

Spring 5-14-2018

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Enciso, Raul, "Foster Youth Access to Higher Education" (2018). *M.A. in Leadership Studies: Capstone Project Papers*. 44.
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Foster Youth Access to Higher Education

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Acknowledgements

I would like to give special thanks to Promises 2 Kids and Just in time for foster youth for helping me get connected with foster youth. Thank you to all my interviewees for being brave and courageous to share their story to a complete stranger. To all my foster youth, remember you did not choose the world you were brought into. Do not allow your past to define you. Instead, use and embrace your story to propel you for your future. You are not alone!

Abstract (Summary of entire paper)

This exploratory qualitative research paper aims to discover how foster youth are able or unable to access to higher education while enrolled in high school. This paper intends to highlight and explore reasons as to why there is a huge gap from highschool to college. It will also serve as a foundation that policy makers may refer to when thinking of coming up with new programing to support foster youth in regards to their education. This research paper will examine different factors that led or misled foster youth from obtaining an post-secondary education. This paper is guided by the research question, what has helped or hindered foster youth from accessing higher education.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine what factors contributed or hindered foster youth from accessing higher education. To put things into perspective only 50% of foster youth graduate high school. “Statistically speaking, under 10% of foster youth attend college, and an even smaller percentage graduate.” (Promises2Kids.org). There has not been much research conducted to explain what has helped foster youth be successful in regards to their education. Most of current research has focused on foster youth mental health, safety, and wellbeing. I ultimately want to understand how to help foster youth bridge the gap from high school to college. In order to do so, I must look at both the positive and negative effects that enable or challenge foster youth from accessing higher education.

I have always had a strong desire to help and support foster youth access to higher education because I know, as a foster youth that college has changed my life for the better. Education was my escape route from my childhood nightmare. “School provides an arena for healthy development for most children, and for some at-risk children school is a place of safety.... A teacher can meet the need a child has for a caring adult who can provide mentorship and guidance (Reynolds & Suh-Ruu, 2004). Higher education opened the door to numerous resources and services. It also has created endless opportunities and established lifelong relationships. I am a product of the foster care system and have beaten the odds. I want to help others who are going through similar experiences that I was forced to undergo.

Having experienced the foster care system, I understand how difficult it is to navigate and live through its complexities. I am also aware of the statistics foster youth must overcome in order to not become another number. “A recent study shows 70% of youth in foster care, ages 15 to 19, want to go to college, and 19% of those youth want to go further.” (Izawa-Hayden)

Foster youth have low graduation rates compared to their peers. “In any given year, there are approximately 800,000 youth in the foster care system. These are young children and adolescents whose parents are deceased or who have been subjected to some form of neglect or abuse.” (Davis, 2006) These experiences make it extremely difficult for them to focus in school. I was lucky enough to be placed with my grandmother and I remained in her care until I turned 18. Many other foster youth are not as lucky and end up homeless, in prison, or have children of their own at a very young age. It is very difficult to break the cycle when it is only you against the world.

Literature Review

There's numerous factors as to why foster youth are unable to pursue higher education. “Placement instability, school transience, and high rates of absenteeism are well-documented barriers to K-12 educational achievement” (Snodgrass 2010). “By definition foster youth have been subject to two traumatic experiences: the neglect or abuse that brought them to the attention of the authorities and the removal from their family. Some are traumatized a third time by the treatment they receive while in the foster care system. These traumatic experiences are at the root of the unique barriers to higher education opportunities faced by foster youth” (Wolanin, 2005).

According to Farineau (2014), youth with a history of maltreatment are 55% more likely to be arrested, 96% more likely to commit a violent crime, and there are over a half of a million children in the foster care system due to maltreatment (Hoover, 2017). Despite these challenges, some foster youth go to college. I am interested to find out how these foster youth were able to access higher education.

