional living program.

Keywords: Foster Youth, Transitional Living, Homelessness, Education, Career

Introduction

Each year between 25,000 and 28,000 youth exit the foster care system due to aging out [1,2]. Foster youth are considered to have aged out of the child welfare system when they are no longer in state custody because they have reached the legal age of adulthood, as compared to being adopted or being legally reunified with their family. Youth who age out of the foster care system are propelled to become independent quickly. Although many states provide youth with the option to remain in foster care until the age of 21, many still experience a transition period that is more condensed than the general population of emerging adults [3]. The transition period is more compressed due to limited options that could possibly extend their transition time and policy-driven timelines [4]. When youth exit the foster care system, they often lack the skills, experiences, and support needed to successfully transition into adulthood; leaving them at risk for low educational attainment, lack of employment opportunity, poor mental and physical health, and increased risk of criminal behavior [5].

The term “emerging adulthood” is used to describe the developmental period of time when a young person transitions into adulthood. This developmental stage typically begins in late adolescence and continues into the mid to late twenties [6]. Some of the developmental tasks occurring during emerging adulthood include acquiring experience in an entry level, foundational job, becoming financially independent, planning for the future, and accepting full responsibility for one’s self and wellbeing [7]. The process and time frame of emerging adulthood and becoming fully independent has

increased in length during the postwar era. The percentage of 18 to 24 year olds living with their parents has continued to increase since the 1960’s and it is not uncommon for parents to provide housing, guidance, and financial support for their grown children [8]. This prolonged reliance on family support has been observed across young adults and families of all socioeconomic levels [4]. A key component of the emerging adulthood and a successful transition into full independence is adequate and appropriate social support [6]. Unfortunately, this slow transitional period into adulthood is often not an option for youth exiting the foster care system [9].

Literature Review

Educational Attainment

Completion of high school or obtaining a General Educational Development (GED) prior to exiting the foster care system is associated with better transitional outcomes, including stable employment and lack of reliance on government benefits [10]. It is estimated that only 50% of foster youth obtain a high school degree or equivalent by the age of 18 years [2]. When compared to the general population, at the age of 26, former foster youth were six times less likely to have received a postsecondary degree and nine times less likely to have received a four-year university degree [8]. Many foster youth experience educational challenges prior to exiting foster care due to multiple school transfers [5] and restrictive special education placements due to disabilities [10].

Scannapieco, Smith, and Blakeney-Strong [5], examined the factors that influence a foster youth’s ability to succeed in various domains of transition. The study focused on education, employment, employability, financial literacy, and shelter and was completed with foster youth who had at one time participated in a specific transitional program. In the area of education, the authors found that youth who were older during their last interaction with the transitional program and youth who were part of a sibling group had higher levels of academic achievement. Youth who were removed from their family due to physical neglect had a statistically significant lower education achievement score. The more placements youth had while in foster care, the lower their score in the education domain. Additionally, this study found that increased planning for the future increases the youth’s likelihood of educational success. The authors suggest that a foster youth who has spent more time with a coach or mentor discussing

and setting goals for the future may obtain higher levels of educational success [5].

Employment and Financial Security

Failure to succeed academically can make it difficult for foster youth to find and maintain employment, resulting in increased rates of poverty and inability to obtain stable housing. Longitudinal studies have shown that youth who age out of the foster care system have higher rates of unemployment and earn less than the general population of emerging adults, even in studies that control for socioeconomic status. Of the youth who do find employment, many are not making enough money to stay above the poverty line [8]. Reports state that only between 30-50% of former foster youth are employed at some capacity in the years following their exit from foster care [5].

As previously discussed, youth exiting the foster care system often do not have the same financial support of family members as other emerging youth. A youth in foster care may not be allowed or able to work prior to aging out due to regulations of the child welfare system, rules of the foster parent or group home, or lack of transportation [5]. As a result, many youth exit foster care with minimal or no money saved [7]. Financial instability due to unemployment, unstable employment, or insufficient earnings often causes 12-30% of former foster youth to rely on government assistance [11,12]. In addition, youth who age out of foster care have a poverty rate that is three times higher the national average [7].

