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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of current and former foster youth who faced challenges with the process of enrolling in post-secondary education. These participants illuminated the importance of teacher preparation programs that include awareness of the contexts of foster children and youth. Unfortunately, little is known about this group, leaving them vulnerable to significant barriers. Many foster youth aspire to a four-year bachelors degree, but need the help and support of high school teachers to get there. Teacher educators have the unique opportunity to prepare future teachers to work with students from such varying backgrounds and experiences.

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Barriers to Post-Secondary Enrollment for Former Foster Youth

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Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of current and former foster youth who faced challenges with the process of enrolling in post-secondary education. These participants illuminated the importance of teacher preparation programs that include awareness of the contexts of foster children and youth. Unfortunately, little is known about this group, leaving them vulnerable to significant barriers. Many foster youth aspire to a four-year bachelors degree, but need the help and support of high school teachers to get there. Teacher educators have the unique opportunity to prepare future teachers to work with students from such varying backgrounds and experiences.

Researcher Positioning

As a former high school English teacher with predominately upper classmen in my courses, I geared up each year for the onslaught of requests for letters of recommendations, Common Application reference forms, and editing and mentoring students through required essays. Wanting to give each student my absolute best required an organized plan to meet November 1st university early action deadlines. As someone who completed her education through a non-traditional route, I always had a heart for those for whom early action deadlines just did not apply, no matter how much they wanted it. Two such students entered my classroom and my life and changed the way I viewed college applications, Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) and access to post-secondary education. These two students were in foster care, a population about which I knew nothing.

The majority of people do not know much about foster care (Wolanin, 2005). This includes teachers. Although teacher education programs provide pre-service teachers with training and education about academic and behavioral problems, foster children constitute a specialized context about which little or nothing is taught. Thus, beginning teachers often have a gap in their preparation. Foster children and youth often experience academic and behavioral challenges. This, combined with teachers' lack of understanding of foster children's needs can make schooling especially problematic (Zetlin, MacLeod & Kimm, 2013).

This paper provides information for teacher educators on the challenges foster youth face with applying for admission to post-secondary institutions, and ways teachers can support foster youth and help make their dream of pursuing a bachelor's degree a reality. In the next section I review research that emphasizes statistically the challenges foster youth face in their academic lives. This is followed by a discussion of key themes gleaned from my data collection with youth who experienced foster care.

Background

Regardless of the emphasis in the U.S. for our youth to receive a college education, for many foster youth it is out of reach (Salazar, 2013). The academic career of children and

youth in foster care is fraught with challenges, arising from both the educational K-12 setting and the foster care system as a whole. The child welfare system is focused primarily on the safety and placement of children who have come into the system. The education and academic needs of foster children become an afterthought (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). In their study, Zetlin, MacLeod and Kimm (2013) found that there was no formal line of communication between the care system and teachers to notify them of students in their classrooms who were in foster care.

While there is a long list of challenges within the foster care system, a few important challenges to note include placement change, abuse occurring from within the new foster parent home, neglect from the foster care system, and a Department of Human Services system that is poorly preparing foster youth to be successful in society once they are out of the care system (Allen & Vacca, 2011). With this in mind, it is not surprising that four years after leaving the foster care system 46% of foster youth have not finished high school, 25% will be found to be homeless, 42% become parents, and only 20% will be able to support themselves (Ferrell, 2004).

Barriers to college / university enrollment

Foster youth graduate from high school at substantially lower rates than those of their non-foster peers. Approximately 50% of all foster children will graduate from high school (Bruskas, 2008). Of those who graduate from high school, approximately 20% will go on to pursue post-secondary education at a community college, four-year college, or university compared to 60% of students outside of the care system (Wolanin, 2005). Those who do enroll in post-secondary education, only 3-11% complete a bachelor's degree. (Casey Family Programs, Stuart Foundation (2012). The Northwest Foster Care Alumni study revealed 1.8 percent of former foster youth achieved a four-year bachelor degree (Pecora et al., 2005). In spite of these statistics, Merdinger et al. (2005) found that 79% of the participants in their study reported aspirations to graduate from high school, and 63% of foster youth planned to continue their education beyond high school. For those who pursue post-secondary education three barriers have been identified: financial hurdles, the application process, and housing.