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“In recent years, there has been a growing interest in understanding the experiences and outcomes of foster youth transitioning into adulthood and their pursuit of a college education. While research has emerged documenting the poor educational outcomes of youth exiting foster care, there is little that examines the factors that lead to successful or unsuccessful outcomes.” (Lopez & Duran, 2016) “At any time, there are approximately 300,000 of these foster youth between the ages of 18 and 25, the prime college-going years. About 150,000 of these foster youth have graduated from high school and are college qualified. Of these college-qualified foster youth about 30,000 are attending postsecondary education.” (Wolanin, 2005) Despite increased efforts to help foster youth succeed, “little research exists on their postsecondary educational experiences, especially at a national level.” (Gross, 2016)

“Research has not been clear as to the reasons for limited school success but these reasons are likely to include: lack of placement stability leading to frequent change of schools, effects of emotional trauma of maltreatment and/or removal from family on ability to learn in school, and stigma of foster care that may preclude greater access to learning opportunities within schools or lowered expectations on the part of teachers.” (Collins, 2004) Some previous research has linked school failure to child maltreatment, and subsequent removal from the home (Trickett & McBride-Chang, 1995; Yu, Day, & Williams, 2002). As of the end of the federal fiscal year 2009 (September 30), over four in ten youth (44%) in foster care have lived in more than three placement settings” (Pecora, 2012). This instability is likely to explain one of the reasons that foster youth are not prepared to go to college.

“The most important barrier to educational attainment and high school graduation that is unique to foster youth is the frequent disruptions of their education by changes in school placement. Foster youth change schools about once every six months, and some research

suggests that they lose an average of four to six months of educational attainment each time they change schools” (Wolanin, 2005). Moreover, a lack of continuity exists as students adjust to different curriculum, standards, and teachers, possibly finding that they have to repeat material already covered at the previous school or that they have missed various credits and are behind the rest of the class. (Burley & Halpern, 2001) “Reasons for their educational shortcomings are legion and include multiple school changes, lack of support by some foster parents, and little understanding of the significance of school” (Barth, 1990).

Foster youth are also far more likely to experience out-of- school suspension and expulsion than their peers who are not in foster care (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004). “Compared to youth in the general population, youth in foster care are less likely to perform at grade level, are twice as likely to repeat a grade (Courtney et al., 2001; Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004; Pecora et al, 2005; Burley & Halpern, 2001), and tend to be concentrated in the lowest performing schools.” (Smithgall et al., 2004). “Foster youth grow up in an alternate family structure without the supports of a biological, two-parent household. Children who grow up in alternate environments frequently have higher rates of unemployment, lower educational attainment and less occupational success than those growing up in intact families.” (Bilblarz & Raftery, 1999).

Children who have lived in a state of acute stress are often unable to shut down this stress when the threat has been removed. This heightened and prolonged state of acute stress can cause the brain to overdevelop in specific areas, including those which control the response to fear (Cole, O’Brien, Gadd, Ristuccia, Wallace, & Gregory, 2005). The long-lasting consequences of early traumatic stresses can manifest in the classroom in a variety of ways, presenting challenges to educators.” (Morton, 2012) “Among these groups they found that foster youth had higher

levels of behavioral and emotional problems, along with a disproportionate number of physical and learning problems that limited their ability to engage with their educational program.”

(Sullivan, Jones, & Mathiesen, 2009) Nearly half (45%) of foster children between 6th and 8th grades were classified as eligible for special education compared to 16% of students who have never been in foster care (Macomber, 2009). “Former foster youth are vulnerable to serious health care problems. Almost four-of-ten (44%) had had a "serious illness or accident" since leaving foster care with 24% of the sample requiring hospitalization.” (Barth, 1990) “The trauma of being taken into care and leaving their families, possibly due to neglect or abuse on the part of their parents, can contribute to a sense of abandonment and low self-esteem for foster youth. (Burley & Halpern, 2001)

Most foster youth are unstable and suffer from mental health disorders. Since foster youth face many different challenges on a daily basis, it is almost impossible for them to think about their future, nonetheless, school. “Many live on the streets, lack the money to meet basic living expenses, fail to maintain regular employment, are involved with the criminal justice system, are unable to obtain healthcare, and experience early pregnancies.” (Reilly, 2003) Foster youth “are often in crisis mode, focusing on other basic needs such as securing food and shelter. Other students who may have returned to their parents or been adopted face similar challenges when familial support is tenuous or non-existent after the student turns 18.” (Paredes, 2017)