Safe and Consistent Housing

Lack of employment opportunities, job insecurity, and adequate wages that keep youth in poverty make it difficult for former foster youth to find and maintain stable housing. Episodes of “couch-surfing” and moving from place to place is common in the years after exiting foster care. Data from the Midwest Study found that 30% of 23-24 year olds had lived in five or more places since leaving foster care [8]. Sometimes youth make a sudden and unplanned decision to exit the foster care system due to frustrations with the child welfare system or behavioral health problem and are immediately left with no place to go and little to no support. Approximately one in four former foster youth experience at least one night of homelessness in the year following their exit from foster care [10]. Foster youth with physical, mental, or intellectual challenges or with substance abuse disorders may have an especially difficult time finding or obtaining appropriate housing [8].

Behavioral Health

Homelessness and financial instability are associated with the decreased use of mental health care during the transition period [7]. Youth who are aging out of the foster care system have higher rates of mental health problems than the general youth population [13]. Studies suggest that more than 80% of youth in foster care have some form of an emotional or behavioral health problem [10]. High rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are found among youth who have aged out of the foster care system. Research by Gomez et al., [7] suggests rates of PTSD in former foster youth were double the rates of PTSD in veteran soldiers [7]. Older youth in foster care consume more behavioral health services than youth who are not in foster care. Approximately 50% of former foster youth utilized mental health services during their last year in foster care [9].

The use of mental health services drops significantly in the transitional years following a youth leaving foster care. Approximately 50% percent of the mental health services utilized previously are no longer accessed within the year following the exit of foster care [9]. A rapid decline in the use of pharmacotherapy is seen within the month following the exit from foster care as well [10]. Possible reasons for the decline in the continued use of mental health care and medication adherence suggests a lack of planning and education about the importance of care and medication prior to

the youth leaving foster care. Sakai et al. [13] explored the reasons why many youths discontinue their mental health care services after leaving foster care. Findings included, lack of transportation, not knowing how to schedule an appointment or refill a prescription, inability to pay for their medication or copays, and not knowing or understanding insurance coverage options. Some youth reported they did not have a part in the decision on what types of mental health care services they received while in foster care and felt that they did not need the services they received. Others stated that they did not fully understand their diagnosis or the treatment options that are available to them.

Importance of Transitional Living Programs

Former foster youth face a range of challenges; they are at an increased risk for low attainment in education, employment and financial stability, often lack stable housing, and are at a higher risk for mental health problems, and criminal involvement. However, many also possess resiliency and overcome these challenges to function as healthy and productive members of society. Current research suggests that transitional living programs available to youth who have recently left the foster care system and those preparing to age out need to provide social support systems as a component of the program. This includes the establishment of supportive relationships with non-parental caring adults such as mentors [6].

Former foster youth benefit from transitional living programs that provide them the opportunity to develop independent living skills while also providing a safety net when they fail. A transitional living program can provide the guidance and support that other emerging adults typically receive from their parents [5]. However, the success of these programs is relatively unknown, particularly as it relates to the perspectives of the program users (i.e., foster youth) themselves.

Methodology

Research Design and Question

Secondary data analysis was utilized in this study to uncover foster youth perspectives regarding their time spent in a transitional living program specifically designed for foster youth (hereby known as “the program”). Researchers examined foster youths’ qualitative responses to questions about the value of the program that were reported in a program evaluation conducted in 2018. Thematic content analysis was used in order to explore the unique narratives of foster youth as it relates to this specific transitional program as well as to explore their perceived realities within said program [14,15]. This methodology allows researchers to become somewhat immersed in participants’ perspectives and worldviews, allows for open discussion and understanding, and is extremely salient to providing additional insight into what is working (and perhaps not working) in transitional programs geared toward foster youth [14,16]. In addition, there is limited research that uses qualitative inquiry to explore foster youth perceptions about transitional programs as a whole, with much of the existing research focused on quantitatively measuring satisfaction with discrete areas of transition into adulthood (i.e., healthcare access or mentorship availability) [16].