Financial hurdles. Optional Independent Living Programs are available to help foster youth with the transition from foster care to independence. Upon leaving the foster care system, 40.5% of former foster youth felt they were somewhat prepared to live independently (Merdinger et. al., 2005). After living in a structured foster care system in which they have adults making decisions on their behalf, emancipation has appeal. However, former foster youth find that they are not prepared to make their way through a less structured, complex environment (Uesugi, 2009). If by the time they leave care they have not attended an Independent Living program, and foster parents or caseworkers have not covered financial responsibility or money management adequately, the student is unprepared for how to manage her/his own living expenses (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). “Housing, transportation, health, legal matters, money management, and employment, are skills that virtually all youth need in order to have stable, happy and productive lives but that youth who have spent considerable time in foster care often struggle to master” (Salazar, 2011, p. 27).

Former foster youth do not have family resources like their college peers. This leads to resource insecurity such as housing, food, and clothing (Uesugi, 2009). The Northwest Alumni study found that one-third living at or below the poverty line (Pecora et al., 2006). Many do not pursue post-secondary education because they cannot afford to do so (Uesugi, 2009 & Wolanin, 2005). Financial barriers have proven to be one of the most significant reasons for those who have been in foster care to not enroll in college (Wolanin, 2005). Without the assistance of someone knowledgeable on how to navigate these options, the sticker shock of college tuition can cause foster youth to believe they just cannot afford it. Additionally, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) presents a barrier in the financial application process. The FAFSA provides an opportunity for applicants to check a box indicating if they are or were a ward of the court. Item number 52 asks, “At any time since you turned age 13, were both your parents deceased, were you in foster care or were you a dependent or ward of the court” (Free Application for Federal Student Aid, 2013 - 2014). Verification of this claim can cause delays. Until the financial aid is received, foster youth are unable to cover the cost of books, supplies and transportation costs (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010).

It is clear that foster youth are at a significant disadvantage when it comes to navigating the financial aid process. With little to no financial training and without someone to help, post-secondary education appears out of reach. For those that can overcome the financial hurdle, challenges continue as they encounter the complex application process for each institution they wish to apply.

The application process. Applying to college can be a daunting process. For foster youth this process is compounded because many face this process alone. As they begin to consider colleges, access challenges arise. Foster youth may not have gained the skills needed in order to gain admission to post-secondary institutions (Wolanin, 2005). As mentioned previously, the focus from the care system has been on safety and placement, not academics. Youth may have been placed in a good home with nurturing foster parents, but that does not guarantee help or support when it comes to college. Many foster parents just do not know how. In fact, 56% of foster parents were found to have a high school diploma or less, leaving them without the tools to mentor a foster child toward college (Oregon Student Assistance Commission, 2008). With emancipation looming at age 18, there has not been a focus on post-secondary pursuits. A gap exists in the training of State personnel and certified parents. Foster parents, case workers and others involved in the lives of foster youth have not been trained or prepared to assist foster youth with the college application process (Oregon Student Assistance Commission, 2008 & Dworsky & Perez 2010). Foster youth must find others outside of the foster care system to assist them as they navigate the application process.

With 56% of foster parents lacking the tools to advise a foster youth on college admission, it is clear that mentorship for foster youth is vital to overcome the challenges of applying to college. Foster youth need someone to stand in the gap and help with the application process. This includes someone willing to help them understand housing options at the institutions they are interested in attending.

