Children and Youth Services Review 78 (2017) 41–47

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth

Coping with change: Using the Bridge's Transitions Framework with foster youth☆

Ande Nesmith

University of St. Thomas, School of Social Work, 2115 Summit Ave., Mail SCB 201, St. Paul, MN 55105, United States

1. Introduction

Older youth in foster care face many stressors and obstacles that are unique to their situation, most notably the recurring transitions they endure. The original transition from biological home to foster care can be traumatic in the life of adolescents, for whom identity formation is still a major life task (ACS-NYU Children's Trauma Institute, 2012; Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010). As many as 20,000 youth per year will remain in care until they age out of the system and are launched into this significant developmental milestone, not by their parents but rather by the child welfare system (Children's Bureau, 2016a). Thirty percent of children in care are 13 years or older and nearly a nearly a quarter (26%) of all children currently in care were placed during their adolescent years (Children's Bureau, 2016a). As such, providers must often work to prepare older youth for their transition *out* of foster care while they are still trying to adjust to their transition *into* care.

The Bridges Transitions Framework (Bridges, 2009) implemented in this study shows some promise in smoothing foster youth reactions to change. The framework was adapted to help older youth, foster parents, and social workers look beyond the concrete goals of independent living (e.g., housing, employment). It is process-oriented and attends to the psycho-social reactions and emotions that youth experience during times of significant change. The framework as applied here provided knowledge, skills, and new tactics for youth, foster parents, and social workers to prepare youth for discharge to independent living (Bridges, 2009; Van Ryzin, Mills, Kelban, Vars, & Chamberlain, 2011). When youth and foster parents understand why youth exhibit certain responses to change, both parties have the opportunity to recognize and avert potential triggers. As such, the framework offers the potential to bring new understanding of otherwise challenging behaviors.

1.1. Transitions while in foster care placement

The typical adolescent entering foster care experiences several placement transitions before eventually exiting the system, most often by aging out (Stott, 2012; White, O'Brien, Pecora, & Buher, 2015). Youth who enter foster care at an older age than average have been found to experience higher rates of placement moves than others, despite having spent the least amount of time in care due to their late entry age (Havlicek, 2010; Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007). While the placement moves may at first occur between foster homes, among those entering care at age 13 or older, about half will shift away from family-like settings into congregate care (DHHS, 2015). Repeated placement moves can lead to a disrupted education, and are linked with later substance abuse and pregnancy at a young age, among other problems (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Scannapieco, Smith, & Blakeney-Strong, 2016; Stott, 2012; White et al., 2016).

These struggles are disproportionately experienced by youth of color, an artifact of the unequal ethnic distribution of children admitted to care. For example, although Black or African Americans only comprise 12.6% of the general population, they make up 24% of all children in care and 35% of 17-year-olds in care (Children's Bureau, 2016a; Children's Bureau, 2016b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Compared to their White counterparts, African American youth are more likely to be placed in foster care, are more likely to be placed as infants, have longer stays, and are significantly less likely to be reunified with family (GAO, 2007; Wulczyn & Lery, 2007). Moreover, African American youth are the least likely to receive independent living services to facilitate a smooth transition (GAO, 2007; Okpych, 2015).

Youth enter care with histories of trauma and, once in care, often feel a lack of control over decisions affecting their lives, which can compromise their ability to cope with significant life changes (Hébert, Lanctôt, & Turcotte, 2016; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). Decisions about admission and placement moves arguably yield some of the most dramatic changes for youth, yet youth often have little say in them (Unrau, 2007). Youth can feel rejected when moved out of a placement, a feeling that can be exacerbated with each additional move (Hébert et al., 2016; Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). To guard against feelings of rejection or of being unwanted, youth may "emotionally shut down" by withdrawing from people or behaving in ways that expedite another transition or rejection, further impeding their ability to connect with future caregivers (Unrau et al., 2008).

Decisions about parental visits are also typically not in the youth's

☆ This study was funded by the Andrus Family Fund (Grant # 20113041). I would like to thank Family Alternatives, Inc. for their collaboration in this study and ongoing commitment to identifying the best practices possible for older youth in foster care. I also thank the Andrus Family Fund. This work could not have been accomplished without their generous support.

