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Voices of youth in foster care and special education regarding their educational experiences and transition to adulthood☆

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ABSTRACT

Very little in-depth information is available on the educational and transition experiences, perceptions, and actions of youth in foster care who are receiving special education services. This paper describes a qualitative study that followed seven youth in foster care receiving special education services, ages 15 to 18, for six to nine months. The youth were interviewed an average of seven times and they were invited to take photographs and make journal entries depicting their lives. The findings documented the complex challenges that youth experience, including educational struggles, difficulty in clarifying their relationships with biological family, and having to make major decisions in the context of uncertainty and inadequate and sometimes restrictive supports and services. Having consistent and committed adult support, knowledge of options and services, and opportunities, skills, and confidence to take positive action toward goals emerged as important themes in the youth's success.

1. Introduction

An estimated 410,625 children and youth are in foster care in the U.S. (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System [AFCARS], preliminary report for 2010). Twenty-eight percent, or 108,432, of these youth are between the ages of 15 and 20 with only 2% of youth remaining in foster care after age 18. Although the total number of youth in foster care has decreased, the number of youth exiting care through emancipation or running away increased from 31,556 in 2006 to 32,840 in 2008 (AFCARS, preliminary estimates for 2006 and 2008). Approximately 40% to 47% of foster youth receive special education services (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Westat, Inc., 1991) and they are significantly more likely to be identified as having emotional disturbances and physical disabilities, as compared to non-foster youth (Stone, D'Andrade, & Austin, 2007).

Findings consistently document that youth in foster care have poor outcomes and face unique education and transition challenges (e.g., Courtney et al., 2005; Goerge et al., 2002; Pecora et al., 2003; Wolanin, 2005). While a large percentage of youth in foster care also receive special education services, limited research has been conducted on their outcomes. Available findings suggest that youth in foster care receiving special education services experience lower educational achievement (e.g., Geenen & Powers, 2006; Smithgall, Gladden, Yang, & Goerge, 2005) and poorer transition outcomes (Anctil, McCubbin, O'Brien, Pecora, & Anderson-Harumi, 2007; Westat, Inc., 1991), compared to youth in foster care who do not receive special education services. While findings suggest that youth in foster care receiving special education services are at elevated risk for educational and transition problems, little information is available that clearly documents the nature of their experiences.

This paper reports the findings of an in-depth qualitative follow-along study of seven youth in foster care receiving special education services as they navigated their education and prepared for transition. The purpose of the study was to examine in detail these youth's experiences, perceptions, goals, and actions within the context of their changing life circumstances.

2. Background

High school completion or GED attainment among youth in foster care is estimated at 50% while the rate for youth in the general population is about 86% (Vacca, 2007), and Geenen and Powers

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(2006) found that youth in foster care receiving special education services had lower educational achievement than youth in foster care or special education alone. Of great concern, a study by Smithgall et al. (2005) revealed that only 16% of foster youth receiving special education services with a primary disability of emotional disturbance graduated from high school; even more worrisome, 18% left school because they were incarcerated.

2.1. Research on youth's experiences and perceptions

Research by Geenen and Powers (2006) documented the lack of coordinated transition planning between special education and child welfare and the level of utilization of special education transition services by eligible youth in foster care is unknown. Unfortunately, studies directly examining youth's experiences and perspectives on navigating education and transition are relatively few. Most studies have sought to capture a snapshot of the youth's experiences by interviewing them once or twice. For example, Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, and Painter (2007) conducted focus groups with 33 youth representative of the Texas foster care program (special education status not reported) in an effort to more clearly understand the needs of youth in foster care. Three major themes emerged from these interviews including the lack of youth involvement in the decision-making process, challenges in communication across systems, and the need for more opportunities for youth to practice life skills gained in training. Tilbury, Buys, and Creed (2009) interviewed 14 youth (special education status not reported) one time (one hour) on topics covering school and work, goals for the future, and who or what provided support. Their findings indicate the diversity of experiences of youth in foster care and the need for additional supports for these youth as they transition out of care. These youth consistently emphasized the importance of supportive relationships and self-determination.

Hyde and Kammerer (2009) conducted two interviews with each of 20 youth in care in Massachusetts to explore their experiences and viewpoints regarding placement change and congregate care (special education status not reported). Reasons for placement moves identified by youth included behavior problems within a placement, mismatch between youth and foster parent, and "step down" to a less restrictive placement. Many youth in residential and congregate settings described being trapped with inconsistent and unclear rules about how to "step down". Youth also expressed apathy about their futures associated with feeling they did not have control. In association with developing a measure of restrictiveness in foster care, Rauktis, Fusco, Cahalane, Bennett, and Reinhart (2011) conducted focus groups with 40 young adults 18 years and older (special education status not reported). Youth associated restrictiveness with rules that were inconsistent, arbitrary, not individualized, and inappropriate to their developmental level.