Housing. Housing is a significant concern for those who have experienced life in foster care. Choice of post-secondary institution is often contingent upon sustained access to housing. Stable housing during campus closures is a unique concern for foster youth

(Wolanin, 2005). In Martin and Jackson's (2002) study 45% of participants reported accommodation challenges at post-secondary institutions (Martin & Jackson 2002). This includes the timing of moving in and out, as well as requirements to leave the dorms during extended school holidays. While their friends return home to spend time with family, students from foster care often must scramble to find viable housing or face the possibility of homelessness. (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Homelessness becomes reality when their emancipation occurs before college move-in dates and when they do not have stable housing they can depend on during extended holidays, and summer months. Merdinger et al. (2005) reported participants experienced an average of 75 days per year without a place to sleep. Housing therefore, can compel a foster youth alumni toward one institution or another based on the housing options offered that would most closely meet their needs.

As former foster youth face the pursuit of post-secondary education, it is apparent that finances, applications, and housing prove to be significant barriers. For youth able to resolve these challenges, enrollment can become reality. For youth who are unable to resolve the challenges, or who fear resource scarcity with the choice of post-secondary attendance, they choose employment over education. The next sections outline the research design I used to conduct my study, and a discussion of the data.

Methodology and Analysis

Hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990) framed this research. This research design was specifically chosen as it "differs from almost every other science in that it attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it" (p.9). This design allows a story to be told in an organic fashion by relaying experiences. The study utilized interviews with open-ended questions. The study was conducted in Oregon, and specifically focused on current and former foster youth that had graduated from high school, were pursuing a post-secondary education, and had applied for the Chafee Education and Training Scholarship for Fall, 2011. Chafee Education and Training Voucher (ETV) funding is available through the Department of Human Services Independent Living Program, awarding up to \$3,000 a year to eligible applicants. Eligibility is defined as (Oregon Student Assistance Commission):

1. Currently be in foster care, or
2. Had been in foster care for at least 180 days (six months) after their 14th birthday and exited substitute care at age 16 or older
3. Be participating in the voucher program on their 21st birthday. Youth may then continue to apply/receive funds until they turn 23 years old as long as they are enrolled in a post secondary education or training program and making satisfactory progress toward completion of that program.

The participants were connected to the Oregon Foster Youth Connection (OFYC), a program of Children First for Oregon. The OFYC is a statewide, youth led advocacy group made up of current and former foster youth. Working with the Director of the organization, potential participants were contacted. While the participants for the study were all current and former foster youth, by soliciting participants from the Chafee Education and Training Scholarship pool, the study was strengthened by participants who had all experienced foster care, and who had all qualified for the Chafee Scholarship, ensuring that all participants had the same experience or phenomenon being explored. From the interested participant pool, 11 were selected. By soliciting from this participant pool, similar characteristics, common experiences, and themes emerged.

After transcribing each interview, important / significant statements were listed. These statements were then organized into themes. Next, a description of the “what” or the “textural description” of the experience was constructed. Next, a “structural description” was constructed (Creswell, 2007, p.159). The final step was the construction of a description that incorporated both the textural and structural, sharing the experiences as perceived by foster youth. Once this was completed, a draft was emailed to each participant for feedback. Participants were afforded a chance to clarify the textural and structural descriptions.

Findings

Textural and Structural Descriptions

The participants each shared their own exceptional story. While commonalities were found among the group, their experiences and perceptions on their time in foster care are unique. Given this, a brief textural and structural description of each participant follows, providing a sketch of his or her experiences.

Emily. Emily entered the State care system at the age of 7 due to neglect and was placed in relative foster care with her aunt. She stayed with her aunt until she was 14, when the abuse she endured at the hand of her aunt was discovered. Because her next placement was 35 minutes away from her middle school, Emily caught a bus at 5:00 each morning. She said:

Well, it was 4 extra hours a day that I was riding, and my foster mom was at home all day and wouldn't give me rides at all, even though she got reimbursed for it. So, that kind of sucked.

