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FOSTER YOUTH IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: INDEPENDENT LIVING

A Scholarly Research Project

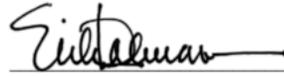
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Doctor of Education

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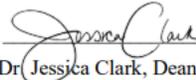
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore reasons why adolescent youth from foster care and in special education, including those who are newly emancipated from the foster care system, have difficulty transitioning into independent living. The study was guided by one research question: What difficulties do students who receive special education services and become emancipated from the foster care system face when transitioning into independent living? Based on several interviews with Thomas, a 19-year-old, emancipated foster youth who received special education services while in school, four life factors (instability of placement and school, mental health, mentors, and lack of communication) and three causal themes (movement, relationship, and academics) materialized. It is clear from the interview findings that foster youth needs an array of assistance to transition into independent living.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother Norma Bell who has always loved me unconditionally and lifted me up. She is my role model and my strength; my wife Margrette who provides balance, encouragement, and peace; my sisters Sandra, Valerie and Anita who are the best sisters in the world, always supportive of me and my dreams; my brother Larry encourages and challenges me to be the best person I can be.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Adolescent youth in special education who are exiting foster care often transition into early adulthood with challenges associated with their life experiences. During childhood, they frequently endure multiple forms of abuse, which include sexual, physical, and emotional abuse (Hallet et al., 2018). As a result, many are placed in group homes during elementary school, which means they have limited residential stability or exposure to a healthy functioning family. In addition, maltreatment during childhood affects their ability to achieve self-esteem, even after being removed from the abusive environment (Hallet et al., 2018). This chapter introduces the study's research problem and setting by providing background information, the study's purpose, research questions, literature review, and description of the significance of the study.

Background Information

In the community of Pleasant (a pseudonym for the study's research setting), there are organizations that educate youth in foster care, such as the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR), Children Youth and Family Collaborative (CYFC), and Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS). The DOR, in partnership with consumers and other stakeholders provides services and advocacy which result in employment, independent living, and equality for individuals with disabilities (Department of Rehabilitation, 2023). CYCF's mission includes working directly on campuses to provide services to foster youth (Children Youth and Family Collaborative, 2022). EOPS works to help students that are minorities, low income, prospective first-generation college students, and English language learners (California Community Colleges, 2023).

In the community of Pleasant, to be eligible for residency in a group home, a youth must attend school within Pleasant Unified School District (PUSD). PUSD is a pseudonym for the community's public-school district. Approximately one-third of foster youth change school multiple times during a single school year (Alliance for Children's Rights, 2018). Often, many of these students' previous school placements are within a nonpublic school. Many times, they are filtered into PUSD because of behavior concerns. When foster care youth receiving special education services are assigned to PUSD, it is at a significant cost to the school district. In 2017, the cost was three times that of educating a peer not receiving special educational services (Petek, 2019).

Friendly Pleasant Academy

Friendly Pleasant Academy (FPA), a pseudonym, is a program for special education students who qualify under emotional disturbance. All the students at FPA have behavior concerns and are not ready to learn at a comprehensive school campus. The program offered by PUSD was established in August 2010 for both middle and high school students. FPA's mission is to educate and support learners in reaching their highest potential. FPA's ultimate goal is for every student to return to a comprehensive site full-time. A comprehensive site provides students in grades 6-12 with the current curriculum and focuses on academics.

Teaching at FPA is incredibly challenging because the population of the students is predominantly 90% from a group home or foster care. In addition, students placed at FPA are mainly from juvenile detention centers. Students entering FPA from juvenile detention centers have crimes from selling drugs, weapons charges, larceny, arson, sex misdemeanors, and other violent offenses. Most of the students take psychotropic medication and have explosive behaviors. Students' violent actions while at school entail throwing chairs, books, computers, or

any items available at peers, staff, or teachers; furthermore, they may destroy their classroom or current area being occupied by breaking anything in their way. Their episodes may also include violently attacking those around them for unprovoked reasons. Due to the severity of the student disabilities found at FPA, all outer classroom doors remain locked during school hours. To enter the school, visitors must be buzzed in after being verified through a glass window by staff.

All of FPA's students suffer from some form of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs include traumatic events that happened during childhood. For instance, violence, abuse, neglect, witnessing violence, and family members dying by suicide (CDC, 2022). ACEs, emotional disturbance, and behavioral issues are closely related. Emancipated foster youth bring these realities with them as they transition into higher education, requiring college teachers and staff to be as well-versed as FPA teachers and staff are in the understanding of childhood abuse, neglect, and trauma. Understanding the trauma experienced by these students is an important aspect of developing support structures to encourage persistence toward mental and physical health in addition to independent living and transitioning into adulthood (Hallett et al., 2018). According to the Department of Social Services under Assembly Bill AB 12, foster youth can be supported by state services through the age of 21. While foster care programs for youth under the age of 18 are increasing, the resources available for foster youth who are aging out of the system, including transitional housing, mental health, and independent living skills programs, still fall short.

Statement of Problem

Special education foster youth that are close to becoming newly emancipated from the system have difficulty transitioning into independent living when the time arrives. These foster

youth do not have the same educational experiences as their peers due to higher rates of absenteeism, suspensions, and special education referrals (Zetlin et al., 2004).

Foster youth, especially those living in group homes and those who receive special education services as required by an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), often have difficulty getting admitted into college (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). Even when alternative settings such as FPA are designed to support students with higher needs, they usually do not have offerings such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses or sports programs that help encourage good college attendance.

Fox and Zamani-Gallaher (2018) have identified a litany of barriers faced by former foster youth that affect their ability to access and complete postsecondary studies, including residential instability, frequent change of school placement, trauma, and mental health issues. Some of the underlying causes for these barriers are child neglect and abuse. As a secondary administrator at FPA, I am greatly concerned about barriers facing emancipated special education foster youth who have a difficult experience transitioning into independent living.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore reasons why adolescent youth from foster care and in special education, including those who are newly emancipated from the foster care system, have difficulty transitioning into independent living. The study was guided by one research question:

1. What difficulties do students who receive special education services and become emancipated from the foster care system face when transitioning into independent living?

Researcher Assumptions

The study was guided by two assumptions. First, it is possible that students who reside in a residential education placement can be successful in either graduating from high school, reunification with family, going to a lower level of care, or remaining in school. Second, there is a possibility that emancipated special education foster youth can be successful in transitioning into the workforce with the right support in place and communication between the social worker, parent/guardian, school personnel, and the student. As the researcher of this study and as an administrator at FPA who has worked for eight years to support foster care youth receiving special education services, I hold these assumptions because I believe all students have the right to access resources provided. I believe all foster youth should be supported by the government up to the age of 25 years old. Many young adults are not prepared to live independently before the age of 30 years old. In addition, I believe foster youth should have free housing, free continued education, job training, mental health support, physical health support, free bus or train transportation and mentors.

Foster Youth in Special Education

According to Geenen and Powers (2006), students in the foster care system face challenges such as emotional trauma of abuse, placement instability, disruption to family, and community ties. Emancipation from the foster care system occurs at age 18, this puts these students at great risk of school failure. The foster care system does not prepare students to transition into independent living. Many of these students have not developed the skills necessary for adulthood, such as organization, focus, self-monitoring, and transitional skills. Russell (2016) shared a number of factors impeding the process of independent living for these youth, including a lack of knowledge about resources, employment discrimination, employment

deficits, lack of collaboration from programs, and restricted workforce opportunities. The academic achievement of students in the foster care system who do not have special education services contrasts with special education students who live in foster care placement.