E-mail address: nesm3326@stthomas.edu.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.05.009
Received 23 February 2017; Received in revised form 8 May 2017; Accepted 8 May 2017
Available online 09 May 2017
0190-7409/

control, yet can be a source of continued internal turmoil throughout the foster care experience. Children naturally form attachments with their parent, regardless of whether that parent maltreats them (Ainsworth, 1989). Parent visits are a critical child welfare intervention used to sustain the parent–child connection and are important for family reunification (Haight et al., 2002; Hess 1988; Samuels, 2009). Recognizing the value of family contact, the Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P. L. 96–272), explicitly requires family visits as a key part of family preservation efforts. Each family visit encompasses a smaller transition, both at the start and end of visiting time. Youth who spend time with family may have trouble letting go at the close of visits, though more frequent time with parents might ease the pain of separation (Lee & Whiting, 2007; McWey, Acock, & Porter, 2010; McWey & Mullis, 2004; Nesmith, 2013).

Learning about the process of adjusting to change while in care can normalize the feelings and reactions to the transitions youth experience, raise personal awareness about past traumas and triggers, foster psychological wellbeing, and enhance healthy relationships (Bridges, 2009; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

2. Transitioning to adulthood

The transition out of foster care is often the last in a long line of childhood moves that foster youth experience. To distinguish transition types, a foster care *spell* here refers to the time in care from admission to discharge; a single spell may include multiple *placements*. Placement moves during a foster care spell can have a cumulative effect on youth as they transition out of foster care into independent living. These moves can impact education, later employment and overall stability in early adulthood.

The more moves a youth experiences, the more likely their education is disrupted, which can have lasting effects into adulthood. Transcripts and individual Educational Plans (IEP) often fail to transfer when youth move, causing them to fall behind academically, ultimately leading to low high school graduation rates observed among foster youth (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007). Youth's level of educational attainment decreases with each additional move during a foster care spell (Scannapieco et al., 2016). In response to this problem, the Fostering Connections to Success Act (P.L. 110-351, 2008) states that when it is possible and in the best interests of the child, the child should remain in his or her current school. However, this has proven easier in theory than in practice. The necessary resources and coordination between schools and child welfare organizations are often lacking. In fact, by age 23, about a quarter of former foster youth still do not have a high school diploma or GED (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010).

After discharge, former foster youth are substantially more likely than other young adults to have significant problems securing employment and stable housing. By age 19 only a third of former foster youth are employed at least part-time, a figure that increases to half (52%) by age 21 (Children's Bureau, 2016b). Stable housing is even more critical. In the years following discharge, bouts of homelessness are common (Courtney et al., 2005). The most current data from the National Youth in Transition Database shows that by age 19, nearly one-fifth (19%) of former foster youth had experienced at least one bout of homelessness, and by age 21, that number climbed to 26% (Children's Bureau, 2016b).

The connections to family are critical to youth both during foster care and after they transition to adulthood. During care, when children and youth do not have regular access to their parents, they can suffer from ambiguous loss, the experience of grieving someone who is physically absent but psychologically present (Boss, 2006; Samuels, 2009). Yet, regardless of a maltreatment history and physical distance, a substantial proportion of former foster youth reconnect with their families of origin and a majority report feeling close to siblings and mothers (Courtney et al., 2010). While it is not yet known if those family ties are adequately supportive to smooth the transition to adulthood, certainly family is important enough that youth seek to reconnect soon after discharge (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney et al., 2005; Geenen & Powers, 2007). Though the role of parent visits during care can be a mixed experience, those relationships should not be overlooked as youth transition to adulthood and regain decision-making control about contact with family.

Independent living services that coach foster youth in concrete skills such as money management or resume and job interviewing training, are essential but not enough (Fowler, Marcal, Zhang, Day, & Landsverk, 2017; Greeson, Garcia, Kima, Thompson, & Courtney, 2015). There is a growing body of research pointing to the critical role of social and emotional support, particularly from an adult, that most young people need during the transition to adulthood (Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010; Samuels, 2008; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

The state of this research presents a compelling case to improve the stability and quality of care for youth during child welfare placements, one that attends to their educational, employment, familial, and socio-emotional needs as they prepare for discharge and independent living. At the same time, youth need strategies to navigate the emotional trauma of admission into care and repeated placement moves during out-of-home placement that may help them build healthier and sustained relationships.

3. Bridges' Transitions Framework

The Transitions Framework (Bridges, 2009) distinguishes between external *changes* and internal *transitions,* the latter of which is experienced by everyone in a personal way. *Change*, according to Bridges (2009), is situational and comprised of discrete events that individuals do not necessarily control, such as losing a job, the birth of a sibling, or in the context of this study, placement in foster care. *Transitions* are the inner psychological processes and reactions to external changes. Everyone experiences both, and the larger or more dramatic the change, the more difficult the transition can be. While the framework was originally developed with organizational management in mind, it has been employed in a variety of settings beyond the workplace. Theoretical applications of the framework have been used to assess foster youth and their caregivers, as well as direct applications with foster youth and with domestic violence programs (Anghel, 2011; Dima & Skehill, 2011; Shy & Mills, 2010; Van Ryzin et al., 2011). Yet there is scant empirical research assessing the utility and effectiveness of the framework in foster care settings.