Once she entered high school, she learned about a program in her school district, which would allow for dual enrollment and earn college credits while completing her high school education. She graduated, earning a traditional diploma, and continued on to community college. She completed her associate's degree at a local community college, and is working toward her bachelor's degree at a state university.

Roberto. Roberto was placed in foster care at birth, living with his aunt, as his mother was incarcerated. Roberto moved from foster home to foster home over the next 18 years, and had 18 or 19 placements. Placements types ranged from relative foster care to secure lock-down facilities. Roberto was eventually placed with in a solid foster home where he received support, acceptance and advocacy. This is the placement he calls "family" and the parents he calls "Mom" and "Dad."

When asked how he could have experienced so much in his life and end up successful, he shared the following about his caseworker, as well as the judge, attorney, skills trainer and others who were supportive:

When I graduated, I walked across the stage and...she started crying and I was like “Oh my gosh. I am almost crying now.” I felt like the dream had ended. She said, “Okay, you are scheduled to be signed out on your 18th birthday. After all I have seen you go through, I would never have seen you be so successful.” Then she hugged me and was like so proud of me because I was able to do this. It was really because of her and my judge, my attorney, my skills trainer, everybody who was there for me.

Roberto is now attending a four-year university in Oregon as a Ford Scholar.

Samantha. Samantha was placed in the foster care system at the age of six. She joined a foster home with a large number of foster children. After living in the home for eight years, the Department of Human Services decided to close this foster home. This caused trauma, resulting in anger and distrust toward her future foster parents and placements, which then contributed to her consistent movement over the next few years. Samantha was eventually placed in a good home a few semesters before high school graduation. She said, “I actually did not find my perfect placement until I was 17.” This perfect placement provided her freedom to make choices within a structured environment. Once secure in this placement, Samantha learned that a math course she took at another school would not transfer to her current school, leaving her .5 credits short of graduation. Samantha took a summer class to complete the credit and graduated with a traditional diploma. After graduation, she enrolled in a university that allowed offered her a move-in date that kept her from being homeless.

Dianna. Abuse and neglect were the cause for removal from the home for Dianna and her brother. They were placed in foster care and lived together in traditional foster care homes for a few years before they were separated. After the Department of Human Services found rope burns on both children’s ankles during a visit, the children were removed from the home and placed in a new foster home.

The second placement was with a married couple and two other girls in foster care. After living in the home, she learned the foster dad was sexually abusing the two older foster girls. She was safe from the foster dad, but not from the grandsons who regularly visited. The grandsons, who were just a few years older than Dianna and who regularly visited, began to act out sexually on Dianna. When she would not comply with their wishes, they would lie to their grandmother and she would hold Dianna down and allow her grandsons to repeatedly punch Dianna.

Dianna's anger over the abuse turned to rage, resulting her placement in and out of lock-down facilities and residential homes. Even when she was placed with the foster parent she calls "Mom," Dianna still struggled with anger. Dianna left this home once after assaulting a girl and was again placed in a lock-down facility until it was determined that she would be able to go home. Once she returned home, she attended a local high school consistently for four years, but dropped out to complete her GED. She is now enrolled in a local community college.

Jason. Jason entered foster care at the age of 17 after being kicked out of his home and left in the care of his grandparents. He shared that he was not without his own faults, but said he was never a bad kid:

I wasn't ever really rebellious in the sense that I tried to do anything rebellious. I just tried to be gone all the time. If they weren't fighting then they were...I mean, it just wasn't a good place to be, in my opinion.

Jason moved in with his grandparents and reality began to set in: "Three parents and no one even wants you." He was also very concerned that if he were told to leave his grandparents home, he would be homeless. Over the next few months, he "got completely clean and sober" and focused on his academics yet he believed he was still treated without respect and without any trust from his grandparents.

Jason was moved from the home of his grandparents into traditional foster home placements and eventually ended up at a group home. It was while living in this group home that he was able to earn his GED and also enroll in a local community college. At the

time of our interview, Jason had just moved out and was living on his own in an apartment, still attending college.