Studies show that there is a concern for foster youth academic performance in general. Leathers and Testa (2006) shared a multitude of factors that affect foster youth with education, including truancy, no college degree or certificate, and poor reading and writing skills. Okpych and Courtney (2019) noted that students who repeat a grade and have behavioral and emotional issues can often interrupt academics. The academic risk becomes escalated when students are placed in special education. These students' child welfare agency, school, and foster home must all work together to provide the services and supports required to achieve better results (Zetlin et al., 2010). In my experience, it is vital for all three groups to have a good understanding of each person's responsibilities as they relate to student success. It is the responsibility of all three groups as well as the student to ensure student success.

Foster Youth Placement

Foster youth in special education often experience a higher rate of foster home placement turnover (Geenen & Powers, 2006). These students usually are in a more restrictive setting than foster youth students who do not receive special education services, meaning that they do not have as much access to their general education peers. The instability of foster home placement often means a change of school placement. This change usually results in students having difficulty adjusting to the new educational environment and, therefore, falling behind in academics. As a result, there must be more attention, time, and commitment given to foster youth students in special education (Geenen & Powers, 2006).

Unmet Needs

Hallett et al. (2018) note that while foster care programs are increasing resources for youth who are aging out of the system, including transitional housing, mental health, and independent living skills programs, these programs still fall short of meeting the needs of these students. Residential insecurity and mobility are primary concerns of foster youth who are preparing to transition to independent living. The uncertainty of housing and academics after leaving the foster care system creates a tremendous amount of stress for these youth (Hallett et al., 2018). If students don't have the certainty of housing, it makes it difficult for them to focus on higher education since their basic needs are not being met. In addition, the worry and stress that these students experience as a result of their uncertainty negatively affects their overall mental health.

Achievement Gap

Postsecondary specialists at community colleges must work in conjunction with child welfare agencies to execute plans and support former foster youth to encourage early achievements. College and community services such as counseling, tutoring, mentoring, vocational training, emancipation services, and training for independent living exist; however, many foster students need additional support. Meadows et al. (2014) shared "For many years interagency collaboration has been recognized as a key component in the post-school transition process" (p 332). Residential placement is intended to provide a stable home and a comprehensive educational program preparing students for emancipation. Students are referred to the program by Child Protective Service (CPS) workers or through dependency court. The criteria are based on the student's ability to function in an open campus and a place more educationally oriented than treatment focus. Furthermore, residential placement is a more

expensive alternative for foster youth. It is the hope that the placement provides stability and increased high school graduation rates which would make the investment worthwhile (Jones, 2012). White (2018) found in most public states that neither child welfare nor the primary and secondary systems are linked to the postsecondary system. Thus, the two systems are a conglomeration of mismatched funding, policies, and practices that are difficult for vulnerable foster youth to navigate. White (2018) notes proper personnel and resources are needed so that foster youth students are exposed to housing, education, employment, community engagement, and healthy options.

Community College

Emancipated special education foster students attending college must perceive education as an essential aspect of their transition to stability as an adult. Many of these students feel the tension between pursuing education to achieve long-term goals and struggling to negotiate day-to-day short-term goals (Hallett et al., 2015).

Given that emancipated foster youth are vulnerable, personnel at community colleges play an important role in assisting foster youth. It is beneficial for the individuals working with the foster youth to be familiar with the needs of students. Ensuring success in the community college requires a high level of leadership and dedicated staff (White, 2018). In California, Michigan, and Washington, there are state-level policies and programs along with community college resources that are committed to supporting foster youth. They concentrated on creating a structured support system to increase student success. These policies and programs center on academics, independent living, health, transportation, and community assessment. White (2018) further noted students achieved higher success levels when these reinforcers are in place.

Organization of Report

This chapter introduced the study's research problem and research setting by providing background information, stating the study's purpose and research questions, providing a brief literature review, and describing the significance of the study. Chapter two will explore the problem more deeply by providing an in-depth literature review. Chapter three will describe the study's research methodology and methods. Chapter four will present and discuss the study's findings, and chapter 5 will draw conclusions and offer implications for practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

More than half a million American youth currently reside in foster homes due to child abuse and neglect (US Department of Health & Human Services, 2008). Abuse does not always cease once foster youths are removed from their homes as many continue to experience child maltreatment while in foster care (Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney & Tera, 2005). Additionally, numerous children in foster care have developmental and mental health problems (Garland et al., 2000). Many previously in foster care encounter difficulties after they leave care including drug use, homelessness, victimization, and or arrest (Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney & Terao, 2005; Marx et al., 2003; Vaughn et al., 2007).

As they transition into adulthood, foster youth continue to face multiple disparities. Many times, while I attend Child and Family team meetings at FPA, foster youth do not realize the paramount meaning of being emancipated from the foster care system. During these meetings, when students have been asked what it means to be emancipated, some of their responses include, “I can be on my own” or “I’ll be able to make my own decisions.” This is of great concern to me as it is evident their conception of emancipation is missing fundamental details; for example, students do not speak about living quarters, employment, mental health, transportation, or health insurance.

PUSD’s foster youth intake meetings are another way that makes me painfully aware of the challenges these youth will face. The triage process is an intake process for foster youth being placed throughout the district. During these meetings, when a variety of teachers, administrators, social workers, school psychologists, and others gather to assess and prioritize a

student's needs, I pay close attention to behavior issues, transcripts, school movement, the juvenile justice system, and hospitalizations. If a student has any of these markers, it indicates the need for in-depth resources because these students are entering the district with numerous obstacles, and it is our responsibility to help them.

In this chapter, I review the literature related to foster youth students aging out of their residential placements at the age of 18, including those transitioning into post-secondary institutions. The chapter begins by detailing the critical issues faced by emancipated foster youth. This is followed by information about how these issues are even more pronounced for special education populations of foster youth. The chapter then transitions into obstacles emancipated foster youth face when receiving transition services and resources, including the lack of interagency cooperation. Lastly, the chapter reviews the literature on support systems for emancipated foster youth, including mentoring programs, programs for college, and programs for the workforce that helps these youth with independent living.

Critical Issues Faced by Emancipated Foster Youth

An emancipated student is one that must exit the foster care system due to turning 18 years of age and no longer being eligible for foster care services. Many emancipated foster youths lack the basic skills necessary to navigate through the college, or university system, or transition into adulthood. Sometimes, youth emancipated from the foster care system do not have a driver's license, cash, or basic household necessities. Due to their circumstances, often foster youth are not fully prepared to understand the supports designed to provide academic, financial, and other support as they age out of the foster care system.

Homelessness and Difficulty Finding Housing

Historically, emancipated foster youth have many obstacles to overcome as they transition into independent living. The first critical issue is homelessness and difficulty finding housing. This is an issue because emancipated foster youth need secure housing before leaving their foster homes or group homes. Hallet (2018) shared that students in a homeless situation face many obstacles in which an average student has an advantage. Most common disadvantages a homeless student encounters include stable housing and basic needs. A few former students from FPA have arrived at the campus in dire circumstances. Two of the students were seeking food and refuge as they were homeless. The third student came to the school on a substance. He also described his situation as grave. For these students, I first obtained food and then secured resources for mental health services and lastly, resources for housing. In addition, while the students were on campus, mental health providers talked to the students.

Lack of Interagency Cooperation

The second critical issue is the lack of interagency cooperation. This issue arises from agencies not working together with fidelity. Zetlin et al. (2012) share, “The many challenges that foster youth present in the classroom go largely unaddressed because of lack of (a) information about the child, (b) teacher preparedness for such challenges, (c) school support to the child and teacher, and (d) collaboration with the child welfare system” (p 270). Students at FPA arrive most times without proper documentation from the previous schools. The social workers assigned to students rarely show up for IEPs. In my experience, social workers evade calls from the school until there is an urgent matter. The group home does not share medical issues with the school. Most of the students take psychotropic medications. When the students refuse to take

their medication at home the group home does not alert the school. This becomes an escalating situation for the school.

