

From Foster Care to College: Perceptions of Young Adults on Their Academic Success

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Abstract: Perceptions of college students, all former foster youth, regarding influences that impacted their academic attainment are described. Themes involve external interactions and internal influences, including a newly identified set of internal characteristics, “success strengths,” that promote college attainment. The Foster Youth Academic Achievement Model is introduced.

During an era when even underprivileged young adults in the United States are obtaining higher levels of education, young people who grow up in foster care – 24-hour-a-day care away from abusive homes of origin – lag behind their peers in high school graduation and General Equivalency Diploma (GED) graduation rates (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005).

Each year, more than 20,000 18-year-olds leave foster care to take their place in society; many are ill-equipped and ill-prepared for their adult lives (Christian, 2003). Recent studies regarding the educational deficits among foster children have documented the problem well, but have offered little insight into how successful young adults who grew up in foster care were able to reach their post-secondary goals. (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002; Hochman, Hochman, & Miller, 2004). Professional development and adult education initiatives, based on the perceptions of young adults who grew up in foster care and have obtained college, should play a central role in improving college attainment rates among these young adult learners.

Purpose of the Study

The phenomenological study reported in this paper explained and described the perceptions of 24 undergraduate college students in South Florida who grew up in foster care regarding how external factors (i.e., home environment, schools, communities, and social service organizations) and internal characteristics (e.g., beliefs, emotions, and motivation) influence their educational achievement (Rios, 2008). Educational achievement was defined as graduation from high school and enrollment in either two or four-year institutions of higher education.

Research Design

This study was conducted in three South Florida counties with demographics similar to many other metropolitan, diverse, U.S. counties with high populations of youth in foster care. A criterion-based purposive sampling procedure identified participants who (a) had experienced at least one year in foster care in South Florida before reaching the age of 18, (b) were attending a college or university, (c) were adults, and (d) received support from the state to continue their education beyond high school.

Of the 123 young adults attending a college or university and enrolled in Florida’s tuition program, 25 (20%) were interviewed. Of those 25, one interview was not included because of the low quality of the recordings. Therefore, interviewees included 24 former foster youth (ranging from 18 to 23 years of age, with a mean of 20): 7 men, 17 women. The 24 participants included 18 Blacks (including Haitians, Jamaicans, Bahamians, African Americans, and Dominicans) and 6 Whites. Some participants had been in foster care all of their lives. Some had entered foster care in early elementary school, and others had entered foster care in their teens. The majority ($N= 11$) had attended only one high school; 5 had attended 2 high schools; and 10 had attended 3

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or more high schools. The majority of participants ($N = 22$) attended public universities or colleges: 12 were enrolled as freshmen, 8 as sophomores, 3 as juniors, and 1 as a senior.

Phenomenology was used as the research method because the goal was to obtain perceptions, which influence behavior and attitudes. Phenomenology promotes the description of participants' subjective experiences, and a key goal of this research was to determine how participants described, felt about, and made sense of their lived experience (Patton, 2002, p. 104). A semi-structured interview procedure was utilized for the 45 to 90 minute interviews, which were transcribed and checked for quality. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes. Themes were illustrated with participant quotes (using pseudonyms to protect participants' identities). This research qualified as exempt through the university's Institutional Review Board.

Research Findings

This section presents themes and concepts that emerged from the analysis of the interviews conducted. Two themes emerged during the inductive analysis of the data: (a) academic barriers, and (b) academic supports. Each theme had sub-themes (types) that added new dimensions to previous research on this topic.

Academic Barriers

Academic barriers are obstacles that limit academic achievement or attainment of career goals (Kenny et al., 2007). Four types of academic barriers were identified: (a) school-related, (b) foster care-related, (c) peer-related, and (d) internal, each of which will now be described.

School-related Academic Barriers

School-related academic barriers are obstacles experienced by students in organizations that provide formal instruction (Kenny et al., 2007). Students indicated that they faced two types of school-related barriers, non-empathetic teachers and administrators and lack of academic rigor, as primary obstacles to their academic progress.

Non-empathetic teachers and administrators. Participants indicated that when school authority figures did not have an intellectual or conceptual grasp of their life and academic situations, they reacted insensitively, and had a limited (or detrimental) impact on participants' academic progress.

Lack of academic rigor. The second type of school-based barrier that emerged consistently was a lack of academic rigor, which means classes were too easy and curriculum did not result in consistent knowledge gain (Marzano, 2003). Participants in this study voiced negative perceptions about many of the schools they attended, indicating that they were not consistently challenged to learn.