Most studies examining youth perspectives have focused on exiting foster care. For example, Goodkind, Schelbe, and Shook (2011) conducted one-time individual interviews with 11 youth and focus groups with 34 youth to investigate why youth leave the foster care at age 18 when findings suggest that remaining in care may be associated with improved outcomes. Some of the youth felt forced out and did not understand how the system worked. Other youth exited care because they wanted to be in control of their lives and thought taking care of oneself was an indicator of being an adult. Several youth expressed regret about leaving foster care because they had experienced many hardships. Another qualitative study of exiting foster care (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) involved analysis of semi-structured interviews with 44 youth in three states, conducted in association with the Midwest Evaluation Study (Courtney et al., 2005). Twenty-four of the youth had exited care. Many of the youth described having experienced premature adulthood in having to manage abuse and neglect, family stressors and foster care placements; indicating that they had developed self-reliance. A rare follow-along study focusing on exit from foster care involved quarterly structured interviews with 404 youth, ages 17 to 19, in Missouri (McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008). Initial interviews were in person and most subsequent interviews were by telephone. DSM based assessments were conducted to assess youth for psychiatric disorders; however, special education status was not reported. The findings indicated that many older youth left foster care in unplanned ways, they were frustrated with the system, and they tended to live with their biological families. Youth with externalizing labels were most likely to leave foster care.

2.2. Experiences of youth in foster care and special education

Virtually all studies examining the perspectives of youth in foster care have overlooked the specific experiences of youth receiving special education services, despite the high percentage of youth in foster care who are impacted by this service. One exception is a qualitative study conducted by Geenen and Powers (2007) which targeted youth who interfaced with both foster care and special education, and were in various stages of transition. The study explored the experiences of youth around both these systems and how that impacted their preparation for adulthood. Themes that emerged made it clear that challenges facing all youth in foster care, such as barriers to accessing services or experiencing instability in placement, were amplified for youth with disabilities. This study utilized focus group methodology and was limited to collecting the perspectives of youth during one point in time.

While findings from the aforementioned studies are informative, most of this research has not been longitudinal, it has focused on particular issues, especially exiting foster care, and very little has been learned about youth's experiences with regard to education. Of major importance, most previous research has not specifically examined the needs of youth in foster care and special education. Thus, an important need exists to both gain a fuller picture of foster youth's experiences and perspectives on their education and transition, specifically among youth in foster care who are receiving special education services.

The aim of this paper is to describe a study which examined the experiences, perceptions, and goals of youth in foster care with educational disabilities as they navigated the complexities of education and transition. Seven youth were interviewed an average of seven times during a period of six to nine months. They also were invited to take photographs and make journal entries depicting their lives. Use of this follow-along qualitative method allowed us to observe how life progressed (or did not) for each of the youth and to examine how youth understood and managed various issues and challenges. We were interested in gaining a fuller picture of what the life of a youth in foster care and special education services looks like and how these youth adapt (or don't adapt) to the stressors they face. Our major research questions were, What are youth's goals, successes, and challenges as they navigate foster care and secondary education?; and What factors influence youth's decisions and actions?

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The seven participants were recruited from a larger sample of 128 youth who were enrolled in Project Success, a randomized trial of the impact of a self-determination enhancement intervention on the educational success of youth in foster care and special education services (Powers, Geenen, & Fullerton, 2005; Institute of Educational Sciences, Grant # R324S060043). Eligibility for the parent study was defined by being in foster care and a freshman, sophomore, or junior in school, and receiving or having previously received special

education services. The intervention was conducted for nine months, followed by a nine month follow-along period during which youth received only 60 day retention phone calls to maintain contact.

This longitudinal qualitative study was conducted during the follow-along period of the parent study. The participants were randomly selected from youth in the intervention or control group and were invited to participate in the qualitative study when they entered the follow-along period. Participation in this study was independent of their participation in the parent study. Study procedures, risks, and benefits were carefully explained to the youth; eight assented to participate in the study. Following their assent, as the legal guardian, the Child Welfare agency provided consent for each youth to participate.

Our goal in sampling was to randomly select a small number of participants for an in-depth follow-along inquiry into their experiences, perceptions, actions, and future goals. Furthermore, our intention was to examine the breadth of youth's experiences, thoughts, and the context in which they were navigating their lives and this purpose was fully explained to each potential participant in an orientation session.