Lack of Support Programs

The third critical issue is the lack of support programs for foster care youth entering college and/or the workforce. This is an issue because the resources are not properly implemented, or the foster youth is not made aware of the programs. Rome et al. (2019) shared that “while youths had received independent living services, there was a clear lack of carryover, when it was time to apply skills for daily living, the youth was unable to remember what they had learned and felt ill-prepared for the task of adulthood” (p. 537). I have witnessed the lack of follow-through with agencies assigned to the students of FPA. Moreover, the agencies are not connected to our district. This is problematic because their position is that the student's Educational Rights Holder (ERH) should do all the follow-through.

Special Education Populations of Foster Youth

These obstacles are even more pronounced for emancipated foster youth who receive special education services. Oftentimes foster youth who are not performing to the level of their peers behaviorally or academically are placed into special education. Hill and Koester (2015). There are several factors, which plague special education foster youth in transitioning into independent living properly. These factors include movement from grades K- 12, behavior and emotional issues, placement into a most restricted environment in special education, mental health issues, and lack of resources. These factors hinder them gaining proper entry into post-secondary education, the workforce, and appropriate housing.

A limiting factor, which is seen often, is the fact foster youth become accustomed to the government for basic needs. However, government resources such as housing and healthcare do

not always transfer over when they are emancipated. This is also true for academic services. According to Osgood (2010) when a foster youth with disabilities reaches the age of emancipation, services which are established do not transfer over and are not readily reinstated. Compared to mainstream youth, vulnerable youth have far less social support for transitions to adulthood. As the foster youth continues the transition process, it becomes evident they are at a deficit.

Obstacles Faced when Receiving Transition Services

Home Support

Some students live in group homes and others may be fortunate enough to have a more stable environment to live in. The education outcome is dismal compared to their counterparts. Without the proper support mentally, emotionally, financially, and with a vested mentor, it is very difficult for these students. Hill and Koester (2015) noted the significance of extra support for foster youth and special education needs to navigate through adulthood. Their conclusion was made through a qualitative and exploratory study of interviews. Furthermore, foster youth who are not performing to the level of their peers behaviorally or academically are placed into special education. Sometimes these students are misidentified and are not given the proper services or have access to the general education curriculum (Hill & Koester, 2015).

Other stressors for foster youth are programs for transitioning to independence. One study examined by Sato and Walker (2002), notes the shortfalls of resources. The study consists of seven residential treatment clients: ages 17-18, three white males, one African American male, two Hispanic males, and one white female. The study uses qualitative data during its examination. Participants were provided with nine questions which were taped and then discarded at the end of the transcribing. The participants enrolled in transition services while at

the treatment center. In viewing their answers, participants had an unrealistic attitude about emancipation; one response noted “To me, it’s just to get out of my own” (Sato & Walker, 2002, p 121.). This clearly indicates the student has no idea about living independently. It was further indicated by the residential director that the youth were enrolled in different stages of the transition process. There was no structure to the program. This profoundly affected the outcomes for the youth participating in transition services.

Amongst the disadvantages confronted by foster youths are mentorship and relationships. Spencer et al. (2010) notes a pitfall plaguing mentorship is mentor connections which can lead to abandonment issues. The authors based their findings on previous research completed. The research methodology used in the article consisted of qualitative research. A large proportion of the foster youth has substantial maltreatment histories, which have been related to insecure attachment. Caution should be considered when assigning foster youth, a mentor. There can be a mismatch, therefore leaving one of the parties feeling disconnected. To address this issue, programs such as Silver Lining Mentoring have created guidelines for mentors to end relationships with their foster youth; however, it was not all programs have established guidelines. Spencer et al. (2010) shared two elements with foster youth and mentors. One is for the mentors to work efficiently with the youth. There must be an established relationship for two years. Secondly, natural, or informal mentors yield positive results for foster youths.

Henig (2009) shared, foster youth aging out of their placement experience perplexing complications while transitioning. Youths are ill-prepared for adult life and struggle with basic daily necessities. Some barriers include a lack of knowledge about daily living costs, paying rent, and mental health services. Many foster youths are unaware of how to pay rent, work, and health care (Henig, 2009). Henig (2009) shared that there are current programs or companies

proven successful for foster youth. These companies offer real-world job training and opportunities. The goal is for the youth to become more self-sufficient with education, income, self-sufficient, and emotionally stable. Unfortunately, these programs are not nationwide.

Homelessness/ Housing

Some homeless students face many deficits. Amongst the shortfalls is their lack of knowledge of resources. Another deficiency is the absence of self-care, i.e., cleaning, cooking, and showering. Homeless foster youth encounter obstacles with community colleges and post-secondary institutes. First, community colleges do not have housing, and post-secondary institutes close their housing units during the holidays. The second element is money issues. Homeless students are unaware of how to use their extra financial aid. Some students send their extra money to relatives. This leaves a deficit for daily living, i.e., food and extracurricular activities (Hallet, 2010). Hallet (2010) suggested that homeless students stay in resident halls year-round. A second recommendation was to provide the student with a plan before embarking on a break from college. A final recommendation is to have employment secured as the student transitions away from college. Hallet's findings were based on two complementary research projects conducted with homeless students transitioning from high school to college. (Hallet, 2010).

Tyrell & Yates (2017) followed 172 emancipated foster youths for two years and used mixed methods throughout their research. Their findings identified three housing risks. First, were the socio-demographic factors, second, was a history of childhood exposure to maltreatment, and third were out-of-home placement experiences. In the first category, it was determined females secured housing better than males. One element leading to this fact was females are more apt to seek resources than males. The next category noted that a history of child

physical abuse or violence was a marker for instability in obtaining housing. The third category noted both males and females, who were emancipated from care at a later age, can obtain higher housing quality. This is because of the opportunities afforded by establishing social support and resources. Results of their study suggest that securing housing for foster youth is crucial for their success in independent living (Tyrell & Yates, 2017).

Lack of Interagency Cooperation

Lee and Ballew (2018) shared that several legislative efforts have been passed to help ease the transition to adulthood and independent living programs. For their study, a mixed method was acquired for the data review. Even with legislation being put into place, youths are not accessing these instrumental services. The data shared notes, over one-third of former foster youth reported unmet services needs at ages 17 and 21 and drop at age 19. Finance and housing are the domains most frequently reported as unmet needs. Furthermore, youths involved with the juvenile justice system and in foster care are less likely to receive transition services. There are two main reasons for those deficits which consist of staff not being kept abreast of services and social workers' lack of collaboration with service providers. The authors shared the lack of knowledge of sustainability as the foster youth progress into independent living. The deficit is due to resources not collaborating with each other as the foster youth follows the continuum of independent living (Lee & Ballew, 2018).

Transition services or programs can be blocked by transition teachers. Meadows et al. (2014) noted collaboration between schools and post-school agencies is not easily achieved. Transition teachers experience many roadblocks caused by their own perceptions. Some transition teachers hesitate to begin any program that requires collaboration with other resources. The reason for hesitation was the concept of control. The author shared that the lack of

interagency collaboration formed an obstruction of services for foster youth. The methods used for their research consisted of qualitative data collection. Their findings suggest collaboration with school systems and post-school services can bridge the gap in independent living (Meadows et al., 2014).

Support

Unrau (2011) examined a campus support system Seita Scholar Program designed to assist college-aged foster youth with financial assistance, academics, and other support. The program aims to create a community of scholars among former foster youth. The scholars are assigned a campus coach with foster care experience. They help students navigate through the campus and challenges of higher education. In addition, students are aided in matters of foster care, Medicaid, Community Mental Health, and other public supports such as food stamps and daycare.