Foster Care-related Academic Barriers

Foster care-related barriers are obstacles encountered by youth primarily because they are wards of the state (Casey Family Programs, 2004). Participants indicated that uninformative caseworkers and low quality foster care placements were the primary foster care-related barriers to their college attainment.

Uninformative caseworkers. Many participants said caseworkers did not tell them about their post-secondary educational benefits until it was almost too late, when they already had spent years not working hard in school, and when they were almost 18, or already had turned 18, and were struggling with questions of where to live and how to survive without state support.

Low-quality foster care placements. The young adults interviewed consistently indicated that their residential placements were not conducive to their academic progress and that

guardians made little or no effort to work with schools and teachers, to help them develop good study habits, and to support the child's efforts to learn as much as possible.

Peer-related Academic Barriers

Participants complained about other foster children who were generally apathetic about school and were emotionally or physically abusive to higher-performing peers. One participant, a first-year African American university freshman, provided insight into the mindset of low-performing youth when he said they were always provoking and acting jealous toward him because they had "nothing to live for." At least five participants indicated that fights with other foster children resulted in stints at juvenile detention centers, which resulted in educational delays.

Internal Academic Barriers

Personal academic barriers are internal emotions and individual behaviors that negatively impact educational progress. Anger was perceived by participants as having had a major negative impact on their academic progress and was associated closely with the second major personal academic barrier identified, bad behavior, which included fighting and rebellion against authority figures, that often resulted in academic suspensions and expulsions.

Summary of Academic Barriers

Most research on academic achievement of youth in foster care indicates that institutional or bureaucratic barriers (i.e., lack of collaboration or delays in transferring of educational records) are the major barriers to foster youth academic success (Burrell, 2003; Casey Family Programs, 2003). Participants, however, spoke of more personal barriers experienced at school, in their foster care placements, with peers and from within themselves. The next section will discuss academic supports, which participants perceived played an important part in their academic success and college attainment.

Academic Supports

The academic support that participants perceived they received can be divided into four types: (a) school-related academic support, (b) foster care-related academic support, (c) community-related support, and (d) personal academic support, or personal success strengths.

School-related Academic Supports

Participants' primary support at school came from caring teachers, helpful counselors, and a challenging academic environment. Stability of school placement in high school was also an important factor.

Caring teachers. Nearly half of the participants conveyed positive perceptions about teachers, consistently noting educators who made a special effort to help them, pay attention to them and make them feel comfortable being foster youth in school.

Helpful counselors. Although participants consistently indicated they valued teachers who were caring, they seemed to not expect nurturing from their counselors, who they knew were overwhelmed. From counselors, participants clearly valued and expected assistance to plan for and apply to college. The patterns for both teachers and counselors indicated that memorable adults went beyond their job description.

Challenging academic environment. Nine participants, including seven former honors students, credited academically rigorous classes, and high-performing classmates, for their academic progress, a perception that supports earlier work on student achievement (Hanushek, Kain, Markman, & Rivkin, 2002).

Foster Care-related Supports

The primary supports related to foster care came from foster parents, the adults who care for youth in substitute care, and caseworkers who promoted higher education. Like biological parents, these adults have the potential to impact youths' academic achievement (Casey Family Programs, 2003; Steinberg, 1996).

Authoritative foster parents. Participants clearly appreciated and benefited from foster parents whose "beliefs, attitudes, and values about learning serve to guide their behavior with their children around school-related issues" (Bempechat, 1998, p. 38). The plurality of the sample indicated that their foster parents were strict but highly supportive.

Education-promoting caseworkers. Five participants mentioned caseworkers whose actions specifically encouraged them to excel educationally. These actions included asking about educational progress, making wake up calls to assure youth get to college classes, and taking youths to college campuses. Although foster parents and caseworkers had direct authority in the lives of participants, the students also consistently noted the positive role played by adults who were not in authority positions over them, such as mentors and relatives.

Community-related Support

For participants in this study, who often spend many years living away from their biological families, blood relatives were mentioned as part of the youth's community, as opposed to their household. These relatives, as well as general community mentors, emerged as the primary sources of community-related support.