The main steps in the Transitions Framework training and process include normalization of emotional reactions to change, becoming familiar with one's own internal transition process, and developing coping strategies built off this knowledge. The framework provides a path for youth – and adults in their lives - to understand why youth behave and feel the way they do after a change in their lives. The framework categorizes responses to change into phases called Endings, the Neutral Zone, and New Beginnings (Bridges, 2009). Though this generally represents a sequence, an individual may encounter aspects of more than one phase simultaneously. Central to the framework is the focus on process rather than goals, and moving at one's own natural pace. The following description of the phases draws on Bridges (2009) work.

Endings are triggered by loss: of a person through death or change in relationship, a living situation, a school enrollment or job, etc. The internal response may be mourning, sadness, regret, or wistfulness. During this phase, the individual focuses more on the past than the present or future. Critical to the framework, this is not the time to set goals or create new plans. Even when their biological family home was unsafe, children still typically love their parents and miss the familiar place they called home (Ainsworth, 1989). Problems with adjustment can occur if the past is not honored, or if youth are pushed to focus on future plans or ‘look on the bright side’ while they still grieve. The

framework acknowledges the grief, and asks youth to identify specifically what is lost versus what is perhaps not gone but is different. Social workers and caregivers are urged to help youth sustain meaningful memories. The framework suggests this be accomplished by engaging in conversations about family or past events and listening when youth discuss them, without attempting to move the conversation to the present or future.

The *Neutral Zone* is the point where the endings have been honored and the new situation is acknowledged, but youth are not yet settled with the change. They may feel overwhelmed and unsure where they are headed or unclear about their identity. Often there is ambivalence toward new commitments, relationships, or ways of behaving. Youth in this stage may exhibit disruptive or resistant behaviors or strong emotional reactions to people and situations. This is a time during which caregivers and social workers must be patient and look beyond the behaviors to recognize the underlying feelings driving those actions.

Finally, in *New Beginnings* a new plan is created and is linked to a sense of confidence and renewal. This is the place where most people and organizations want to be, but, according to Bridges (2009), cannot get there without first experiencing the first two phases. Foster parents and social workers can help youth to be creative in identifying new paths and goals in this stage as well as actively celebrate their new successes.

4. The present study

The purpose of this study was to assess the utility and short-term impact of using the Transitions Framework with foster youth. In particular, the study examined changes in youth perceptions of their ability to cope with change, six to nine months post-training. This project was implemented by a non-profit foster care agency, Family Alternatives, Inc. (heretofore “the agency”) that emphasized services and well-being for older youth in care. The agency received funding from the Andrus Family Fund to integrate the Bridges Transitions Framework into their work with foster youth and foster parents, with a particular focus on older youth who were facing discharge from foster care in the near future.

5. Methods

5.1. Human subjects review

The research activities for this study were reviewed and approved by two institutional review boards: the principal investigator's university IRB and the IRB of the county human services department that was responsible for the foster youth.

5.2. Transitions Framework training and implementation

The agency hired a Transitions Framework expert consultant who conducted several two-day interactive trainings of all social worker staff and supervisors (n = 10), using a “train-the-trainer” approach. The training followed a manual and participant workbook designed, according to the manual, for “human services professionals to increase their capacity to support themselves and others through the difficult transitions that change creates” (Mills, 2011, p. 1). The staff practiced the skills and applying the concepts while the trainer observed and provided feedback.

Social work staff then conducted trainings with foster parents and their adolescent foster youth. These trainings were offered in four-session sequences, each sequence offered multiple times over the course of the three-year project. Post-training, some youth continued on as co-leaders for new trainings of both youth and foster parents, drawing on their own transitions experiences to explain how the framework could be applied in real life.

The training groups were kept small, typically with five to eight youth and their respective foster parents. The structure was highly interactive, asking participants to reflect on their own life changes to help them understand the transition process. They shared stories with others, mapped their processes on paper, listened to others, and assessed others' transitional stages. Participants presented examples from their daily lives to receive feedback and direction on managing reactions. Finally, they were provided with concrete behaviors and strategies to try at home and report back on in subsequent sessions.

Foster parents were encouraged to help youth in the Endings phase, to honor youth's past and recognize the importance of losses they endured. Foster parents learned to identify triggers and recognize underlying reasons driving challenging youth behaviors that surface in the Neutral Zone and were provided with effective response strategies. Finally, they were presented with ideas to help youth celebrate movement toward intentional positive change in the New Beginnings stage.