Avery (2011) used a mixed method to support mentors as a paramount resource for foster youth. Mentors are considered as support because of the many benefits the source provides; furthermore, the positive effects of mentoring are generally thought to derive from the support and modeling from mentors. Some aspects include social and emotional relationships, cognitive skills, and positive identity development. Strong social scaffolding surrounding a child predicts their successful development and adjustment behavior and determines their ability to gain adult self-efficacy; however, due to the high turnover of mentors, it is nearly impossible to gain ground on social scaffolding. For mentor programs to be beneficial the following must be included: ongoing training for mentors, structured activities for both, and clear expectations on contact and ongoing support (Avery, 2011).

Beal et al. (2018) examined 151 adolescents who were ages 16-20 and had been in child welfare protective custody for at least 12 months. The authors used qualitative and quantitative methods, practical action research, and case studies in their research. Beal et al. (2018) note giving individuals a voice and involving them in legal decisions, promotes students' perceptions of fairness in the legal system. Participants were asked if they desired a voice in decision-making. They noted yes, but overall participants requested their Child Protective Services (CPS) worker to be involved in their decision-making. The CPS worker was the main stakeholder preferred. Beal et al. (2018) noted the participants are usually in CPS custody for five years and there has been a relationship created among them. Young people need strategies to ensure supportive adults are active participants in their lives and present when making decisions (Beal et al., 2018).

Forenza et al. (2016) examined a program using a qualitative method for youths participating or voicing their opinions through involvement in organizations. Specifically, The Youth Advisory Board (YAB) enabled foster youth to advocate for positive change within the foster care system. The principal purpose of YAB is to empower and foster youth advocacy and leadership skills. Forenza et al. (2016) reviewed literature noting foster youth's use of this realm. It has been successful in altering laws specifically in California Youth Corrections.

Jones (2012) examined factors using quantitative data that contribute to successful outcomes for foster youth in Residential Education Placement programs. Success is dependent upon students graduating from high school, reunification with family, going to a lower level of care, or remaining in school. Many students in the foster care system face challenges such as emotional trauma of abuse, placement instability, disruption to family and community ties, and emancipation at the age of 18. Residential placement is intended to provide a stable home and a

comprehensive educational program preparing students for emancipation. Jones examined students who are referred to a program by Child Protective Service workers (CPS) or through dependency court. The criteria to enter the program are based on the student's ability to be stable in an academic environment. It is the hope that the placement provides stability and increases high school graduation rates because of the cost associated with these programs. (Jones, 2012).

There is a need for educational support during middle school for foster youth students. Tyre (2012) explored an area using quantitative methods for academic improvement in the areas of reading fluency and comprehension. The author examined a model known as Education Success Program (ESP). ESP consists of a teacher and college-level students who serve as tutors. Tutoring services and schedules depended on the individual student. All students who fall into the risk area are required to have tutoring. The subject area of focus was reading the comparison between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension. Foster youth students were compared against their general education peers. The data showed gains by closing the achievement gap in reading fluency and comprehension. The student support model consisted of advocacy, mentoring, and tutoring for middle school foster youth. Tyre shared an education liaison model in which a social worker acts as a bridge between education and social service agencies. In conclusion, it is expected that the liaison can assist to coordinate communication between social services, educators, and caregivers. This is to ensure foster youth students are successful in school and in life (Tyre, 2012).

Waintrup and Unruh (2008) noted positive results in a program for foster youth incarcerated. The authors used qualitative analysis to examine the program. The results indicated two, four, and six months after release from a youth correctional facility, approximately 68% of all participants were positively engaged in school or employment and did

not return to youth or adult correctional facility (Waintrup & Unruh, 2008). The program provided the following elements: assessments for skills, counselor, treatment manager, parole officer, and facility, and community education staff. These resources work directly with the transition specialist. The most important component of the program is the transition specialist.

Waintrup and Unruh (2008) explain transition specialists are essential to make the program work and help guide the youths. The transition specialist's duties include carefully directing youths through resources and noting all the individual's strengths before pushing the youths through resources. The transition specialist can also serve as a mentor. Transition specialists carefully loop their clients into resources by making connections with their youths. During the intake process, the youths are placed according to their corresponding resources. Another aspect of the program was that the process begins while the youth is in custody. A plan is created, and life skills are taught by the transition specialist. When it is time for a job application the transition specialist will review the information for accuracy and delete unnecessary items. Careful planning is established as to where the youth will place a job application. This is to not jeopardize the employer or compromise the youth. It was inferred that the transition specialist must be an outgoing person, an advocate, a good communicator, and resourceful with the community. This serves as a twofold matter. The community places trust in the specialist. The foster youth student is placed in an environment to help make them successful and it can provide positive outcomes. Youths are provided with tools to be productive citizens. The community wins by the youths not being detained, saving taxpayers money (Waintrup & Unruh, 2008).

Transitioning services for incarcerated foster youth have a dismal outlook. Once a criminal background has been established, their services are harder to obtain. Waintrup and

Unruh (2008) shared a program to help to transition incarcerated adolescents and the paramount role of a transition specialist. It was noted, youths with disabilities are more likely to return to the court system in contrast to their peers. It was further noted that formerly incarcerated youth working and attending school for six months had lower recidivism rates. In order to help transition services for incarcerated youths all stakeholders must be on board. These resources include the correctional facility, school, employment, family, and independent living in the community (Waintrup & Unruh, 2008).

A program examined by Zetlin et al. (2006) focused on foster youth from ages 3-21. The researchers used qualitative methods for their research. The data collected came from case files, caseworkers, and school records (Zetlin et al., 2006). The additional support came through an Educational Initiative Project. The Education Liaison was a pilot program for 18 months through the Child Welfare Agency (CWA). The major component of the project was the placement of an Education Liaison in the CWA's office to help social workers address the numerous, and often complex educational problems of the children on their caseloads (Zetlin et al., 2006). After interviews were completed the Education Specialist was selected mainly for their knowledge of the law. They were trained extensively, and expectations were disseminated. The Education Specialist received referrals for problematic cases the social worker could not resolve. There were steps a social worker needed to complete for the youth to be submitted to the Education Specialist. Once a referral was submitted, the specialist began the process to resolve the issues. Cumbersome duties of the education specialist include making calls, reviewing files, and follow-ups. When the Education Specialist could not resolve the issues, they had access to a law center for guidance. There were committees created to resolve any issues amongst the parties involved in the project. The education liaison model featured multiple agencies working collaboratively.

Together they advocated for assessments in the educational situation and found resources and programs beneficial to the youths. The authors noted the education liaison model was an effective tool for foster youth (Zetlin et al., 2006).

Programs for College

Foster youth students face a big challenge due to multiple placements before the age of 18. Many of these students have not developed the skills necessary for adulthood. Services such as the Department of Rehabilitation exist; however, many foster students need additional support. Whitman (2018) explored the Academic Capital Framework using quantitative data. The Academic Capital Framework has six areas that focus on stimulating foster youth students' success in postsecondary education. These areas consist of cost, supportive networks, navigating assistance, accurate resources, college programs, and advocacy from family. The author references a student's personal perspective of managing through college. Students noted a mentor or counselor was paramount for success. Using Academic Capital as a lens for studying college transitions offers a new perspective on the ways students from underrepresented social and cultural groups access higher education and transition into college life (Whitman, 2018).