Using information that was collected and reported in a previously completed program evaluation in 2018, researchers analyzed responses elicited from a focus group conducted with foster youth in order to determine whether or not they found the program helpful or effective in their journey of transitioning into adulthood and what impact, if any, the program has on their lives. Specifically, the research question is: What is the main benefit of participating in a transitional living program for foster youth, from the perspective of foster youth?

Participants

After approval was granted by a university institutional review board, researchers were able to review a program evaluation of a transitional

living program for foster youth conducted in a metropolitan city in a southern state in the United States. The original program evaluation contained qualitative responses from eight foster youth who were actively involved in the transitional living program in 2018 and who participated in a single, 60-minute focus group. Specifically, this purposive sampling of foster youth contained three youth who identified as female, and five foster youth who identified as male. There were four white foster youth, three Black foster youth, and one Hispanic/Latina foster youth. All participants were aged 16 - 18. There was one youth who was completing their senior year of high school, two youths who were pursuing their GEDs, three college freshmen, and two youths who were not in high school and were not pursuing their GED at the time of the study.

Procedure

Researchers examined responses from participants that were solicited during a 60 minute focus group. A short, semi-structured interview guide was used in order to elicit responses from participants about their experiences. The focus group began with the interviewer asking the participants to state the first thought that comes to mind when they think about the program. Interviewers also asked foster youth questions about goals they set for themselves during the program as well as their perspectives on different services offered within the program. Interviewers remained open to where the participants steered the conversation and allowed their personal stories related to the program and perspectives about benefits of the program to naturally unfold.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis was conducted using the constant comparative method [17] and was completed using the responses of the foster youth who were asked about the program and who participated in the focus groups. Their responses (included in the program evaluation in 2018) were published in said evaluation and were read multiple times, coded by two researchers (both of whom are social workers), with one of the researchers being the person who completed the original program evaluation and who conducted the focus group.

A multi-level coding process was completed in Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software. Using an open or “in-vivo” coding method, the words and ideas of respondents were used to describe their perceptions of the program and the data was initially designated into early categories of “characterized concepts” or conveyed meanings (p. 54) [18]. Next, axial coding was utilized in order to understand how established concepts identified in the primary stages of coding could potentially be grouped into specific categories that helped identify new ways to understand the experiences of participants, specifically as it relates to the transition program.

Finally, selective coding was used to continue to sort existing codes into final categories and identify any themes that were central to the described experiences of the eight participants [18]. During this final phase of coding, theoretical saturation was met, as there were three major codes that were applied to the data most frequently, with no new information presenting itself in the data.

Findings

After qualitative analysis was complete, the core category or theme of “opportunity” was solidified, as all eight participants cited this as the main benefit from their participation in the program. Specifically, participants reported that they experienced opportunity for foundational employment, opportunity to obtain education, as well as the opportunity to develop future career goals, all of which served as essential navigational resources for them via the program.

Opportunity for Foundational Employment

Participants reported that participation in the program allowed them to obtain minimum wage jobs that help them develop skills and build

their resumes. All eight participants who participated in the focus group reported that they had obtained employment with the help of the program, specifically the program’s coordinated effort to connect them to employment opportunities within their specific community and by making sure that employers visited the program site regularly to discuss jobs available. This is a particularly important finding since securing early employment can serve as a major protective factor for youth transitioning out of the foster care system [19]. Regarding the mentorship opportunities as well as how it leads to employment, one participant reported that:

“They [help us find jobs] a lot! Like the job that I have...They have a lot of people come and tell us about jobs. The job that I have, a woman came to one of our gatherings and helped me get a really good job!”

Participants also reported that the benefits of working included obtaining insurance, developing financial literacy by learning how to save and budget their earnings and hone entry-level job skills. This program component is supported by numerous studies that highlight the importance that foster youth be provided opportunities to prepare a resume, complete a job application, practice interview skills, and to learn to be self-sufficient through entry-level employment [20,21]. One participant explained that being employed was an essential part of the program, stating that:

“...[Because of the program], I work at a Hotel! [Program Staff] helps us get jobs. They do that really well. They’ll take you to the workforce. They will take you anywhere! They want you to [work] so you won’t be sitting around the house all day.”