Education-savvy mentors. Seven participants praised mentors with whom they formed trusting and supportive relationships. These mentors were all college-educated adults who helped the participants apply to, and enroll in college (and obtain vital financial support). The value of mentors is illustrated by Erica, a female African American university sophomore who thought she couldn't attend college because she was in foster care. A helpful school guidance counselor helped Erica obtain a mentor who "called whoever she had to call to make sure I got what I needed." The assistance provided by her mentor resulted in Erica receiving tuition waivers for four years of a public university education, and a monthly government stipend of nearly \$1,000.

Conscientious relatives. Fourteen of the students spoke admirably about the support they received from relatives, mostly from aunts and siblings. Siblings also served as motivational role models, providers of emotional and financial support, and academic mentors.

Personal Academic Support: Success Strengths

The following seven "success strengths," personal competencies associated with healthy development and life success, emerged from participants' narratives: (a) perseverance, (b) responsibility, (c) self-efficacy, (d) resourcefulness, (e) diligence, (f) internal motivation, and (g) goal orientation.

Self-efficacy. Although nearly all participants experienced periods of self-doubt and often behaved in ways that were inconsistent with their academic abilities, they all eventually came to believe strongly in their own abilities to succeed academically, a trait vital for academic excellence. Virginia, a community college freshman, was impelled to attend college by the academic success she experienced in high school. She said that: "I know I was able to do it. Everybody's able to do it. Even if you are in [special education] classes you can do it as long as you apply yourself." This strong sense of self-efficacy was evident in nearly all the participants.

Resourcefulness. Participants' academic strategies included constantly seeking advice about schoolwork, obtaining tutors, buying extra study resources, and becoming friends with high-performing youth.

Diligence. Consistently, academic effort was identified as an important pattern among participants, who spoke of going beyond what was expected of them and working very hard to do well in school.

Internal motivation. Thirty-two of participants' 38 statements concerning motivation related to participants' internal motivation to succeed academically. For instance, one longed for the independence and stability that a college degree might provide. Another indicated that she realized that it was up to her to get the education she knew she needed for success in life.

Goal orientation. The importance of educational goals, also known as "educational aspirations" (Benard, 2004, p. 29) as an element of high achievement, is well documented (Adelman, 2006). Six participants aspired to graduate degrees and none of them expressed any doubt that they would attain their goals.

Summary of Academic Supports

Academic supports included support from school personnel, caretakers, caseworkers, and mentors. Success strengths refer to characteristics that comprise a set of student-level factors that support years of quantitative research indicating that "student level factors account for the lion's share of variance in student achievement" (Marzano, 2003, p. 25).

Foster Youth Academic Attainment Model

Participants identified both barriers and supports within and across the contexts of family, school, and peer groups. The interaction of sources of external supports (i.e., school, foster care, and community), sources of external barriers (i.e., school, foster care, and peers), internal supports (i.e., success strengths) and internal barriers (i.e., negative emotions and behaviors) can be conceptualized by a new proposed model for understanding influences on foster youth academic success, the Foster Youth Academic Achievement Model. This model, shown in Appendix A, is based on Lewin's Force Field Analysis Model (Marrow, 1969).

Implications for Educators

Understanding the perceptions of former foster youth in college, and advocating for change based on that awareness, can help adult educators "equalize the wrongs of society by providing an education to an adult populace that did not receive the basics through traditional education" (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000, p. 156). Former foster youth are currently benefiting from new Federal legislation, specifically the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (H.R. 6893/P.L. 110-351), that aims to improve education and health care services for children in care, especially for transitioning youth and young adults who emancipate from foster care (Children's Defense Fund, 2008).

This study has implications that dovetail with increase national attention on improving foster youth's educational opportunities. The finding that some participants experienced a lack of empathy among teachers and other school personnel, as well as that others benefitted from caring teachers and helpful counselors, implies that educational leaders at all levels of education should seek out materials and staff training regarding the influences that impact educational achievement among youth in foster care and make sure that as many members of their staff as possible are exposed to this training. Particular emphasis should be placed on the identification of foster youth in school, showing these young people empathy, monitoring their educational progress, and providing mentoring, and a supportive yet challenging academic environment.

Conclusion

The need for special academic support to help disadvantaged youth overcome barriers to their academic progress is a major tenet of educational research and practice. This study described perceptions of successful young adult students from an especially vulnerable sub-set of

our youth population – foster children. The study indicates that a deeper understanding of the type of support that is needed, and an understanding of how youth contribute to their own academic success through a particular set of personal attributes, can help society increase the numbers of foster children who attain college and succeed in life.

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Appendix A: Foster youth academic achievement model.