Gray et al. (2018) examined a group of 36 foster youth, using a mixed methods approach that had aged out of the system. The foster youth participants were well supported with resources. They were entering their first year of a four-year University. These foster youth were set up for success by having many resources readily available, especially for foster youth. The mindfulness-based intervention was delivered as part of a first-year seminar course. The foster youth participants were divided into two sections. Section one contained 16 youths and section two contained 20 youths, 71% of the participants were female. The participants consisted of 44% Caucasian and 39% African American, 8% Hispanic, and 9% other. The study focused on

mindfulness, sleep quality, and stress. Overall, the participants felt better while implementing the seminar. However, when the seminar ended, and time passed participants had delayed improvements. The short-term data resulted in positive outcomes (Grey et al., 2018).

Foster youth need to be made aware of the resources available. College counseling staff must be made aware of obstacles encountered by the foster youth. A few suggestions made by Grey et al. (2018) include: college counseling staff will benefit from the targeted training in dealing with foster youth. Another suggestion was for there to be designated counseling members for foster youth. This can enable or build emotional support with foster youth. A final suggestion was to add funds to the college specifically for the unique needs of foster youth.

Programs to Assist in Workforce

There are current programs or companies proven successful for foster youth. One such company noted was United Parcel Service (UPS) which services youth between the ages of 16-24. Another program mentioned is LINKS, a multi-agency collaboration effort to provide services for youth transition, ages 13-20. Assessments of goals, strengths, and needs are part of the intake. The goal is for the youth to become more self-sufficient with education, sufficient income, stable living quarters, emotional support, and behavior. These programs have proven to be successful; unfortunately, they are not national (Henig, 2009). An act was reviewed by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) passed in 1998. The WIA can be helpful for foster youth but there needs to be an amendment to aid foster youth. A specific model noted was the One-Stop Center model within the WIA. In the One-Stop model, students can access all their resources. It was shared that the model would be beneficial for foster youth. The highlight of the program consisted of transitioning services, mentors, and career and vocational assessments which are

funded by the federal government (Henig, 2009). The researcher used a mixed methods approach to evaluate the data.

A resource shared by White (2018) uses a mixed method on state-level policies and programs along with community college resources that are engrossed in supporting foster youth. States concentrated on creating a structured support system to increase student success. They paid particular attention to three statewide supporters that are committed to foster youth. California, Michigan, and Washington offer statewide structured support for foster youth. The states centered on academics, independent living, health, transportation, and community assessment. Students achieve higher success levels when these reinforcements are in place. White noted that for resources to be prosperous strong leadership and reliable staff must be secured. Personnel at community colleges play an important role in assisting foster youth. It is important for the individuals working with foster youth to be familiar with the needs of students (White, 2018). The program implemented in California for foster youth has been a success in addressing academic, career, and personal life skills (White, 2018).

Resources Support Systems for Emancipated Foster Youth

To overcome these obstacles, emancipated foster youth needs mentors and other forms of support to assist them through these challenges. Fortunately, programs designed specifically for foster youth are growing and help provide financial, academic, and other support. Unrau (2011) notes that these programs help provide foster youth with the tools and resources necessary for success and help with the inequality they face by providing them with career opportunities like their college-going peers.

Mentoring Programs

Spencer et al. (2010) share, foster youth need to have an established mentor that is a permanent part of their life. A person that can help them with social and emotional support as well as with the transition into adulthood. I can recall the first interview with this study's research participant. He mentioned the essential need to have numerous mentors. Mentors serve different facets of his life. A few of these mentors were utilized for emotional support and to navigate through life obstacles. The other mentors had the resources the participant needed to transition successfully.

College Programs

Unrau (2011) shared that programs at a college to support students is a strategy that engages and keeps students interested in college. Such programs facilitate foster youth students to obtain internships, athletic scholarships, and advancement in their careers. Programs such EOPs benefit foster youth because of an array of resources and sympathetic counselors who understand their plight.

Workforce Programs

According to Woolsey (2008) for youth to be successful there must be an array of programs to assist in the transition process. A comprehensive resource of the program must be available to aid the youth to become productive citizens. This was the case for the participant in my study. The participant surrounded himself around a group of individuals who directed his moves and programs to be independent living. I could recall the participant sharing his fear of being homeless in the sixth grade. There was awareness from the participants of the possibility of becoming homeless.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature related to foster youth students aging out of their residential placements at the age of 18, including those transitioning into post-secondary institutions. The chapter began by detailing the critical issues faced by emancipated foster youth. This was followed by information about how these issues are even more pronounced for special education populations of foster youth. The chapter then transitioned into obstacles emancipated foster youth face when receiving transition services and resources, including the lack of interagency cooperation. Lastly, the chapter reviewed the literature on support systems for emancipated foster youth, including mentoring programs, programs for college, and programs for the workforce that helps these youth with independent living. Chapter 3 will report the study's research methodology and methods.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Methods

Introduction

Chapter three describes the research methodology and methods used in this study. The purpose of this study is to examine resources for emancipated foster youth transitioning into independent living. The researcher's study is guided by the following question: What difficulties do students who receive special education services and become emancipated from the foster care system face when transitioning into independent living?

Research Methodology

Qualitative Research

The study uses qualitative methods to gain knowledge on supporting foster youth who receive special education services as they transition into independent living. Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe qualitative research as a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of qualitative research involves emerging questions and procedures, collecting data in the participants' setting, analyzing the data inductively, building from particular to general themes, and making interpretations of the meaning of the themes. Creswell & Creswell (2018) share, qualitative research concentrates on the process along with the final outcomes.

The researcher's qualitative approach was used to understand what the case study students experience in a group home. Interviewing the case study participant, stakeholders, and professionals aided the ability to find resources for emancipated foster youth. The data collected also indicated reasons why emancipated foster youth are experiencing difficulties with resources.

Action Research and Case Study

An action research approach guided the study's research design. Herr and Anderson (2015) share, "Action research is a systematic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical, and undertaken by the participants of the inquiry [...] is best done in collaboration with others who have a stake in the problem under investigation." (p. 4). For this particular study, a case study participant was interviewed to obtain a perspective of foster youth transitioning into independent living. Action research was selected because the researcher worked at the research site at the time of the study. Leathers and Testa (2006) share that many foster youth experience barriers with mental health, education, and behavior, which may make it difficult for them to transition into independent living. Action research, paired with the case study, allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the foster care system. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state, "Case studies are a design of inquiry found in my fields, especially evaluation, in which the researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a case, often a program, event activity, process, or one or more individuals" (p. 14). In this study, the case study participant provided answers to questions, which the researcher created to obtain an understanding of the transitioning process of foster youth.

Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

It is paramount when conducting action research, to practice reflexivity. Herr and Anderson (2015) state "...the notion of reflexivity is crucial because action researchers must interrogate received notions of improvements or solutions in terms of who ultimately benefits from the actions undertaken" (p. 4). In this study, the researcher viewed reflexivity as an opportunity to learn from the research participant for the purpose of professional development and improved professional practice. A researcher must remember their positionality in the study.

In this study, the researcher was an insider (Herr & Anderson, 2015). While working FPA it became apparent to the interviewer that emancipated foster youth were not receiving proper transitioning services. The special education foster youth enrolled at FPA are from group homes and have faced an enormous amount of trauma. By the time these special education foster youth begin their senior year in high school, most of them have changed schools several times. It's at this point in their lives they become emancipated foster youth. The realization is that they do not have an idea of what it is like to live on their own. While talking to seniors, they mentioned the fear of being homeless.

One can only imagine how emancipated foster youth students are feeling. Most students throughout the district come from stable homes and have a parent or family member to support them. These demographics go home to an institution where staff are paid to take care of them. Also, there is an enormous amount of turnover with staff. As soon as the youth begins feeling attachment toward a staff, they are replaced with someone else. It is the theory of action research that perhaps decayed relationships cause students to not receive the proper guidance for transition services.