Demographic characteristics of the youth are presented in Table 1. At the time their interviews started, two of the youth were fifteen years old, three were seventeen years old, and two were eighteen years old. One youth had dropped out of school in the eleventh grade, two were in tenth grade, two in eleventh grade, and two were in twelfth grade. Three of the youth were behind on credits for graduation while four were not. Three of the participants were male and four were female. Information about youth experiences in foster care (e.g. reason for entry, number of placements) was gathered from the state's child welfare electronic database. School data (e.g. disability, grade, diploma type) was obtained from educational records.

3.2. Data collection

Youth were each assigned one interviewer who met with the youth on average once a month, for nine months, for 60 to 90 min. Interviews were conducted in youth's homes, local libraries, parks, and interviewer's cars when no other confidential space was available. Two of the interviewers were doctoral students in the School of Social Work and two were Masters' students in the School of Social Work; each had training in clinical interview techniques. Prior to beginning the study, rehearsals were conducted to review strategies for building rapport with the respondents, asking follow-up questions, and providing interview accommodations for youth with receptive or expressive communication challenges. Ongoing support was provided to each interviewer by the investigators. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim; participant names and other identifying information were redacted from the transcripts.

Each interviewer followed a protocol aimed at exploring the participant's experiences, perceptions, goals, and supports in navigating foster care, education, and other issues during the interview period. Interviewers asked several open-ended questions (e.g., "What's happened in your life since we met last time that is important for you, now or in the future?; How do you figure out what to do now or in the future?"). Follow-up questions (e.g. "Did you feel you had a voice in that event?; What do other people do to support you or make it harder?") and active listening feedback were used to gain more in-depth understanding and/or to clarify youth's statements. An added benefit of conducting interviews over a long period of time was that youth were more comfortable giving honest responses because they had developed trust for the interviewer.

As a means for recalling important events between interviews, youth were offered cameras, journals, and art supplies. Before youth shared their stories about the pictures, they were coached to not reveal identifying information about people (such as name or address) in the pictures. Two main questions were asked about the pictures: "What is the picture of?" and "What is important about the picture?" The youth who selected the journals chose the entries they were comfortable sharing. Art supplies provided included small sketchbooks, colored pencils or markers, and a few small canvasses. All cameras, photos, journals, and artwork were kept by the youth. Three participants chose to use cameras, four chose to write in journals, and one chose the art supplies as the main tool for recall. Descriptions of which method each youth chose is provided in the Findings section for those youth who made use of the tools.

Field notes were recorded following each interview. At the conclusion of each youth's interview period, interviewers created an integrated summary of their field notes. Summaries included a time line of key events experienced by the youth during the interview period, synthesis of the interviewer's observations related to each youth's shifting perspectives and goals, and contextual factors that were important for understanding that youth's experiences.

3.3. Data analysis

Transcripts were analyzed by the interviewers and study investigators. A three-pronged, iterative approach was used to capture a detailed understanding of the experiences, perspectives, and goals of each youth over time, and to identify key cross-cutting themes that emerged across the youth. Transcripts were coded using established ethnographic and content analysis techniques (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Themes were identified within and across each youth's transcripts according to the constant-comparative procedures described by Lincoln and Guba (1986). The data units were sorted by category and initial categories

Table 1
Characteristics of study participants.

Pseudonym	John	Kathy	Joe	Greg	Debbie	Janey	Amy
Age	15	17	17	18	17	18	15
Race, ethnicity/gender	Caucasian	African American	Caucasian male	Caucasian male	Caucasian female	Caucasian female	Caucasian female
Total # of placements/# last 6 months	74/1	144/1	42/1	4/3	72/1	3/3	48/2
IEP eligibility	Autism	ED	ED/LD	Health/ED	LD	LD	LD
Diploma type planned	General	General	General	n/a	General	Modified	General
Grade	10	12	11	Dropped out in 11th grade/GED	11	12	10
Number of high schools attended	1	2	1	2	1	1	1
Alternative school, reason?	Yes Behavior, expelled	No	No	n/a	No	Yes Behavior, expelled	Yes Student's choice
GPA	2.15	2.13	2.21	n/a	2.0	2.57	2.7
Number of credits/behind	19/no	23.5/no	20/no	4.5/yes	18/no	1.5/yes	9/yes
Number of absences in last semester	1	20	19.5	n/a	1	26	5
Study condition	Treatment	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment	Treatment	Control

were expanded to accommodate new themes that emerged. Transcripts were reviewed by a primary and secondary coder to control for possible coding biases and each coding disagreement was discussed until an agreement was reached. Context and time line information as well as interviewer impressions from interviewer's summary notes were interrelated with the transcripts to create a narrative depiction of the unfolding of each youth's life across the interview period. Concurrently, the interview team had a series of meetings to discuss unique and cross-cutting themes emerging across the youth. Some adjustments were made to theme definitions to facilitate consistent labeling of similar themes across the youth's transcripts. Data trail procedures allow for a follow-up audit to confirm the verifiability of the findings.