As with any endeavor to think in new ways about problems and behaviors, it took time and consistent exposure for participants to internalize the concepts, practice implementing them, and to employ the new terminology. To support use of the framework, the social workers consistently integrated the transitions concepts in foster parent meetings and during programming with youth. When behavioral problems were discussed, social workers asked youth and foster parents to identify recent and past changes that might contribute to the behaviors. They routinely asked youth and foster parents to identify what stage of transitions the youth was in and explored how that might help both parties make sense of youth reactions. Social workers offered subsequent booster sessions to foster parents to reinforce the use and understanding of the framework as well. Youth were offered group events that combined fun activities (camps, overnight ‘lock-ins,’ group meals) with discussions of the Transitions Framework and how it applied to the youth's lives.

The youth co-leaders served as post-training coaches with youth and foster parents as well. They presented their stories and experiences at foster parent and youth trainings and were available to youth via texting or in-person to talk through reactions to change in the context of the framework. Some of the youth co-leaders attended the camps as junior counselors, drawing on their Transitions Framework skills to assist with camp activities and discussions.

The trainings were offered over the course of three years, using a rolling enrollment as new youth were admitted to care.

5.3. Measures

Measures of the use and impact of the Transitions Framework were assessed with both youth and foster parents with in-person surveys.

5.3.1. Youth Experiencing Transitions (YET) scale

We used a measure of the model's main concepts, the Youth Experiencing Transitions (YET) scale to assess change from pre-test to the post-test at six-to-nine months post-training. The YET is a 13-item self-report questionnaire that asked youth about their thoughts and behaviors as they related to their transitions (Van Ryzin et al., 2011).

After a thorough review of the research literature, the YET appears to be the only empirically tested instrument available to assess this construct. The Oregon Learning Center developed and tested the YET for use with Transitions Framework to assess some of the latent, internal changes youth encounter that might be attributed to the Transitions Framework (Van Ryzin et al., 2011). In particular, the YET was designed to assess youth preparedness for significant transitions with an eye toward the move from foster care to independent living.

To assess its validity, the tool's designers examined whether a change in YET score predicted a change in the Achenbach's Child Behavior Checklist internalizing (anxious, withdrawn, depressive) or externalizing (aggressive, destructive, noncompliant) scores. A factor

analysis revealed two factors in the instrument: openness and determination. *Openness* refers to youth's receptiveness to change and willingness to reflect on it and learn from it. An openness to thinking in new ways about change must occur before one can expect to modify behaviors and other reactions to change. *Determination* in this situation, refers to youth's willingness to adjust critical goals for the future. This can be important because flexibility toward future goals may ease the impact of change when goals must be modified. Openness was a significant predictor of internalizing behaviors but not externalizing behaviors (Van Ryzin et al., 2011). Determination was not a significant predictor of either internal or external behaviors.

5.3.1.1. Foster parent assessment. Foster parents completed the Foster Parent Assessment approximately one year after the Transitions Framework training. The tool served as a rough measure of fidelity by assessing the extent to which foster parents understood and applied the framework concepts and skills with the youth in their home. The instrument addressed two factors using 12 items on a 5-point Likert scale (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). First, it assessed foster parent understanding and confidence in applying key components of the framework. Second, it examined foster parent efforts to apply the concepts when engaging with youth. Foster parents were asked to indicate how frequently they used specific practices taught in the training to employ framework concepts. Nine items rated these on a 4-point scale (*never* to *almost always*). The assessment was developed in collaboration with two expert Transitions Framework consultants.

5.3.2. Data collection

Data are reported from three collection points, approximately every six months. These include the pre-test YET with youth at baseline just prior to the training, the post-test YET six to nine months after training, and the Foster Parent Assessment, 12 months post-training. Enrollment in the program was rolling so this data collection process repeated throughout the three-year study period.

At the start of the study there were 81 youth who met the project's age criteria of being at least 13 years old and residing in a foster home at the agency. We were able to obtain legal guardian consent for 63 youth. Those guardians who did not consent did so by non-response rather than expressing any specific objections to the study. All 43 foster parents who completed trainings during the study period were invited to be contacted a year later to complete the foster parent assessment; 35 agreed to be contacted again.

5.3.3. Analysis

We calculated grand and item mean values for the YET. *t*-Tests comparing matched pre- and post-test YET scores were calculated for all items as well as for the openness and determination factors.

Three youth characteristics that could influence changes and internal transition experiences were also examined: history of prior placements, parent visits, and type of maltreatment. Prior placements reflect significant past changes in caregiver family, home life, and possibly school and neighborhoods. Parent visits were included because of the influence they are known to have on youth experiences of loss or connection and because visits themselves entail a smaller transition process as they begin and end.