Andrew. Andrew was removed from the care of his mother when he was 10 years old. He was living at that time with his mother who regularly took drugs and abused alcohol. When she was under the influence, the home became very volatile. It was not uncommon for Andrew to attend school with an injury caused by his mother. He said, “My mom would lie to my teachers and they would believe her.” On one occasion, he arrived at school with a broken hand and a black eye. A few days later the police and the Department of Human Services arrived at his school and took him into foster care.

Andrew experienced 65 placements over the next seven years. When asked why he had so many placements, Andrew said, “Some thought I was just too unstable. Not sure how to deal with me.” Andrew said he was a very angry child and acted out. He attributes his high number of placements to this anger and to foster parents not knowing how to relate to him.

Eventually, Andrew was able to return to his original neighborhood and attend a local high school. When he arrived, the transition was not easy. Andrew said, “When I moved into this placement, I hadn’t been in school for like 6 months.” He eventually left this high school and earned his GED at a local community college.

Andrew is now living in a home with several other boys. They are all attending the same community college. His foster parent, who he now calls “Dad,” has taught him carpentry, and through working with his ILP worker he was able to obtain a handyman license. Working with his hands and building furniture reminds him of his love of art and of his favorite teacher who helped him deal with his feelings through art.

Tanya. Tanya was in foster care for 20 years, the longest of all participants in this study. Tanya entered foster care with her older sister. They were removed from what Tanya characterized as a “hurtful situation.” The abuse she experienced had long-lasting implications for Tanya: “Until I was 6, I didn’t speak one word. I signed everything. They said it was because of trauma.” After being selected by a television show, Tanya, eight and her sister 11, along with their caseworker flew to New York to participate in a special show

on foster children available for adoption. A couple saw the show and was approved to adopt the girls. The girls moved to [Illinois] for about 11 months but the adoption failed. The girls were returned to Oregon and placed in separate homes. Over the next 12 years, Tanya moved very regularly. At more than one foster home placement, she was abused

Tanya landed in a solid foster home during high school. The foster parents were supportive and encouraging, attending her many choir concerts and supporting her academically. As Tanya's 18th birthday was approaching, she realized that if she aged out of the foster care system, she would be left homeless during her senior year. She contacted her caseworker and was able to extend her time in the foster care system, allowing her to finish high school and continue to receive support into her first few years in college. Tanya successfully graduated from a public high school and received her diploma. She is now attending a community college and living with her sister, from whom she was previously separated.

Ben. Ben, like two other participants, entered the foster care system through a voluntary route and was placed in a traditional foster care home. Unfortunately, that placement did not last long. The foster parents smelled gasoline and discovered that Ben had drenched a toy truck in the basement. Given the amount of fuel that was found, and the resultant danger to the occupants and the home, Ben was immediately moved to a residential treatment center. Over the next few years, Ben was in and out of residential treatment and group homes. When he returned to a traditional foster home placement, he was enrolled in a public middle school. He was given an Individual Education Plan (IEP) to support his needs. Ben was diagnosed with psychosis NOS, requiring supervision. He was moved from home to home, and was in and out of several schools. He entered his last public high school with only six credits. Due to his diagnosis, he was assigned a one-on-one. This is an individual who would accompany and supervise Ben at school and at home.

Even with the additional help and support, Ben found no way to get caught up. While the one-on-one was academically helpful, psychologically Ben began to question who he was. He said:

So they had someone from my house come to school and wait outside my classroom. It didn't keep me from being successful, but it made me feel really bad about myself. Am I this horrible kid you are making me out to be?

Ben decided to leave high school and pursue his GED. The staff at the high school made several calls on his behalf and enrolled him in a GED program at a local community college. After earning his GED, he enrolled at the community college, where he continues today.