Every year 4,000 youth emancipate from California’s foster care system upon reaching the age of 18 (Cooper, Mery, & Rassen, 2008). At that age, former foster youth are pushed out into the world without monetary support, family support, a place to live, and often without basic living skills.” (Bailey, 2010) Because of the urgency to provide for a child's critical needs, such as protection and safety, the educational progress of foster youth may not receive adequate

attention. In most states, the educational needs of foster children are not consistently tracked by caseworkers, increasing the likelihood that a child's educational problems will not be addressed by either the school or child welfare agency. (Burley & Halpern, 2001) Federal legislative action has focused on introducing key measures or outcome indicators emphasizing such important areas as length of care, safety from child abuse or neglect, placement history, and permanency (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005a).

“Success in school can be a positive counterweight to the abuse, neglect, separation, and impermanence experienced by children and youth in foster care: Education has the potential to markedly improve their life chances and their ability to contribute to society as productive adults. Although more data are clearly needed, particularly on a national level, the overall picture emerging from the studies to date is not encouraging. The research suggests that far too many of the children and youth in foster care are not succeeding in school and that a concerted effort will be required if significant progress is to be made in their educational outcomes....” (Pecora, 2012)

“Part of this process is helping them attend college and although many social workers do provide the youth with the basic information about college, there is often no follow up or other support provided to help the youth in applying for college. Youth often times do not have the support from family and other non-social work entities to help encourage them during the process.” (Chretien, 2017)

“In conclusion, a substantial number of youth enter foster care and are likely to remain there for an extended period of time, and are cared for by a patchwork system of care, consisting of child welfare agencies and local, state, and federal governments. Further, studies have demonstrated mixed results and few rigorous studies have been conducted to date. “This lack of knowledge about foster children and youth extends to the educational system, where educators

are not adequately trained to meet the unique needs of this group of students. In addition, teachers and administrators are often unaware of foster children in their school and classrooms, and sometimes unable to meet the needs of this population. This lack of information creates an unfortunate disadvantage for the student, teacher, and administrator.” (Morton, 2012)

Understanding the outcomes of youth who have been placed in foster care has been encumbered by a lack of random assignment studies and other methodological issues.” (Casey Family Programs, 2006) “However, as noted earlier, with greater knowledge surrounding the factors contributing to successful transitions for foster youth into adulthood, more effective programs could be designed to support this population toward increased success. (Hendenstorm, 2014)

Methodology

This research paper is framed as an exploratory qualitative research design. The researcher conducted five 40 to 60 minute interviews with foster youth. The researcher obtained written consent to record their conversations and IRB approval was awarded. Four participants were former foster youth and one was a current foster youth. All five interviewees entered the foster care system at one point in their lives. A commonality they all shared was that they did not live with their biological parents. Even though they shared similar experiences, each one had their own unique foster care experience. Three of the volunteers were females and the other two were males. In addition, three of the participants were currently enrolled in college and the other two were not. Four of them identified as latino or hispanic and one as black. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years old.

The researcher utilized a snowball sample to get a hold of all of his five volunteers. Due to the difficulty of connecting with these youth, the researcher reached out to Promises 2 Kids

and Just in Time for Foster youth to help locate foster youth who were willing to share their story. The researcher obtained potential foster youth contact information, and emailed, and texted them, and also added a \$10 dollar incentive to lure more youth to participate, nevertheless, most did not respond, especially the ones that did not go into higher education. Some previous research explains that research on foster youth is difficult because, “Foster youth are very difficult to contact. Foster youth often keep their foster care status private. For those who are currently in care and those that have aged-out, it is very difficult to gain access to contact information because the state protects their identity.” (Morton, 2012) Due to the sensitive information participants shared, the researcher will only share personal information using their first and last name initials. Once all the interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim and deleted recording for confidentiality purposes.