The interviewer came to FPA with a wealth of administrative and teaching positions. A native of his community, the researcher has touched many lives of adolescents and young adults. He is an educator and administrator. While working in the position of teacher and Principal, his view of students' lives has changed over time. From 1993 to 2000 the researcher served as a math teacher. From 2000 to the present, the researcher has served as an administrator at various school sites including middle and high schools. Before arriving at his current site, the researcher was at a comprehensive middle school. He was elected to serve at a school which is a special

education program for students with emotional disturbance. It is there the researcher became aware of the great need for foster care students' mental health and social-emotional support.

As the principal of FPA, the interviewer aims to develop students in the readiness for 21st Century learning skills in the areas of collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and communication. He also aims to develop his faculty and staff to be masters of their trade. The further focus is to develop students to become productive citizens who maintain safe, respectful, and responsible behaviors in all community settings.

Research Methods

Research Context

FPA is Pasadena Unified School District's therapeutic program, also known as a non-public school. A therapeutic program is a highly structured special program that incorporates daily supportive counseling and specifically designed academic instruction for students diagnosed with emotional disturbance and specific learning disabilities in grades 6-12 (Pasadena Unified School District, n.d.) FPA was created to service special education students who are under the criteria of emotional disturbance. The student's IEP must indicate the diagnosis of emotional disturbance to enter the program. The program is equipped to deal with mental illness and crises involved in a mental health meltdown. The teachers are provided with specialized training on how to de-escalate students when they are in crisis. The school encompasses grades six through twelfth on an individual campus for the whole program. It is also considered the most restrictive environment a student can attend. Under the continuum of school placement, students' next location can be residential treatment or juvenile hall. The continuum refers to the entire spectrum of placements where a student's special education program can be implemented (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.).

Research Participant

This case study focused on one male emancipated foster youth who received special education services at FPA from 2007 to 2023 and had known the researcher for six years at the time of the study. The participant lived in a group home. The participant also attended the same school FPA and had the same principal (the researcher) since sixth grade and age 13. He was eligible for dual or full-time enrollment at a comprehensive site. The participant decided it was in his best interest to stay near mentors who could help his plight. The participant was 19 years old at the time of the study.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

The study's research participant was chosen from FPA. The researcher and the participant had an established mentor-mentee relationship at the time of the study. When the researcher mentioned the study to the participant, he expressed interest in telling his story. He was chosen for the study because of his 13 years of experience living in the foster care system and group homes. FPA has a transient population of students who move around a lot through California. Students on average remain at FPA for six months. The participant was an outlier who made the decision to stay in school and seek resources to live independently. The researcher sought the participant so that an analysis could be investigated on resources on students transitioning into independent living.

Data Collection

Interviews

The data collection process for this study involved three interview sessions with one research participant. The interviews utilized ten semi-structured questions in each session (see Appendix A). Mertler (2020) states, "In semi structured interviews, the researcher asks several

‘base’ questions but also has the option of following up a given response with alternative, optional questions, depending on the situation” (p. 134). The interview questions were research-based and were established from the purpose and question of the study.

Interview Questions

In semi-structured interviews the researcher asks over many base questions but also has the option of following up a given response with alternative, optional questions, depending on the situation (Mertler, 2020). The alternate questions were provided when an answer provided by the participant led to another topic related to the study. The optional questions focused on the transitioning process related to foster youth and independent living. The semi-structured interviews allowed the participant to be open to his experience and current situation.

During the interview, additional questions were produced from the answer the participant generated. In these instances, questions included, what do you mean when you say placement? How did that make you feel when you left Hillside? Tell me more about your journey with independent living.

The questions generated by the researcher allowed the participant to elaborate and provide suggestions on independent living experiences in the foster care system. In response to each interview question, the research participant was encouraged to share memories and experiences related to the study’s research question. Creswell and Creswell (2018) share, “Narrative research is a design of inquiry from the humanities in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives” (p. 13).

Interview Procedures and Timeline

The interviews were held by the researcher and foster youth student via WebEx virtual meeting platform. At the beginning of each interview, the participant was asked for authorization

to record the interview. The participant agreed to begin the meeting. The researcher then began the recording. Introductions were made and the researcher began with the title of the action research. It is customary for any meetings held via WebEx for introductions to be made.

For the convenience of the participant, virtual meetings were offered and accepted by the participant. The researcher shared his screen with the participant. The screen generated questions during the session. The questions being answered were highlighted in yellow for the participant. The questions were generated on the screen as the student has a processing disorder. By sharing the questions on the screen, the participant could read and take his time to process the question. During the interview the researcher probed the participant with “Tell me more,” “I need more detail,” “Can you explain that a little more,” and “What does that mean?”

The data were collected over a three-week period, once a week on Tuesdays. The interviews were scheduled for the week of February 7, 2022, the week of February 14, 2022, and the week of February 21, 2022. After each interview, there was two hours of time for the researcher to compile and analyze the data. Once all three interviews were completed, the qualitative data analysis was completed.

Data Analysis

To answer the study’s research question, a case study participant was interviewed three times. The data collected from the interviews were entered into a spreadsheet and coded using dramaturgical coding. *Dramaturgical coding* is used to make sense of qualitative data when the research participant’s life experiences are studied by the researcher as if they were “a performance” and the research participants’ interactions with others are viewed as “a cast of characters in conflict” (Saldana, 2014, p. 123). This allowed me, the researcher, to study the participant’s life experiences more objectively, even though I had known him for years at the

time of the study. The dramaturgical coding process led to the development of four life factors: instability of placement and school, mental health, mentors, and lack of communication.

Next, the data were further explored using causation coding. *Causation coding* is used to interpret the details of a life experience into a linear visual that the researcher can use to make inferences about the meanings of different life experiences and use the inferences to develop themes or categories (Miles et al., 2020). The causation coding process led to the development of three causational themes: movement, relationships, and academics (see Table 1).

Table 1

Life factors and causational themes

	Movement	Relationship	Academics
Instability of placement and school	Frequent movement disrupts life	Difficulties building trust	Change of school often
Mental Health	New therapist, school, health conditions	Problematic in generating confidence with new psychologist	Not mentally stable and will cause behavior issues
Mentors	Find new mentors and cause mental health issues	Creating relationships takes a long time	Caring person missing to advocate for individual
Lack of Communication	Individual not open to dialogue	Not confident and distrustful	Academic records delayed. Individuals not placed properly in school

According to the researcher, Table 1 contains three causational themes: movement, relationship, and academics, which are found in the horizontal columns. The four life factors, instability of placement and school, mental health, mentors, and lack of communication, are located in the rows to the left. The cells underneath each causational theme summarize findings from my interviews with the case participant.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology and methods used in this study to answer the research questions. Furthermore, it outlines the research context, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 will report and discuss the study's findings to answer the researcher's questions.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore ways to support emancipated foster youth who receive special education services as they transition into independent living. The study was guided by the following research question: What difficulties do students who receive special education services and become emancipated from the foster care system face when transitioning into independent living? This chapter introduces the research participant, Thomas, before presenting, analyzing, and discussing the interview findings and answering the study's research question.

Thomas

For this study, a series of interviews were generated on one foster youth's life experience. To protect the young man's identity, he will be referred to as Thomas. Thomas is an African male who at the time of the study was 19 years old. Thomas is 5'8 and is a proud Libra according to his date of birth. Thomas has an enduring personality and is often smiling and optimistic about life in general. He loves to read books and is proficient in reading comprehension. One of my fondest memories of Thomas is observing him reading *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley in eighth grade at FPA. He went on to read *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson. What makes this remarkable is the fact the books were unbridged! While the other students in the class read books, he helped his peers with the pronunciation of words. During Thomas' middle school years, one could find him reading on breaks. Thomas came into foster care at the age of nine and has a younger brother in the foster youth system. He did not want to discuss the reason why he was in the foster youth system. He became a special education student in second grade. Thomas was retained during

second grade and tested for special education services. He qualifies for special education services under emotional disturbance.