Jennifer. Jennifer entered care at the age of 14, but her relationship with the Department of Human Services began when she was 12. Jennifer said she grew up in a dysfunctional home where she was neglected by her mother and abused by her brother. She described herself as rebellious, choosing to do drugs, run away, and have sex for the first time at the age of 12. She said, "It was my first time and I ended up getting pregnant. Shortly after becoming pregnant, Jennifer learned of her pregnancy when she was admitted to the hospital for overdosing on drugs. This is when the Department of Human Services became involved in her life.

When she was removed from her home at the age of 14, her pattern of running away continued, resulting in numerous placements in various settings. She started in traditional foster homes, but continued to run away. When asked why, Jennifer replied, "I just didn't feel normal staying in a foster home. I felt out of place. So when I stayed with my friends, I felt normal again. I just wanted to feel normal." Her placements continued to escalate in terms of security levels and treatment. She ended up in several lock-down facilities and residential treatment homes.

Two years later she found herself, once again, pregnant. Living now with an abusive boyfriend after running away from another foster home, the state placed her at [Mary's Home], a residential treatment center for pregnant and troubled youth. In 2007, she delivered her second son. That child was also removed from her care and placed for adoption.

Jennifer received academic support while in the lock-down facilities where she was placed. It was here that she was able to focus on her education and began to see the value in an education. She was always a smart child and when she focused, she found that she enjoyed school. This enjoyment was reflected in her 4.0 GPA. Once she was enrolled in a traditional high school, she continued to do well. Yet, a few years later, she chose to drop out of high school, even though she was on track to graduate with honors.

Jennifer went on to earn her GED at a local community college. She then enrolled at a community college and began working towards her associate's degree.

Byron. Byron is a 21-year-old male, who experienced 15 years in the foster care system. At the age of three, Byron was removed from his home because his parents were involved in drugs. His parents were involved in several criminal activities, including the manufacture, distribution and use of drugs, stealing, and pimping. Byron and his older brother were removed from the home and placed with their great aunt. During their time in this placement, both his great uncle and his older brother physically and sexually abused Byron. He was moved into non-relative foster care where he moved from placement to placement over the next 14 years.

At the age of 12, Byron was in another abusive foster home. After being physically and mentally abused, he was moved to another home. Byron said that this placement was “a high risk placement for kids who had stabbed someone or raped someone.” While at this placement, Byron began to run away, spend time with his friends and use drugs. At the age of 14, he was on the run from law enforcement. He said, “I was at like rock bottom. At that time I was going through so much. A lot of inner turmoil.” At 15, he was caught and sentenced to eight years for the manufacture, distribution and possession of marijuana and methamphetamines near a daycare. He spent close to two years in a juvenile delinquency center and was released a few weeks before his 17th birthday. Once he was released, he returned to the home of [Rebecca], the high-risk placement he was in before he was caught and sent to the juvenile delinquency center. [Rebecca] is whom Byron calls Mom. When asked why she made such an impact on him, Byron said, “She is just unconditional.” He felt safe and he felt loved for the first time in his life. Even though Byron is no longer in

foster care, he continues to enjoy a relationship with [Rebecca] and the boys he lived with. This is his family.

Upon his release, he attended an alternative school where he earned his GED and learned trade skills. The alternative school connected him with businesses in the community, where Byron learned the contracting and landscaping business. These skills have allowed him to find employment and pay his tuition bills at a local community college.

Tessa. At the age of 12, Tessa was an angry pre-teen who was dealing with a new step-dad who, in her opinion, was taking her mom away from her. Tessa began looking for ways to force her mom to pay attention to her. Unfortunately, Tessa chose to do this through skipping school, getting into fights at school, and being sent to detention. She said, “I would go to school and get into fights because I thought that if I did that I would get to see my mom more and that she would care about me.” When Tessa’s mother determined that she could not deal with her behavior any more, she turned to the Department of Human Services for assistance. Tessa was admitted into the foster care system as a voluntary case. Tessa said the hope was that both Tessa and her mom would have time to cool down and repair their relationship.