Limitations

Being a former foster youth myself, I am aware that I may have some unconscious biases since this is so dear to my heart. Since all the five volunteers are from the state of California, some of the answers may not be applicable to other foster youth in different parts of the country. In addition, most of participants were from latino or hispanic descent, which does not represent the entire foster youth population. Furthermore, this is only a small representation of the larger population size. That being said, the responses provide some interesting insight into the lives of foster youth and the challenges they face to achieve access to higher education.

Findings

Challenges

The problem as stated before is that foster youth are not accessing higher education even though there a lot of resources and scholarship opportunities for them. The complexities of the foster care system makes it extremely difficult for youth to navigate the education pipeline. Foster care is an umbrella term, and under it, youth may be placed into a foster home, group home, guardianship, adoption, or kinship care. Depending on the type of placement youth end up, determines what services and resources foster youth are entitled to. For example, RM said, “it’s weird, they wouldn’t give me any services that regular foster children would get. I was under guardianship. It’s a loophole for foster care.” “Due to the wide variety of eligibility requirements, there are potential equity issues regarding the appropriate distribution of education and training funds” (Collins, 2004).

A similar situation happened to me. I was denied the Chafee grant, extended foster care, and many other foster youth scholarships because I was placed in guardianship care. I was very upset because I was unaware that there were different definitions or criteria to be labeled a foster youth. “Independent living programs, particularly those supported by the federal John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, aim to help foster youth generally between the ages of 16 and 21 to make the transition to self-sufficiency. However, these programs serve only about half of the eligible foster youth.” (Wolanin, 2005) “There is a need for more access to information about the programs that currently exist, as many foster youth may not be aware of what is available.” (Cohn & Kelly, 2015) The Chafee program is designed and carried out on a state by state basis. (Wolanin 2005 I had to learn the limitations of the foster care system the hard way, just like RM.

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The foster care system is complex and messy. There are so many different definitions of what it means to be a foster youth. There is a federal definition, but states also have the ability to redefine who counts as a foster youth. Counties also have their own definition. Furthermore, even with \$22 billion of federal, state and local funding annually (Scarcella, Bess, Zielewski, Warner, & Geen, 2004), there are reports that the foster care system is in crisis, that foster parent retention is low, workers remain overloaded with high caseloads; and that poor salaries, inadequate supervision and stressful working conditions result in high staff turnover and uneven job performance (Casey Family Programs, 2006)

My respondents also pointed out another challenge that foster youth faced which is the many disruptions in their secondary education due to placement changes that made them ineligible for college. NV mentioned, “because I missed so much school growing up till this day I can’t really write an essay. I don’t know what the different essays are that’s really hard especially in college because it’s all about essays here.” Foster youth end up falling behind academically because they are forced to start all over in a new school and become adjusted to the new campus. In addition, sometimes not all their credits transfer over forcing them to retake some courses they have passed at previous schools.

In some cases foster youth experience homelessness, which make them not want to go to school. DV shared that while he was attending high school he became homeless. He refused to go to school because that would require him to wear the same clothes as the day before.

In general, foster youth are very resilient. They must face and overcome so many obstacles early in their lives simply to survive. Their survival instincts turn on and they learn how to fend for themselves on a daily basis without any parental support. Research has shown that individual, family, and neighborhood components interact to help make young people

resilient (Condly, 2006). “Some students may get discouraged if they don’t have someone cheering in their corner and believing in them. Having someone who is proud of their accomplishments pushes them to achieve more and gives them the confidence they need to push forward.” (Paredes, 2017)

After interviewing the three foster youth that ended up going to college, a common theme I overheard was that they all were involved in extracurricular activities. Whether it be in a school club or organization, an organized sport, their church group, or volunteering, foster youth occupied their time with hobbies and interests of theirs. This was reaffirmed by ED who mentioned, “I could truly say right now that if not even just within my extracurricular activities but if, it wasn’t for Boy Scouts, and my professors, and my teachers and even my peers, I would not be the man I am today.” Extracurricular activities coupled with individuals who offered support gave foster youth a sense of worth and some sense of belonging.