A general linear regression was used with the YET change scores (post minus pretest) to assess the main effects of each of these three variables. Race and gender were included as control variables. With a small sample size and categorical covariates, the number of variables in a single model was limited to avoid overfitting. Finally, descriptive statistics were calculated on the foster parent assessment, primarily mean scores for each item.

Table 1
Youth placement characteristics (n = 63).

Placement characteristic	Percent
Placement history	
First ever	26.5
Prior placements	73.5
Placement type at initial interview	
Non-relative foster home	92.1
Group home	5.3
Residential treatment center	2.6
Placement reason[a]	
Neglect	68.9
Abuse	54.1
Parent substance abuse	47.5
Child mental health	4.9
Other	16.4
Parent visitation	
At least occasionally	67.5
No visits	32.5
Permanency plan	
Remain in care until age of majority	70.2
Reunify	15.8
Independence	5.3
Adoption	3.5
Other	5.3

[a] Youth may have more than one placement reason.

6. Findings

6.1. Youth participants

Sixty-three youth participated in the study, completing a YET pre-test and the training. On average, the youth were 17 years old at the start of the study, though some were as young as 14 and as old as 20. We accepted youth older than 18 if they were still living in their foster homes and receiving extended foster care services, which can continue to age 21. We reached 54 youth (86%) for the post-test six to nine months after the initial training.

All participants were admitted to their current placement as adolescents, at 16 years old on average. Those with prior placements were admitted at ten years old on average. Slightly more than half (54%) of the youth identified as African American, African, or Black. White youth comprised the next largest subgroup at nearly one-fifth of the sample (19%). Gender was nearly split between males and females, and one transgender youth.

Nearly three-fourths of the youth had a prior placement (73.5%) and the vast majority (92%) were in non-relative foster care at the start of the study (Table 1).

The most common reason for placement was neglect (68.9%), followed by physical abuse (54.4%) and parental substance abuse (47.5%). Seventy percent of the youth had a permanency plan to remain in care until they aged out, though a sizable minority had plans for family reunification (15.8%). Two-thirds of the youth had some visits with parents, leaving a third with no visits.

6.2. Foster parent participants

We identified foster parents of the youth who completed the post-test YET. Twenty-one of these foster parents had previously agreed to be re-contacted and were invited for an interview 12 months post-training. Seventeen (81%) completed the assessment questionnaire, reflecting on how they employed the framework with youth in their homes since the training sessions.

6.3. Foster parent applications of the Transitions Framework

The assessment presented foster parents with knowledge and confidence statements pertaining to key aspects of the framework and

Fig. 1. Foster parent applications of Transitions Framework (TF) with youth.

were asked to rate them on a 5-point scale. Most items revealed that foster parents understood the framework. The responses demonstrated that foster parents saw value in the framework, with 100% strongly agreeing that it was important to help youth feel that the transition process is normal and strong agreement (mean = 4.9) about applying the concepts with youth in their homes. They also indicated that the three stages made sense to them (4.9).

Two items yielded scores below the "agree" to "strongly agree" range, both asking if they focused on the internal process and feelings rather than goal-setting (mean = 2.6). These items revealed unease with giving up an emphasis on goals when youth still mourned the past.

We then asked foster parents to respond to statements about how they employed the framework with youth in their homes. For each statement, ratings on a 4-point scale assessed how often they engaged in particular activities or conversations with youth, drawing on Transitions Framework concepts and tactics taught during the trainings (Fig. 1). On average, they tended toward "frequently" for most items.

Foster parents most often celebrated new beginnings and were able to recognize resistance behaviors as a response to external change. The lowest rated item, which was still close to "frequently" was initiating activities to honor youth's past.

6.4. YET scores

We compared matched pre- and post-test YET scores for the 54 youth who completed both questionnaires. The lower score on the 5-point scale represents a more desirable score. Therefore, a positive outcome is represented by a decline in the mean score over time.

The overall pre-test mean score was 2.5, falling between "not sure" (3) and "agree" (2). By the post-test, the mean score dropped to 2.1 (agree). Matched *t*-tests of overall YET mean scores were significant ($p = 0.000$). Ideally, youth and their foster parents attended all four training sessions. Most attended all, but some attended only three sessions. The post-test YET scores were not significantly different based on attending three versus four sessions.

t-Tests were run on the two subscales, Openness and Determination. At post-test, participants were significantly more open to transitions concepts ($p < 0.000$; Table 2).