Findings, Analysis, and Discussion

Based on several interviews with Thomas, a 19-year-old, emancipated foster youth who received special education services while in school, four life factors (instability of placement and school, mental health, mentors, and lack of communication) and three causational themes (movement, relationship, and academics) materialized.

Life Factor 1: Instability of Placement and School

The first life factor was Thomas' instability of foster home placement and school. For Thomas, instability was created when he had to move to new foster homes frequently (movement), which required changing schools often (academics). As a result, he had difficulty trusting his foster parents, teachers, and peers (relationships). When there is a disruption in the foster youth's living situation, it causes them to feel isolated. It is hard to build trust, and building rapport with new peers can be arduous. Following are Thomas's comments relating to instability of placement:

From my experience seeing peers coming and going into other residential placements, it's been difficult for others to adjust to the new environment. It is hard for them to build trust with peers and adults. Most newcomers do not take too well with staff. I have seen newcomers have emotional meltdowns. They do not like school, and some cannot read.

The instability of foster home placement and school makes everything more difficult for foster youth like Thomas. Zetlin (2012) asserted:

Researchers have found that nearly half of all foster youth fail to complete high school, approximately one fourth of these individuals end up homeless in the 12 to 18 months after being legally emancipated, and 34% end up in the public welfare programs (p. 4).

I recently experienced this myself. Two former foster youth appeared at FPA school and were peers to the participants. They had aged out of their group home and were homeless, living underneath a freeway underpass. These students did not graduate from high school and were now panhandling for food. The school provided the students with food and resources for shelter. Last year, another former student arrived at FPA on drugs and was homeless. Unfortunately, he also aged out of the group home and had not properly transitioned into independent living. The student also did not graduate from high school. These statistics are not uncommon for the community of foster youth living in our surrounding boundaries.

Life Factor 2: Mental Health

The second life factor was mental health needs. Mental health services are a huge part of foster youth's success in transitioning into independent living. However, these services do not always transfer over to the foster youth once they leave placement (movement). This situation makes them vulnerable to the new environment and its people (relationships), which sometimes leads to mental instability and behavior issues in school (academics). The following are

Thomas's comments relating to mental health issues:

I did receive mental health services, but they only came to see me once a month. I really needed to see my therapist once a week. I was used to seeing them on a weekly basis. I wasn't allowed to see my regular therapist. Someone else was assigned to me.

Osgood (2010) shared, "The services these vulnerable populations receive as children and adolescents often come to an end during the transition to adulthood, even if the need for

them continues and even if current life circumstances present obvious difficulties” (p. 212). Even as a teacher and administrator who is very familiar with foster youth, I was surprised to find out the mental health services for transitioning youth were not solidified. This is problematic for youth transitioning from foster care to independent living. While some portions of the services can be restored, it has been in my experience, not to the fullest involvement, as it was prior to transitioning.

Life Factor 3: Mentors

The third factor is the necessity of mentors. Mentors are paramount for foster youth while in placement and transitioning into independent living. For mentor programs to be beneficial the following must be included: ongoing training for mentors, structured activities for both, clear expectations on contact and ongoing support (Avery, 2011). Foster youth suffer when there is not a good match with their mentor. According to Spencer et al. (2010), having a mentor early on in life is beneficial but the mentor must continue with the youth for two years to make lasting results. Mentors assist foster youth to navigate through daily life concerns. They advocate on behalf of foster youth. Some of the realms a mentor can assist with are medical appointments, transportation, communication concerns within placement, employment assistance, school concerns, and personal issues. When foster youth are relocated (movement), it takes time to meet new people and rebuild trust (relationships), which often results in fewer opportunities for mentorship and fewer adult advocates (academics). Thomas’ comments relating to mentors were as follows:

Having a mentor, I would say, is the most significant resource for me. It is not just one mentor but several of them that help me navigate life. I have mentors at my group home, school, and neighbors. They assisted me when I needed something.

Spencer (2010) shared “Whereas there is agreement that foster youths need permanent, supportive, emotional connections with adults to navigate the challenges transitions to adulthood” (p. 226). It is paramount for foster youth to have several mentors. A foster youth who has a few mentors benefits from the variety of areas the individual can provide. For instance, setting goals, helping with academics, and sharing passions the foster youth might have been all ways to get to know these students and build trust with them. In my experience, it is paramount for a foster youth to have several mentors. For example, Thomas had the principal of FPA for emotional and academic support. He also utilized his former teacher at FPA for submitting applications and to review deadlines on submissions to programs. In addition, Thomas accessed mentors at his group home to organize the transition appropriately.

Life Factor 4: Lack of Communication

The fourth factor is lack of communication. When foster youth move to new foster home placements (movement), there is often a lack of communication and a lack of resources. Foster youth are sent to new placements, and to new schools, without proper documentation. Because the new school does not know much about the foster youth or their needs, both relationships and academics can suffer. Zetlin (2012) shared “A major difficulty appears to be the multiple disruptions in their school because of frequent changes in home and school placements” (p. 5). A fact that is often seen is the movement of students without letting them know. One day the student will be at school and then abruptly move to another city the next day. Moreover, schools have difficulties locating records. In some instances, foster youth repeat a class, miss deadlines, are not identified as special education, and lack the proper services they are entitled (Zetlin, 2012). The following are Thomas’s comments relating to lack of communication.

I repeated second grade and no one at FPA knew that had happened. It wasn't until my teacher in eighth grade looked at my age because I was moving onto high school. My teacher verified my birthdate with my group home. She mentioned had she known the information sooner we would have held an IEP amendment to adjust my grade. Later, in 10th grade, I was approached with the same offer. I declined the movement. I liked the group of peers and teachers. I was not ready to move. Even though I was the oldest student in the class it made sense to me to stay back. My mentors had many conversations regarding the movement, but I stuck to my belief. I will be 19 years old when I graduate from high school.

In my experience, a fact that occurs often at FPA is students arrive with no transcripts or school records. If they do come with records, they are outdated. It is difficult to track down the student's record because of the constant movement. FPA has no choice but to place the student in appropriate classes but oftentimes, the classes assigned are repeated or not necessary. When records are received by the school, they are reconciled. It is not uncommon for the school to receive records on a student who has already transferred to another school. The population of students at FPA is transient and they usually are enrolled for six months or less.

Synthesis of Themes

It is clear from the interview findings that foster youth needs an array of assistance to transition into independent living. Moving around or instability causes most foster youth to feel isolated or disconnected from their home environment. Moreover, not having a trusting adult in their life is a predictor for behavior issues or meltdowns. Mental health services must continue, as foster youth transition. Many times, as they transition, foster youth will be given a resource that does not match the demands they require. The agencies place foster youth with older adults,

and they don't feel a connection with the resource. Mentors can advocate for foster youth. The mentor can come in many forms, such as school personnel, neighbors, and group home personnel. They play a significant role. Many times, they keep the foster youth on track with school and home. It is paramount to note that mentors can be found throughout the foster youth's life. A few stable mentors throughout the foster youth's life make a marked difference in their success in independent living. Foster youth change of placement makes it difficult for agencies to communicate with each other. This deficit is a spiral for education mishaps. Often the records from previous schools are not received on time. Foster youth are not placed in the correct classes causing inappropriate credit deficiency. Foster youth also miss deadlines that are vital for academic success.