4. Findings

The following narrative descriptions provide a glimpse into each youth's experiences, perceptions, goals and activities. They are by no means generalizable to other youth, but provide insights into how these youth perceive, make sense of, and react to their experiences in foster care, special education, and other life areas. Personally identifying information (names, specific places) has been changed to maintain confidentiality.

4.1. John

John entered foster care at five years of age due to physical abuse. He experienced six different foster care placements in eleven years: four non-relative placements, one group home and finally kinship care, where he had lived for the past six years. John had six siblings, two of whom lived with him and his grandparents, two of whom lived with John's mother, and one who lived with a different set of grandparents. John self-identified as Caucasian, had a special education label of autism, and attended an alternative high school. John was 15 years of age and in the 10th grade at the time of his first interview. He was interviewed over a 12-month period (June–May) every 8–10 weeks, for a total of six interviews. Key events for John during the interview period included changing schools (November), re-engaging with his bio mother and other family members (December through May), and a brief period where he ran away and was living on the streets (April).

4.1.1. School a waste of time

At the beginning of the year, John was placed in a very restrictive alternative school for students with emotional and behavioral challenges. Early on, John described his frustration with the process that resulted in this placement.

> I felt just mad…Because I was doing good but they said I was doing bad so they just sent me out of there…They see me as a different person that I think myself that I am being good…They don't listen to me. They won't listen to me because, I don't know, they were just rude…. Getting too much suspensions, getting voided, getting into people's problems and stuff and help them get into fights and stuff. Yeah. They got sick and tired of me so they just sent me out of there. I have now been here for about two years and then I'll get out of here.

John described the alternative school as a waste of time and a place where little learning was going on. He reflected on the low expectations teachers had for students and the daily disruption that occurs when you group together students with behavior difficulties.

> I don't do class work because everybody is involved with trouble, and I just, you know, try to get out of it. But I'm into it. …no one teaches anything because everything is out of control. They teach really low, low grade, so I just get really annoyed with it. They don't have no algebra or anything, because they are always teaching low stuff because they have kids who have disabilities and stuff there.

With much advocacy from his grandparents, John eventually transferred from the alternative school into a less restrictive setting. John emphasized the importance of this transition and how a supportive, more open educational setting along with higher educational expectations had a direct impact on his learning and excitement about school.

> Everybody treats me nice. Like I can go in the halls by myself and not have someone following me everywhere. There is more freedom here. Instead of the bathrooms are locked, they are unlocked here….. This school is way different than my previous school. I changed a lot… I am more calm. I do work. Like at (previous school) I didn't do no work. I was just mad every day. They let you be, when you are mad, they put you in here. You walk out. You have your time, talk.

Even with a positive change in schools, John continued to struggle at times as experiences in foster care and his relationships with bio family made it difficult to concentrate on academics.

> There are some days I don't like to be in school, not because of school is bugging me. It is just things are bugging me. I just get really nervous, because I'm worried about my sister and stuff. And my mom and people.

4.1.2. Navigating the push and pull of biological family

During the interview period, the Foster Care Program was slowly granting John more visitation time with his mother. John expressed excitement about seeing his mom and how in the past, his desire to see his mother meant that he had to break the law (in his eyes).

> I have never spent time with her that much because the state has authority over me….Like they can tell me that if it is not safe for me to go over there, because I had to have supervision. But now, I am getting older and can get more privileges to go see my mom…I kind of slipped staying with my mom sometimes. I kind of broke the law.

While John expressed a longing to be with his mother, he also described how his mother's instability and unhealthy relationships put him at risk. For example, when describing his mother's recent marriage to an abusive man, John expressed concern for their safety.

> I'm happy for her. I don't like the dude. (He is a) rude, dirty, nasty person… My mom, she has a little phone, dials on accident, so I hear language all the time. He is very nasty toward my mom. I hate that. He threatened me. He makes threats to me….Tells me if I disrespect my mom, he is going to hurt me. I came in my mom's life first, so he needs to cool off. That's my mom. He can't keep me from my mom.

Similarly, John was conflicted over his relationships with his siblings, which he also felt could put him at risk.

> We pick too many fights. I don't want to be around him. I don't feel comfortable hanging out with him on the streets. When I was with him one time, I almost got myself beat up, because he goes around with a red rag, trying to all act cool. You might get jumped. I don't want to be there, say, oh, yeah, I was there but I didn't want to do anything. My brother died. I am not going to do that. I'm not going to just sit there watching my (other) brother get killed.