Over the next four to five years, Tessa was in and out of foster homes, alternative schools, and residential treatment. She had contact with her mom and had regular visits and weekends at home. Unfortunately, the relationship continued to be rocky, so she was placed farther and farther away from her mother, in the hope that this relationship would not distract her from being successful academically.

After being placed at a residential treatment center, Tessa began to focus on academics and found her teachers encouraging and supportive. She began to work on her classes and successfully complete credits. When she was moved into a traditional foster home, she found that many of her credits transferred. She worked very hard and was able to graduate with a traditional diploma.

Today, Tessa is back at home, living with her mom. She is attending a local community college, pursuing cosmetology training.

Challenges and Supports to Post-Secondary Attendance

Analysis of the data collected from these eleven youth revealed three challenges that had to be addressed in order for these youth to achieve their goal of post-secondary attendance: finances, application processes, enrollment requirements, and housing. These challenges are discussed in the following sections.

Finances. For many of these participants a significant barrier was encountered during the completion of the Free Application For Student Aid (FAFSA) application. One question on the application asks if the applicant was in foster care, a dependent or ward of the court. For applicants who check the box, the federal government would follow-up. Emily said:

They do these random checks to see if those who check the box that they are wards of the state or if their parents were deceased. Well, it just so happens that three quarters of those kids who are getting “random checks” are foster kids.

The applicant—in this case current or former foster youth—would have to contact the Department of Human Services to have proof of their claim. Applicants who were 18, who just recently aged out, or who were still in care knew they needed to contact their caseworker. Those who had aged out previously no longer had a caseworker and therefore had to find someone in the State system who could assist them, resulting in significant delays. Emily said:

You have to have proof of being a ward of the court for financial aid and if you finished foster care and you have been on your own and now you want to go on to college...who are you supposed to ask for that paperwork? They are supposed to give it to you when you age out, your social security card, your birth certificate, and a few other things. But if you lose it, it is really hard to get them back.

This delay in receiving financial aid is a serious issue for foster youth. Without the money they need, they are not able to purchase required textbooks, even though classes have started. Emily said, “They hold up your financial aid up to three months even after you turned in all of your forms. Things like that are really hard because you can’t be like, ‘hey parents, can I borrow \$200?’”

Current and former foster youth are particularly vulnerable to financial set-backs. Without a consistent plan or individual in their life able and willing to cover books and supplies when financial aid is delayed, it becomes very difficult to stay in school. Once they have aged out of the system, they no longer have a caseworker they can call for help to navigate the financial or documentation barriers that may arise. And, even though they may still have a caseworker during the application process, the care system is not trained to assist.

Application processes. While the Common Application allows for students to apply to multiple schools with one application, a few requirements such as teacher recommendations, required personal essay, and application fees proved difficult for these participants. To overcome the challenges, several participants utilized the resources in their high school when it came time to fill out college applications, write application essays and look for scholarships. Roberto’s high school had the ASPIRE program. This program helps middle and high school student’s access education and training. He said, “ASPIRE really helped me find scholarships.” Tonya found a scholarship for which she qualified, but needed assistance with the essay. Tonya sought the help of her English teacher. She had never shared her story with a teacher before. Tonya said:

I gave it to my English teacher. I was like, “This might scare you a little bit to help me with this but here, could you help me?” I ended up staying with her until like 5:00. She was like balling within the first 5 minutes and I was like maybe she is the wrong person to be asking to help me. But she ended up helping me edit them. I loved her for helping me with that.

High school guidance counselors were also credited with crucial support. Samantha said:

When I was trying to apply for colleges and I was trying to apply for scholarships and trying to get it all together, DHS was like even though I was in an Independent Living Program, they kept switching my worker so I couldn't count on them and then I had my foster parents, but your parents only know so much. My counselor held it together. She helped me choose schools, apply to schools and get deadlines met.