The Determination subscale comprised of three items: a willingness to change ideas about future plans regarding jobs, about education, and overall rigidity about any plan. This subscale did not yield significant results.

A regression model was estimated using YET change scores from pre- to post-test, controlling for youth-level characteristics (Table 3). Main effects models were run on the YET change score using a history of prior placements (yes or no), parent visits (never or at least occasionally) and maltreatment type (physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, parental substance abuse). The sample size was too small to enter all youth characteristics simultaneously. Therefore, each of these variables were tested as a single predictor on the change YET score and then again, controlling for ethnicity and gender. Youth who had no parental visiting during their current foster care placement scored significantly better (lower scores) on the YET ($\beta = -0.34$, $p = 0.016$) than those with visits. This held true when controlling for gender and ethnicity.

When sex and race were included in the model, African American youth had significantly better scores ($\beta = -0.36$, $p = 0.031$) than Caucasian youth. Prior placements and type of maltreatment history did not yield significant results.

Table 2
YET openness subscale ($n = 54$).

Openness	Pre-test		Post-test	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
I am confident that I can change my life for the better.	1.81	0.89	1.26	0.44
I feel there are periods in my life when I had to end an old way of behaving and begin a new way of behavior.	1.76	0.78	1.65	0.65
It is o.k. to feel uncomfortable when learning a new way to deal with an old problem.	1.89	0.79	1.56	0.69
I have learned a lot about myself by reflecting about my life.	2.09	1.00	1.52	0.69
It is ok to feel confused at times and to change your mind about future plans.	2.05	0.63	1.75	0.69
Openness subscale*	1.92	0.58	1.54	0.38

* $p < 0.000$; 1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree.

Table 3
Birth parent visits on YET change scores (GLM regression, $n = 54$).

Variable	β	t	*P*-value
Visits			
Birth parent visits (ref = had visits)*	−0.34	−2.53	0.016
Visits, controlling for gender & ethnicity			
Birth parent visits (ref = had visits)*	−0.34	−2.58	0.015
Male gender (ref = female)	0.09	0.73	
Ethnicity (ref = Caucasian)			
African American/African*	−0.36	−2.26	0.031
Other (Asian, Latino, Multi-ethnic)	−0.15	−0.85	

* $p < 0.05$.

7. Discussion

This study builds on previous work assessing the utility of the Bridges Transitions Framework (TF) with older youth who are transi-

tioning out of foster care (Anghel, 2011; Dima & Skehill, 2011; Van Ryzin et al., 2011). The findings here provide preliminary evidence that the Transitions Framework may be a promising tool to help these youth understand how change affects them and ease the strain of transition. After training and immersion into the framework, participating youth were more accepting of their transition experiences and more optimistic that they had the ability to guide their own futures.

Although trainings are often reserved for social workers only, including foster parents in the training was likely an important factor in the observed outcomes. As the adults who have the most contact with the youth, foster parents may have a greater influence and the opportunity to reinforce and enhance critical concepts of the framework, in the moment when transition issues surface. The foster parents indicated that, for the most part, they adhered to the framework with youth in their homes. Adolescent resistant behaviors can be extraordinarily challenging for foster parents and contribute to the high rates of placement moves (Hébert et al., 2016; Unrau et al., 2008). A year post-training, foster parents consistently recognized difficult youth behaviors as indicators of an internal struggle with external changes, rather than viewing them simply at the behavioral level (e.g. as defiance).

The weakest implementation area for foster parents was their support of youth in the Endings phase. They were less likely to engage in actions that honor the past for youth before jumping into goal-setting. As a foster parent, it may be hard to recognize the value of supporting a youth's loss over a parent who was abusive or neglectful. Foster parents who try to prematurely move youth toward goals may worry that thinking about the past is a form of pointless 'dwelling', especially if family reunification is unlikely. The trainings and social workers need to attend to this more closely, perhaps engaging foster parents in role plays pertaining to Endings using real-life examples that they bring in from their homes or providing more specific tools to help them appreciate the deep loss that many foster youth endure.

Involving youth as co-leaders may also be an important factor in the findings here. Seeing a youth at the helm of a training may increase the level of buy-in for youth participants (Clay, Amodeo, & Collins, 2010). Youth leaders can provide authentic examples of how they applied the framework in their own lives. Given the high level of mistrust adolescents may have of adults in the system (Unrau et al., 2008), hearing the value of the framework from one of their own may prove more convincing.