However, when John described his relationship with his grandparents, one can see the positive influence and stability they have contributed to John's life, even if he doesn't always see it that way:

> Well, someone called my grandma and told her that I was not at school and they were just wondering. I was like, huh, okay. She had been calling me all day and I didn't answer. Then I finally answered and I was like, well, I just left the mall. She said well you

come home and you are grounded. I was like, okay. I came home…. when I got home we talked, and I told them the truth.

4.1.3. What it means to be an adult

As mentioned earlier, toward the end of the interview period, John briefly ran away from his grandparents and lived on the streets for a few days. John returned to his grandparents and his brief experience with homelessness did not have lasting negative consequences. The experience, however, exposed him to physical violence, drugs and criminal activity and sharpened his awareness of what life might bring if he didn't start preparing for adulthood.

> I decided that about a month ago, to stay home, don't be on the streets, because you never know where I am. I'm always over in Southeast and that is a bad part of town, drive-bys and stuff. People want to beat the crap out of people. I don't hang over there. I just go home right after school. Grown up is act mature, act better than the other people. When someone is like, oh, yeah, when you are walking down the street and some guy is like, do you want some weed or something. No, I'm fine. I don't smoke it. Act better than the other person that is trying to get you in trouble. Act mature. Act the better person than somebody else. Act like an adult.

The most salient themes that emerged for John were clearly tied to important events in his life and how they unfolded over time (changing schools, increased visits with mom, running away). The protective role his grandparents served also became clear. Whether it was advocating for school change, making sure John did not get into trouble, providing a stable place for him to live (even after he ran away), or just helping John feel supported and valued, it is clear his life would be on a very different trajectory if not for his grandparents.

4.2. Kathy

Kathy was placed in foster care around 2 years of age because of neglect and threat of harm. Early on she experienced many changes in placement; however, she has been with her current foster family since age seven. Kathy has sporadic contact with her bio family, including her father, paternal grandparents and siblings (two brothers and a sister). She has never met her bio mother. Kathy self-identifies as African American and receives special education services for an emotional disability. Kathy was 17 years old and in 12th grade when she started interviews: she received special education services for an emotional disability. She was interviewed over a seven month period (December–June) for a total of 6 interviews. Key events for Kathy centered around contact with her bio family (January), the death of a friend from a drug-overdose (February), struggling to finish high school (May–June) and preparing for transition out of foster care when she turns 18 (May–June).

4.2.1. Importance of a caring, committed foster family

Kathy stressed that early on she was reluctant to trust her current foster family, did not always feel accepted and initially tried to push them away. However, as they stayed by her side over time, she began to feel a part of their family and grew to appreciate their support and commitment. For example, as Kathy reflected on what she has learned from being in foster care, she highlighted:

> Learning how to be a part of a family and not like turning it into a negative thing, to where you are like, oh, this isn't my family. I don't have to be here. You are not my parents. You don't tell me what to do, which there was a point when I was like that, but I'm not anymore… I haven't had to go from home to home to home to home to home, because my parents were willing to put up with my crap so I could be a better person, and help me benefit and help me to be who I am.

4.2.2. Difficult planning for the future

Early on in the interview period, Kathy acknowledged that she was facing important transitions in the near future (finishing high school, exiting foster care) but she was unable or unwilling to talk about these impending changes, or even her hopes and dreams for the future:

> I try not to think about the future too much because that usually stresses me out. I just try to focus on today…Because when I think about what is going to happen next, like I just put one thing on top of the other and just keep building and building it. Like what am I going to be, what am I going to do, what I am going to be. It just goes around in circles. I need to just focus on today, on the moment and not worry about that stuff. Tomorrow is tomorrow. Yesterday is yesterday, and today is today. You have to just live for today, live for the moment. I can't worry about what is going to happen next. Just take life as it hits me, you know.

> Her reluctance to think about the future was further amplified after the death of her friend: I am living in the moment. I am just trying to cherish every moment I got, because ever since my friend died, I can't think about tomorrow, because I don't know if there will be a tomorrow for me.

However, as time progressed and Kathy realized that she is getting closer to these transitions, she became much more future oriented and expressed considerable anxiety about not having a plan:

> I have a fear, just afraid I'm not going to have any place to go. I don't know what I'm going to do. I was not prepared for this at all. I am just like on my tiptoes with everything. Like, I don't know what I am going to do after high school. I don't have a clue. I wasn't thinking about that during high school because all I was focusing on was making the grades so I could at least pass my class.