It is clear that teachers and school counselors played an important role in the application process. Without knowledgeable individuals able to help foster youth through the process, scholarships and required documents would have been difficult to complete. Knowing what will be required during the application and eventual enrollment process, teachers and counselors can anticipate potential pitfalls before they occur.

Enrollment requirements. This barrier included important documents such as social security cards, birth certificates, and immunization records. Samantha had a difficult time with her social security card. She said:

I had an issue with my social security card. I went to the office and it said that my card had gotten taken out six times and somewhere in the midst of it being taken out so many times, and I am sure it was when I was moving foster homes and they would lose it, so God knows who all knows my ID. But in the process of it being taken it out one time, they misspelled my middle name. So, my social security card had a problem with my name so that was why I was having trouble getting scholarships. Even with my FAFSA they were like it didn't go through. So, I had to go fix that.

Both Emily and Samantha shared challenges with immunization records. Emily said, "When I was filling out my paperwork for [MSU], they asked for your immunizations. That was really hard for me to get because I had lived in [Louisiana] when I got the first ones, obviously." Samantha was able to enroll but said, "I actually got my grades held this term because I have not turned in my immunizations."

With significant effort and persistence, Emily was able to locate her immunization records and remain enrolled and Samantha was able to correct her social security card error and apply for scholarships and financial aid.

Unfortunately, one more barrier was identified by two former foster youth: Housing.

Housing. As the emancipation date for foster youth looms, housing becomes a priority. Foster youth hoping to continue their education must be knowledgeable about the housing options at the institution(s) they are interested in attending to ensure their needs will be met. Often, alignment between emancipation and college housing does not occur, requiring a plan for gaps in consistent housing. Samantha and Roberto shared their experiences pursuing stable housing.

For Samantha, her emancipation discharge date and lack of a cosigner for an apartment played a significant role in her college choice. Samantha initially desired a move to California to attend college. Evaluating her support structure in Oregon, however, she decided to stay local. She had two choices: she could attend a community college or pursue a four-year institution. She shared, “I was thinking of going to a community college and getting an apartment there with a friend. I couldn’t find a cosigner for the apartment or anything.” Once she was accepted to a private four-year institution, housing again became priority. Samantha said, “I was supposed to be discharged on Aug 26 and be on my own, so when that date came, I had a dorm waiting for me at [Cascadia]. So that was what really tipped the boat for going to [Cascadia]. Look, I have somewhere to live!” The university also offered housing during school breaks, with the exception of the winter holiday. Samantha shared she was able to stay with her former foster family for a few weeks, and then her foster mother arranged for her to stay with a family friend for the other two weeks.

Roberto also encountered housing challenges when he began to consider different institutions. He was offered a prestigious scholarship to a four-year institution and was relieved to see the housing agreement. They did not require students to move out during any school holidays, eliminating the anxiety of having to scramble to find a place to stay or face homelessness.

The unique housing needs of foster youth are often overlooked. Choosing an institution based on housing availability is a reality, which can significantly limit post-secondary options. If not resolved, this barrier can propel a foster youth alumni toward full-time employment instead of pursuing their personal goal of a bachelor's degree.

Conclusion

It is clear that each participant encountered significant barriers to academic achievement during their time in foster care. Despite these barriers, they persisted thanks to reliable support. Teachers should not assume that the state care system is providing essential support to those in foster care. These individuals benefit from advocates as they work through the admission and FAFSA process. They also need someone who will help them finalize enrollment requirements. In my study, these foster youth credited teachers for providing the support they needed the most. Yet, researchers have reported that teachers are largely an untapped support resource for foster youth (Zetlin, MacLeod & Kimm, 2013). My study reiterates the claim that teachers can play an integral role in the lives of foster youth pursuing post-secondary education. Significantly, as these participants attested, the support, guidance, time, and mentorship provided by teachers does not go unnoticed or unappreciated. If you are an educator, how will you respond to the insights I have provided here?

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