Youth who had no family visits had significantly better YET change scores than those who had at least some visits. This was not anticipated, as past research demonstrates that family visits can reduce anxiety and are associated with better child behavior (McWey & Mullis, 2004; Nesmith, 2013). It is possible that parental visits make it harder to let go of the past, an important part of the transitions process (Bridges, 2009). The measure used here was not designed to capture the complexity of parental visiting. While the model suggests there might be an important parental influence, it needs to be explored more carefully before drawing definitive conclusions.

African American youth had more improved YET scores than Caucasian youth. While we did not have data to examine the underlying reason for this, it is possible that the Transitions Framework filled an otherwise unmet need for these youth. Not only has past research found that African American foster youth are less likely than Caucasian youth to receive standard independent living services, but also that their biological parents receive fewer services to support reunification (GAO, 2007; Okpych, 2015). In turn, African American youth are significantly less likely to be reunified with family (GAO, 2007). While the youth in this study were all provided the same services regardless of race or ethnicity, it does not account for their entire foster care experience; their prior placement spells may have occurred at other agencies with different service patterns. There is not enough background information available in this study to tease apart some of these potential factors. To fully answer it would require a more complete placement and service provision history. Given the pattern of poor experiences and outcomes for African American youth in care, the possibility that the Transitions Framework may be linked to positive results is worthy of further investigation.

Finally, implementation fidelity matters. When aiming to change human behavior, 'dose' is important. Often new models are implemented with a one-time training. Critical to the success of this project was immersion and integration of the framework into as many aspects of the foster care program as possible, including training all involved parties, embedding the terminology and concepts into program activities, discussing the phases during meetings between social workers and foster families, and employing transitions-supportive tools on a daily basis in the foster homes.

The adversities that foster youth transitioning to adulthood face are well-documented (Courtney et al., 2005; Scannapieco et al., 2007). Program models to improve outcomes that have been evaluated and demonstrated to make a significant difference are scarce. While more research with larger samples and comparison groups is needed to more definitely assess effectiveness, the Transitions Framework shows early signs of promise.

8. Limitations

This study has several limitations. There are a broad range of factors than can influence youth experiences and behaviors while in foster care. They each have different family histories, varying lengths of stay and numbers of placement moves within a foster care spell, to name a few. The small sample size did not permit extensive multivariate analysis to control for many of these variables simultaneously. The YET, while the only validated assessment tool available to examine the Transitions Framework, has not been widely tested on a range of populations, nor has it been standardized. Finally, the foster parent assessment was not completed by all the foster parent participants and could disproportionately represent those who were most enthusiastic about the model.

References

ACS-NYU (2012). *Easing foster care placement*. New York, NY: ACS-NYU Children's Trauma Institute.

Ainsworth, M. S. (1989). Attachments beyond infancy. *American Psychologist*, *44*(4), 709–716.

Anghel, R. (2011). Transition within transition: How young people learn to leave behind institutional care whilst their carers are stuck in neutral. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *33*, 2526–2531.

Bridges, W. (2009). *Transitions: Making sense of life's changes*. Cambridge, MA: Da Copo Press.

Boss, P. (2006). Ambiguous loss: Preventive interventions for family professionals. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, *98*(2), 8–10.

Children's Bureau (2016a). *The AFCARS report: Preliminary FY 2015 estimates as of June 2016 (#23)*. Washington, DC: Administration for Children and Families.

Children's Bureau (2016b). Highlights from the NYTD survey: outcomes reported by young people at ages 17, 19, and 21 (cohort 1). *National youth in transitions database*. Washington, DC: Administration for Children and Families.

Clay, C., Amodeo, M., & Collins, M. E. (2010). Youth as partners in curriculum development and training delivery: Roles, challenges, benefits, and recommendations. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, *91*(2), 135–141. http://dx.doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.3971.

Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Lee, J., & Raap, M. (2010). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 23 and 24*. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A., Ruth, G., Keller, T., Havlicek, J., & Bost, N. (2005). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 19*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

Courtney, M. E., Piliavin, I., Grogan-Kaylor, A., & Nesmith, A. (2001). Fostering youth transitions to adulthood: A longitudinal view of youth leaving care. *Child Welfare*, *80*(6), 685–717.

DHHS (2015). *A national look at the use of congregate care in child welfare*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Dima, G., & Skehill, C. (2011). Making sense of leaving care: The contribution of Bridges model of transition to understanding the psycho-social process. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *33*, 2532–2539. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.08.016.

Dworsky, A., & Courtney, M. E. (2010). The risk of teenage pregnancy among transitioning foster youth: Implications for extending state care beyond age 18.