Kathy also mentioned her dismay over not having the support she needed to figure out a plan for the future. Even though she had a close relationship with her foster parents, she did not feel comfortable asking them if she could stay after leaving care, and thus had to struggle with the discomfort of not knowing.

> I always worry about the future. I am like, what am I going to do tomorrow? What am I going to do about this? I guess figuring out what I was going to do after high school was kind of like a slap in the face, because my parents didn't talk about that kind of stuff. When I was a freshman they didn't think about that stuff. So now I am pretty much just like, I am at a dead end with that. I am not really choosing to do anything. I don't know. I'll have to figure it out later.

4.2.3. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger

While Kathy talked more about the future (and the uncertainty it held) as time went on, she also became increasingly reflective about her experiences in foster care and how it made her a stronger, more resilient being.

> I can be successful and my past doesn't have to be my future. It doesn't have to affect me in a negative way. It is affecting me in a positive way. I would say that I am a better person. If I didn't go through all the stuff I went through, I don't think I would think the way I do. I'm not saying it is a good thing, but I have definitely learned from it and it has definitely made me stronger.

4.2.4. My life, my decision

Kathy often noted that even though she was approaching adulthood, important decisions about her life were typically made with little or none of her input. She stressed the need for

professionals, in particular caseworkers, to use a developmental approach, giving adolescents greater voice and independence rather than treating them as young children who need protection and oversight. For example, Kathy described frustration with her caseworker and the restrictiveness of the overall child welfare system:

> You see, that's why I hate – that's why she gets on my nerves. She does things without asking me. Or she will make decisions for me that I don't want. Or she'll just say no to everything. She doesn't work with me. She is pretty much, oh, I work for you. That means you make all my decisions for me, then? No, I have a brain and I know how to use it and I know what I want and don't want.

In sum, as Kathy went through the interview process over time, she developed a sharper realization that her need to focus on the present and divert all her energy to simply finishing school helped her not dwell in the past but also left her without a clear plan for transition and life after high school and foster care.

4.3. Joe

Joe entered foster care at three and a half years of age due to maltreatment and sexual abuse. From the time he was placed in care to age 15, he lived in 14 foster homes, all non-relative placements. Joe had never met his biological parents and did not know if he has any siblings. The longest Joe lived in one place is with his current foster parents, where he had resided for the past three years. Joe identified as Caucasian and was eligible for special education services under the categories of emotional and learning disabilities. He attended his neighborhood high school and was enrolled in general education classes. Joe was 17 years of age and in 11th grade at the time of his first interview. He was interviewed six times over a 6-month period (Dec–May). Key events for Joe during the interview period included learning skills for adult life such as working and passing an exam for a license which would allow him to serve alcohol as a minor at his job.(January).

4.3.1. I am the only one who knows my life story

When asked if there is someone who knows Joe and could talk about his experiences and challenges, Joe explains:

> The only person who comes to mind would have to be my caseworker, because he has a file this thick because I have been in the system for over 14, 15 years. So you could always read my file. It is huge. You probably won't. The place I'm living at now is the longest I've lived in, in any place in my entire life. I've never stayed in one place longer than three years. Never had one set of friends for longer than three years. So really, no one knows me down to the grit and dirt of everything I've done, except myself.

4.3.2. You never know when you will have to leave and start over

Joe said the difficult thing about being in care was moving so often and never knowing when he would have to move again. At age nine he was happy in his foster home until:

> I guess [the foster parent] got kicked out of foster care because the motherly figure was an alcoholic. The placement got shut down…I think I cried then. This was random, "you have to go". [I had lived there almost] three years, I just took the hit, gobbled it up, and cried, like a little kid would do.

Then moving to a new home and school was a hard adjustment:

> I usually felt [bad] every time I went to a new place, because you would have to put your roots in again, meet new people, get used to them, and then interact with them. In the beginning I felt that was hard to do. I never really got the hang of it until just recently.

Joe felt that never knowing when he might have to move impacted peer friendships:

> I have gotten over the [fact that I can't really be] making friends, but for a lot of foster kids that is a little difficult, because you move from place to place. You make friends so often and then you lose them so often that it is kind of hard to keep doing it. You know you are going to lose them eventually.

4.3.3. Awesome foster parents

Despite these hardships, Joe found stability with his foster parents of the past three years. He talked about his foster dad:

> [He] is the most awesome foster dad I've ever had. He has that aura about him that even though he is not very big, he walks into a room and people just kind of step back to make room for his personality. He is definitely a role model.

Joe then went on to describe the most important thing his mom and dad do to support him:

> They are there. That is all I know to say. They are always around if you need help or something, and they are funny to boot. I've never had any really heartbreaking depressing situations where they held my hand, but — they are just around when I need them.