It was also reported during the focus group that participants were required by the program to apply for at least three jobs per week, increasing their odds of finding employment. Although this requirement seemed to be effective, there were participants who found this difficult and arbitrary:

“I applied and submitted applications to the places that I wanted to work. I only wanted to apply to places that are for one, first hiring of course and places that I can get to easily. They were telling me to do 3 a day!” [appears upset].

Opportunity to Obtain Education

Only forty six percent of foster youth possess their high school diploma or GED, and less than three percent obtain a bachelor’s degree from a post-secondary institution [22]. Because lacking formal education negatively impacts youths transition into adulthood, it is essential that programming geared toward this population include educational opportunities [23].

When asked how the program has shaped their life experiences, participants reported that the program provided them the opportunity to finish high school, obtain their GED, and even attend college. Six of the eight participants were in the process of pursuing and/or completing educational goals, while two of the participants were considering their educational options and in the early stages of establishing educational goals (i.e., deciding to either obtain a high school diploma or pursue a GED).

One youth reported that they “already [earned] a GED as well as a certificate in small engineering repair” and that they “were done with school completely!” There were also participants who explained that the program helped provide the support they needed to finish high school and apply for college, stating that:

“[Through this program], I am attending [a community college] for summer school, and then I am going to [a 4-year university] in the Fall!”

Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating that she is “now going to go to college and [major] in business, and then I am going to go to IT tech!”

Opportunity to Develop Future Career Goals

Many programs aimed to increase positive outcomes for foster youth rarely incorporate effective practices that assist with successful employment and career development into adulthood [19]. However, when asked what they wanted to do for a future career, most of the participants had a clear plan for a path forward. Participants reported that they had specific ideas about their future careers, including “working on a farm in Texas,” “owning a motorcycle shop,” producing music, becoming a nurse, and even starting their own non-profit organizations.

One participant even explained that her experience within the program as well as the connections she has made in the community have inspired her to use her career to help others. She states:

“I plan on becoming a social worker and going for my masters! ...After that, I plan on going somewhere where social workers are more prominently needed. I plan on minoring in business... My family has a business they own back home. ...I [also] want to be a marriage counselor!”

Another participant explained that participation in the program gave them room to develop career goals that were congruent with their interests, stating that:

“[There is] computer stuff I want to do. I plan on one day making my own games and stuff like that! Eventually, I want to get spotted by...people who make games, if i’m lucky. ...[That’s] how people get connected with the game jobs in the first place. People just notice them!”

This is particularly important for transitional programming for foster youth, as talking with youth about their specific talents and dreams for their future increases the likelihood of permanent or stable career paths for this population (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).

Discussion

The core theme “*opportunity*” continued to emerge as all eight participants cited this as the main benefit from their participation in the program. Youth reported that they experienced opportunity for foundational employment, opportunity to obtain education, as well as the opportunity to develop future career goals; all of which served as essential navigational resources for them via the program. To our knowledge, this is the first study to conduct a secondary analysis of program evaluation data on the perspectives of foster youth regarding their time spent in a transitional living program.

Researchers applied a secondary approach to examining foster youths’ qualitative responses to questions about the value of the program that were reported in a program evaluation conducted in 2018. The topic of employment emerged more than any other theme. Youth participating in this program shared the benefits of having minimum wage jobs, the opportunity to develop new skillsets, and being presented with paid and unpaid activities to boost ones resume. All youth who had jobs credited their success to the efforts set forth by the program. Particularly, youth looked forward to the weekly gatherings, which served as a meetup for youth to network with prospective employers from the community.

Studies report that at least 50 percent of foster youth have a GED/ High School Diploma, 70 percent have a desire to attend college, while 33 percent of foster youth actually enroll in college before the age of 25. However, only four percent are able to earn a certificate or associates degree and two percent a bachelor’s degree [24,25]. These findings reveal significant gaps for policy makers and researchers for intervention. When compared to the general population, more than 50 percent of non-foster youth attend college by the age of 25 and 25 percent obtain bachelor degrees [26]. Findings from our sample revealed that six of the eight participants were in the process of

pursuing and/or completing their educational goals, while two of the participants were considering educational options and were establishing educational goals.