Connections to the Literature

This study highlighted four themes that are deficient for foster youth transitioning into independent living. Several studies were examined, which provided suggestions for the deficits to be minimized. These themes were explored, and suggestions were provided to improve the disparity brought on when these themes appear. A noteworthy surprise was Thomas' indication of the essential role a mentor plays for foster youth. It wasn't just one mentor; there were several sprinkled throughout his daily life. For example, one mentor catapulted Thomas' success by providing emotional support. This is an element that Thomas shared was paramount for him staying on track with school, behaviorally, and independent living. Laitila et al. (2019) shared "... aspects are of great importance, and they should guide the developments of interventions..." (p. 658). As Thomas began the transition to independent living, he relied heavily on the many mentors he had secured. There was a counselor who helped with the college applications. Next, the principal guided him with real-life unexpected conditions and emotional support. His former

teacher helped with assignments he needed assistance with. The mental health provider met with a participant at his new dwelling. There were scheduled and organized meetings with the mental health providers. They made home visits to make sure he felt safe in the new environment. And finally, Thomas had the cell phone numbers of mentors to reach if there was an emergency.

Research Question

The study's research question asked, what difficulties do students who receive special education services and become emancipated from the foster care system face when transitioning into independent living?

First, instability of placement and school occurs when there is a disruption in the foster youth's living situation. It causes them and the school to feel isolated. It is hard to build trust, and building a rapport with new peers can be difficult. Second, mental health services are a huge part of foster youth's success in transitioning into independent living. However, these services do not always transfer over to the foster youth once they leave placement. This situation makes them vulnerable to an unfamiliar environment. Third, mentors are paramount for foster youth while in placement and transitioning into independent living. Mentors assist foster youth to navigate through daily life concerns. They advocate on behalf of foster youth. Some of the realms a mentor can assist with are medical appointments, transportation, communication concerns within placement, employment assistance, school concerns, and personal issues. Finally, a lack of communication can frustrate the progress of foster youth. When foster youth move placements, there is a lack of communication with resources. Foster youth are sent to new placements, and schools without proper documentation.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reported and discussed the study's findings and answered the study's research question. Chapter 5 will identify implications for practice, offer recommendations for future research, discuss the study's limitations, and draw conclusions.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Introduction

Synthesis/Summary of Findings and Discussion

Based on several interviews with Thomas, a 19-year-old, emancipated foster youth who received special education services while in school, four life factors (instability of placement and school, mental health, mentors, and lack of communication) and three causal themes (movement, relationship, and academics) materialized. The first factor, instability of placement and school, revealed that frequent movement disrupts life and causes difficulty building trusting relationships. As a result, academics suffer due to frequent change of school. The second factor, mental health, revealed that constant movement means new therapists, schools, and health care providers, leading to loss of confidence and sometimes, mental instability. The third life factor, mentors, revealed that finding new mentors and creating close relationships takes a long time. As a result, caring individuals are missing to advocate for the foster youth. The fourth life factor, lack of communication, revealed that some individuals who work with foster youth are not open to dialogue and may be distrustful, which can lead to academic records being delayed and students not being placed properly in school.

Implications for Practice

There have been various research studies completed on foster youth transitioning into independent living. It is paramount that foster youth receive the proper services they are entitled to. The findings of this study suggest four implications for practice. The first implication involves the transition process itself. Foster youth do not receive any information until high school. The information they receive is broadly submitted through grades 9-11. During their

senior year, the information is generated at a fast pace. At times the foster youth are going through the process and not understanding the seriousness of the situation. To aid in the ability to foster youth to transition to independence there are courses strictly for them. The course should consist of essentials in independent living (Rome & Raskin, 2019).

A second implication involves the resources which are offered. There is an array and promises to follow up with the foster youth. However, if the school does not contact the agencies, services are ignored. For instance, the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) pledges services and resources such as job training, school supplies, free laptops, and financial incentives for attending school; however, I have witnessed many of these resources or services not materialized. The Department of Rehabilitation expects the students to be proactive and persistent by calling and showing up in person to access the resources.

A third implication involves the lack of accountability for resources or services to be delivered to foster youth. Accountability is a huge component that needs to be addressed. In a recent, IEP a service provider was contacted and shared they were not aware of an application. The parent produced an IEP of the service provider acknowledging the application three months ago. Yet the provider could not explain where the application was located in their data system. The service providers from DOR need training on IEP's and their role in providing these resources to foster youth students.

Group homes and foster parents should consult with foster youth and stakeholders before a movement takes place. Mental health services should be facilitated until a foster youth is stabilized in independent living. When a mentor makes a connection with a foster youth it must continue until it is no longer needed. Schools and inter agencies should connect and have a structured plan on how to obtain records of a student.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the implications for practice, two specific questions for future research emerged. First, why is information about the transition process only provided during the youth's senior year? Second, what can be facilitated for foster youth to obtain a driver's license? Addition into, replication of this research study may be beneficial to generate ideas on new insights for their population. One recommendation would be to complete the study at a comprehensive high school, where foster youth are enrolled in general education courses.

Limitations

The findings of this qualitative case study consisted of only one participant. The sample was too small to obtain a larger understanding of the plight of foster youth. However, I wanted to understand one foster youth on a deeper level and therefore increase my understanding and insight as a professional who works daily with foster youth.

Conclusion

Months have passed since interviewing Thomas. When I began this study, I saw him daily. Now that Thomas has transitioned to independent living, there is rarely contact between us. Recently, I contacted Thomas via phone. He mentioned that he thinks of all the mentors he had throughout his adolescent years. He shared that mentors were instrumental throughout his life. He can still reach out to a few, and they will be there for him. Thomas stated that at this time college is not an option. He is currently working at a local university in the cleaning department and is taking a vocational class on solar panels. He shared that he values his independent living situation. He abides by the guidelines to stay in the apartment provided by the government. He regularly attends church with one of his mentors and is excited about his future. He states the

mentors in his life have been instrumental in his growth and maturity. I personally would like to thank Thomas for teaching me about foster youth transition into independent living and bringing me joy in my growth as a leader. It is my wish that Thomas can come back and mentor some of the foster youth at my site.

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APPENDIX A

Interview One

1. Are you comfortable talking about your family?
2. Have you visited or spoken to your relatives? How often? How did it go?
3. Do you have any brothers or sisters? If so, are they in the foster care system?
4. How many schools did you attend throughout K-12?
5. Have you ever been held back in school (repeated a grade)?
6. How many of your friends like school?
7. Are there adults in your school that care about you?
8. How interesting are most of your school subjects to you?
9. How do you feel about school?
10. Do you follow directions, plan activities, or stay organized?
11. Before completing this interview, is there anything you would like to share with me?

Interview Two

1. What are some of the greatest challenges foster youth students face while transitioning into independent living?
2. What is a personality trait that helps during the transition period?
3. What is a personality trait that hurts or hinders foster youth during the transition period?
4. Do you feel supported at school? If so, how? If not, why?
5. Did you have support outside of school? If so or not, explain.
6. Can you describe one success story you had during foster care?
7. Do you have advice for any new foster youth entering the foster care system?

8. Do you have any advice for your school or group home?
9. What advice would you give a foster youth transitioning into independent living?
10. What do you need to facilitate a successful transition into independent living?
11. Before completing this interview, is there anything you would like to share with me?

Interview Three

1. How do you plan on managing your time?
2. Do you know how to manage your money and bank account?
3. Do you know how to invest for retirement?
4. Do you have health insurance? Do you see a doctor on a regular basis?
5. Do you have a driver's license and car? If not, how do you get around town?
6. What type of career are you interested in? Do you plan on attending college or a trade school?
7. Can you name a few of your personal goals?
8. What are your future plans?
9. Do you plan on staying in California? If not, where do you plan on relocating?
10. Do you feel hopeful about the future?
11. Before completing this interview, is there anything you would like to share with me?