When asked, Joe offered his advice to other youth in care, and says that his foster dad contributed to his current view of and approach to his life:

> Alright, I am going to say, suck it up, you are not the only one. Because I know I used to be that way. I always played the victim. I am a foster kid, waa, waa, waa. It just makes life horrible. I have [had] foster home places that are actually pretty good. This one is awesome, but most of the foster homes I've been in have been decent and nice. [I learned to suck it up] when I came here. I kind of grew up a little bit, matured and here I am.

4.3.4. I know what I want and I do what I need for my future

Joe expressed self-reliance and confidence borne out of a belief that if he doesn't make something of his life, it will not happen. He worked in a restaurant for a year, after school and on weekends, and appreciated his employer's support. He prepared for and passed the exam for a license to serve alcohol as a minor, saying that "…It is just something that needs to be done to open more career options…" Joe expressed his self-direction toward his ultimate career goal:

> I'm pretty good at keeping track of myself and what I need to do. So if I have something I need to do I find time to do it and all the million other things I have to do. I figure if you want it bad enough, you are going to get it whether anybody else likes it or not. I want to be an editor. I am very good at writing. I like to read. So I think not newspapers, but edit books, edit other people's work.

Joe explained why he was working so hard and how it would lead to his adult life.

> [I do these things because] they need to be done. I want to do what I have to do go to college, and in order to do that I have to pass high school. In order to do that, I need to keep my grades up. In order to go to college I need money, so that's why I have my job. I kind of tie those together with a bunch of strings and knots and you've got my life. Eventually I will be done with college and then my real life will start and I'll have some fun. Right now it is just in progress.

Joe's belief that his life would be whatever he made of it spurred him to set and achieve goals for his future. After living in 14 different placements in 13 years, the relative stability he found with his foster

parents in the past three years seemed to provide a foundation for his self-confidence, self-reliance, and goal orientation.

4.4. Greg

Greg entered foster care at age five due to neglect and drug abuse by both his mother and father. He had lived in 20 different foster care placements; mostly non-relative, and for briefer periods with family (aunt and grandparents) and in residential facilities. At the time of the interviews, his mother was in a psychiatric facility and his father had been in and out of recovery programs. Greg identified as Caucasian and completed the tenth grade. In 11th grade he was transferred to an alternative school for youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities; he attended for one month and then dropped out. When he turned 18, he didn't want to live in foster care, so he requested his emancipation and was released from care. At the conclusion of the interviews, Greg was living with his grandmother who was able to offer a place to live but not guidance and support about his future. Eight interviews were conducted, one every 1–5 months, over a twelve-month period and ended a few weeks after the emancipation process was fully completed. The key events that occurred in Greg's life during this time period involved the process of emancipation and his initial efforts to establish a life outside of care.

4.4.1. Trying to figure out how to make it on my own

In one of the first interviews, Greg said, "You ask me questions that I probably should be thinking about." Greg's caseworker had encouraged him to participate in an independent living program to prepare for adulthood but he declined. Now, as his emancipation approached he thought it would have been helpful but said that instead he will learn it all on his own:

> I could have done []like the independent living program. My caseworker asked me if I wanted to go to it. It is basically how to live on your own. I could have had stuff like that, how to deal with problems and like that. That would have helped. At the time I was like real on edge and I just didn't really want to do it.

Two months before emancipation, Greg imagined what he will do when he is on his own:

> I am going to have a job and probably get my own house and stuff, or an apartment. I like the idea of living in a motel, though. It [] would be fun because you have cable TV. …you are just like alone, by yourself. Basically you get a nice bed and stuff usually.

4.4.2. Labels don't help me transition

Greg wondered why in reports and meetings, the focus was on negative labels and descriptions of him in mental health language with no inclusion of the positive things in his life and too little focus on transition to adulthood. Reading from the report he was given:

> It just starts out, "[youth's name] is a 17 ½ year old male who is the product of a fairly chaotic family background", and stuff. "It appears both parents had drug and alcohol abuse problems." It is just so negative and stuff. Then they give it to me to read. I don't know how they expect me not to get angry at them about it. I mean, I don't even want to read this stuff. It is all the bad stuff. There is nothing…positive in it. See look, "Cognitive, [inaudible], social inflexibility, poor emotion regulation." I mean, who wants to hear that about themselves?

4.4.3. There is no way to get the system to provide better support, better services

Greg expressed his growing frustration with the support and coordination for his transition and upcoming emancipation. He also realized that protesting about this process, getting angry, would not make any difference and in the end felt there wasn't anything he could do to get better help from the 'system', leading him to the conclusion he just needed to get out:

> Those meetings don't mean nothing to me. I don't even know what they are for. Because there are so many meetings that I was sick and tired of all of it. There are too many things to think about. You can get mad at them but nothing is really going to happen. []They put you through too much, it seems like, for a young kid and then they expect you to be normal at 18. They will give you services and counseling and stuff and it will just never go away. I am just trying to get out of it. I am trying to start new. Start a new life.