Literature supports that foster youth pursue higher education through motivating lens of internal and external factors. Influencers such as social workers, counselors, teachers, and volunteers are all external factors that encouraged youth to pursue higher education [27]. Internal factors such as increasing one’s career and financial upward mobility and the desire to undo previous trajectories of emotional, psychological, and physical trauma have served as internal motivators for degree attainment [27]. Our sample revealed similar findings. Youth stated they had specific ideas about their future careers, such as owning a farm or a motorcycle shop, becoming a nurse or a social worker, and even starting their own non-profit organizations. These findings are consistent across the literature as many foster youth share that obtaining higher education will be their beginning opportunity to provide a better life than the one they were reared in and to provide a better way of living for their future families [28].

Conclusion

The transitional program referred to throughout this paper is an organization that fosters youth trust. To serve youth who have aged out of the foster care system and become homeless, the program opened its doors in 2008 and soon thereafter expanded its services to all homeless youth in a metropolitan city in a southern state in the United States. In 2013, the program received a Health and Human Services grant to provide housing and supportive services to youth who are at risk of homelessness. This program provides youth with a sense of belonging. Many leave the program prematurely, but still come to the weekly gatherings to share a meal, to seek assistance with employment, education, housing, and to be part of a peer/family group. Some youth are not ready for long-term placement but it is obvious they consider this, their safe place, a place they know does not judge them, and provides stability. The program has a supportive staff that cares deeply about the needs of the youth they serve. They continually strive to improve their professional skills and services and are devoted to the mission of the organization. Beginning June 2016, the program brought on a Licensed Master Social worker with program evaluation and grant writing experience. This has strengthened the data collection and management needed within the program and freed up outreach staff. The program staff are always willing to go the extra mile for youth. One staff reported how she and another intern attended the high school graduation of one foster youth. Although this youth only stayed at the program for approximately two months’ post-graduation, when she arrived at her new destination, the youth phoned her transitional coach to provide an update of her new location. This was not a requirement of the youth, however the fact that she reached out is an example of the bond that was built between the two.

The strength of the transitional program lies in the devoted well-trained staff who believes deeply in the potential of the youth to succeed despite their difficult circumstances. The program also saw an increase in occupancy during 2018 from an average of 8.1 youth to 9.2 youth (10.3 youth for the last three months of the reporting period). This is attributed to increased outreach and increased awareness to the community. They have taken significant measures to provide for the emotional, social, and environmental needs of the youth with a caring and well qualified staff. This program is well known in the Community and the Executive Director is often sought out for his expertise in working with this population. The staff has the education, resources, and community partnerships to successfully address the challenges this population experiences. The program provides a structured home-like setting for former foster youth to continue their development and address the multiple social,

psychological and physical needs that go unaddressed during their often, early traumatic lives.

Implications for Practice

Children aging out of foster care represent a disproportionately vulnerable population. Policy makers can generate and fund programs that prepare these young adults to address life skills, as systemic issues in the child welfare system have created instability for many in foster care. Young adults could benefit from understanding the responsibility of financial matters, obligations for rental agreements, and intimate relationships in order to successfully emerge into adulthood. Working to provide a consistent and stable environment during the formative years is essential to human development. Foster care training for social workers should include curricula that prepares youth for adulthood. Frontline social workers must be diligent in their efforts to respond to the unique mental health concerns of this population. Mentoring programs are indicated to prepare youth for successful transition. A multi-faceted approach is necessary to respond to this issue. Further research could provide important data on this population. Policies can also be developed to assist foster parents as they help prepare their foster children to transition successfully into adulthood. Research indicates that the best predictor of success for youth who age out of foster care is relationships; not jobs, education, financial literacy, but significant and impactful long term relationships. Those who have a caring adult in their lives are more likely to experience increases in their health and well-being [29]. The key to helping foster youth succeed is to build long lasting relationships with them.

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