Children and Youth Services Review, *32*, 1351–1356.
Fowler, P. J., Marcal, K. E., Zhang, J., Day, O., & Landsverk, J. (2017). Homelessness and aging out of foster care: A national comparison of child welfare-involved adolescents. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *77*, 27–33.
GAO (2007). *African American children in foster care*. Washington, DC: United States Government Accountability Office.
Geenen, S., & Powers, L. E. (2007). "Tomorrow is another problem": The experiences of youth in foster care during their transition into adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *29*(8), 1085–1101.
Greeson, J. K. P., Garcia, A. R., Kima, M., Thompson, A. E., & Courtney, M. E. (2015). Development & maintenance of social support among aged out foster youth who received independent living services: Results from the multi-site evaluation of foster youth programs. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *53*, 1–9.
Greeson, J. K. P., Usher, L., & Grinstein-Weiss, M. (2010). One adult who is crazy about you: Can natural mentoring relationships increase assets among young adults with and without foster care experience? *Children and Youth Services Review*, *32*(4), 565–577.
Haight, W. L., Black, J. E., Mangelsdorf, S., Giorgio, G., Tata, L., Schoppe, S. J., & Szewczyk, M. (2002). Making visits better: Perspectives of parents, foster parents, and child welfare workers. *Child Welfare*, *81*(2), 173–201.
Havlicek, J. (2010). Patterns of movement in foster care: An optimal matching analysis. *Social Service Review*, 403–435.
Hébert, S. T., Lanctôt, N., & Turcotte, M. (2016). "I didn't want to be moved there": Young women remembering their perceived sense of agency in the context of placement instability. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *70*, 229–237.
Lee, R. E., & Whiting, J. B. (2007). Foster children's expressions of ambiguous loss. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, *35*, 417–428.
McWey, L. M., Acock, A., & Porter, B. E. (2010). The impact of continued contact with biological parents upon mental health of children in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *32*, 1338–1345.
McWey, L. M., & Mullis, A. K. (2004). Improving the lives of children in foster care: The impact of supervised visitation. *Family Relations*, *53*, 293–300.
Mills, D. (2011). *Managing transitions: Handout packet*. New York, NY: Andrus Family Fund. http://www.transitionandsocialchange.org/.
Mitchell, M. B., & Kuczynski, L. (2010). Does anyone know what is going on? Examining children's lived experience of the transition into foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *32*, 437–444.
Nesmith, A. (2013). Parent–child visits in foster care: Reaching shared goals and expectations to better prepare children and parents for visits. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *30*(3), 237–255. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10560-012-0287-8.
Nesmith, A., & Christophersen, K. (2014). Smoothing the transition to adulthood: Creating ongoing supportive relationships among foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *37*, 1–8. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.11.028.
Okpych, N. J. (2015). Receipt of independent living services among older youth in foster care: An analysis of national data from the U.S. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *51*, 74–86.
Oosterman, A., Schuengel, C., Slot, N. W., Bullens, & Doreleijers, T. A. (2007). Disruptions in foster care: A review and meta-analysis. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *29*, 53–76.
P.L. 110-351 (2008). *Fostering connections to success and increasing adoptions act of 2008, Public Law No. 110-351*.
Samuels, G. M. (2009). Ambiguous loss of home: The experience of familial (im) permanence among young adults with foster care background. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *31*, 1229–1239.
Scannapieco, M., Connell-Carrick, K., & Painter, K. (2007). In their own words: Challenges facing youth aging out of foster care. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *24*(5), 423–435.
Scannapieco, M., Smith, M., & Blakeney-Strong, A. (2016). Transition from foster care to independent living: Ecological predictors associated with outcomes. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *33*, 293–302. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10560-015-0426-0.
Shy, Y., & Mills, L. (2010). A critical new pathway towards change in abusive relationships: The theory of transition framework. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *38*, 418–425.
Stott, T. (2012). Placement instability and risky behaviors of youth aging out of foster care. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *29*, 61–83.
U.S. Census Bureau (2010). QuickFacts. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/.
Unrau, Y. A. (2007). Research on placement moves: Seeking the perspective of foster children. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *29*, 122–137.
Unrau, Y. A., Seita, J. R., & Putney, K. S. (2008). Former foster youth remember multiple placement moves: A journey of loss and hope. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *30*, 1256–1266.
Van Ryzin, M. J., Mills, D., Kelban, S., Vars, M. R., & Chamberlain, P. (2011). Using the Bridges Transition Framework for youth in foster care: Measurement development and preliminary outcomes. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *33*, 2267–2272.
White, C. R., O'Brien, K., Pecora, P., & Buher, A. (2015). Mental health and educational outcomes for youth transitioning from foster care in Michigan. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, *96*, 17–24.
Wulczyn, F., & Lery, B. (2007). *Racial disparity in foster care admissions*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children.