The youth I interviewed stressed how much they wanted to feel they belonged. Extracurricular activities, took their mind off their current living situation and became a way to find a home away from home but also helped them fit in somewhere. This “fitting in” can be a double-edge sword. RM gave the example that In high school she was very oriented towards her friends... after thinking about it, she realizes that maybe because I didn’t have that connection with people at home, I would seek out friendships constantly, so I didn’t have to think about what’s going on at home”.

Foster youth who attended college knew early on that they were going to enroll into a higher education system. For example, NV stated “It’s just always been a part of me. I knew I was always going to go to college no matter what.” Another youth reinforce this idea stating, “I would truly say the end of ninth grade... I really wasn’t thinking about a higher education until--

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I had a teacher sit down with me and really discuss, don't let that hold you back... sophomore year, my English teacher sat down with me and... She phrased the question that what's next, what's after high school?" Having a caring adult that genuinely shows interests in foster youth, and provides exposure positively impacts foster youth chances of accessing higher education. "I think that's one thing that I loved about, not even just that school, but teachers there at the school, because they really truly care about you. They really will take the time and effort to get to know you and help you succeed." Knowing that someone out there cares about you motivates foster youth to seek higher education as their ticket out from the foster care system.

In addition, foster youth who attended a higher education institution generally wanted to set an example for their siblings. They were self-motivated to not to fall into the same cycle their biological parents did. RM mentioned, "I think the only thing I can think that motivated me was the idea of not being like my birth parents, which didn't really really do anything with themselves. I guess it was that idea of not creating the same cycle." ED added, "High school was about proving people wrong, proving statistics wrong, that college is something I want to do, knowing that I'm capable of doing it." NV reinforced the notion by sharing that college became more and more for my younger sisters to show them that our past should not haunt us and stop us from achieving success.

Another theme that emerged from the interviews to help explain why the college bound foster youth were able to attend college was that they attended regular public high schools. In addition, they were advised to enroll into honors or advanced placement courses by a teacher or counselor. NV shared how her school counselor was the one who encouraged her to take AP classes. "Several studies have indicated the profound effect of student involvement on learning. Specifically, students need to feel a sense of "mattering" versus feeling marginal." (Daly, 2011)

As for the two other foster youth that did not enroll into higher education, they mentioned they attended specialized schools that did not require them to take any elective courses in order to graduate high school. “The team also expressed a desire to drop the community service requirement for the foster youth tuition waiver and formalize the practice of having a foster youth liaison at each postsecondary institution.” (Sarubbi, Parker, & Sisneros 2017) In the schools that these youth described, curriculum was designed in a way that granted foster youth the ability to quickly catch up for any missing credits or requirements. By doing so, foster youth do not take the two years of foreign language, one year of visual and performing arts, and one year of college electives that most universities require students to have taken in order to be eligible to apply.

Conclusion/Implications

Helping to understand how to bridge the educational gap for foster youth from high school to college has always been one of my passions. As a matter of fact, I am a former foster youth that pursued higher education as my refuge. I am interested in supporting high school foster youth access higher education because by personal experience I believe the best investment foster youth can make is in themselves. Education is something that no one can take away from anybody. Foster youth are survivors who are figuring out how to navigate a complicated system. “It is important to understand the different systems that are in place in the foster youth's life and how each system can play a direct role in the child's development. Understanding the “many systems that interact with foster youth that can negatively or positively impact their attitudes on higher education” (Hoover, 2017) can help educators and policymakers better attend to the needs of foster youth.

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I want to help foster youth bridge the gap and help foster youth access higher education to set them up for success. Trends that emerged from this study were individual resilience, supportive adults or community members and being involved in extracurricular activities. These three factors helped foster youth access higher education because when they have the willpower to carry on and chase their dreams nothing can stand in their way of becoming successful. Caring adults provide that little extra push that foster youth need to overcome the challenges that come with being a foster youth. Foster youth who did not go to college didn't do so because they did not have stable housing. Without stability it is impossible to pursue a higher education.

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