A few weeks after he went to his emancipation hearing before the judge he reflected:

> I just walked in there and talked to the judge and stuff, and she said, okay, I'm dismissing you. It took 20 minutes to just get out of everything. It's just like they can get you into state care for 13 years and toss you to the side of the road or something, and in 20 minutes you are out. I was amazed at how fast it took for them to get me out of it.

Greg was asked if he'd had time to think about what he was going to do next. His answer showed a lack of knowledge about what he needed to have in place and do in order to live on his own:

> What to do next? I just plan on getting sort of a part-time job []. Then I will have my Social Security check. [] Who knows, I might get real bored and lonely or something. At least I will [] have a place that I live [] and I'll just do the things I like to do.

Although Greg looked forward to making his own choices, there was, between the lines, apprehension at the fact that he lacked a family support network or adult allies:

> It has been so long since I got to choose what I do and stuff. That is part of the reason I am happy to leave the state because now []I get to have a little bit more say in what I do instead of people choosing for me. It is sort of different, too, because I don't have any parents to go to. So really, I don't really have anybody to call and talk to really.

4.4.4. "Because in my mind, help isn't help"

In his final interview, two months after emancipation, Greg shared from his journal. He wrote about the conflict he felt. He didn't feel the people in the foster care and mental health system actually helped him. He was trying to figure out if the people in the system thought his situation was his fault, or due to his problems or his family's fault. This made him angry and he began to believe that he had to make it in order to prove that they were wrong about him and his family. Another part of him wanted help and saw that he needed it, but he didn't believe it was actually available. He wanted help only if it would truly be helpful and if it came with no strings attached—the string being judgments from the 'helpers' about Greg and his family.

> [Reading from his journal] "My pain that I have inside me eats at me all day long…[] but I need to find a way to overcome it if I even can. Now I've trapped myself in something that I cannot get out of." That is all my fault and I know it, but I can't live up to it. Part of me wants to give up everything or get help somehow, but then everything that I've said reverses it, and I cannot accept any sort of help.. because in my mind, help isn't help. In fact, I've been telling myself that I sort of know everything, that I am smarter than most of them. I am confused, but I know that if I don't do it then I guess they are going to be right about [me and my family].

Over the course of twelve months of interviews, as Greg traversed and completed the emancipation process, several themes were evident.

There was a clear absence of any positive, stable, competent adult role model or ally in Greg's life. Thus he struggled to make sense of the transition–emancipation process on his own and in the end was confused, demoralized, and depleted by the experience. He set the process in motion without adults providing information and discussion about the consequences of this choice in a way that he could understand. Later, he felt alone and helpless and tried to reconcile the view of himself given to him with a view of himself that might give him hope, direction, and confidence. He knew he needed help but doubted that the "help" available then or now could really make a difference. Greg's story is a stark example of the outcomes when a youth abruptly jumps from youth to adulthood without the opportunity to take confidence-building steps and knowledge for adult life.

4.5. Debbie

Debbie entered foster care at the age of seven due to sexual abuse. She experienced 13 foster homes, with the longest placement being six years. She vividly remembered the day she went into care and stated she thinks about it every day. Her contact with her biological family was limited and not approved by her caseworker because of restrictions on her contact with her father and brother. She referred to the other foster youth in the home as her brothers and sisters. She was 17 and in the 11th grade when she began interviews. When asked about school, she would only say she felt she was doing fine even though her grades were not as high as they could be, she enjoyed her classes, and she was determined to get a regular diploma (instead of a modified one or her GED). Interviews took place over an 8-month period (Oct–May) for a total of six interviews. During this period she experienced several key events: she was accepted into a youth police academy (January), one of her foster brothers ran away from home placing great stress on her foster mother (February), she had an unapproved visit with her father and brother, and a brief reconnection with her bio mother (April). Debbie chose to use the camera as her recall tool; most of the pictures were of her foster siblings and their pets.

4.5.1. Transition planning

Planning for the future or a life after care was not something Debbie focused on. She admitted to having a feeling that if it wasn't something that was going to happen tomorrow, she wasn't going to worry about it. When asked how she would make the decision, she reported that she didn't really know. During the interview period, Debbie grappled with the decision of whether to remain in foster care or "age out". She was asked about how she was making the decision in each interview. As she started the process of applying to the police cadet academy, she was better able to discuss how her current activities might impact her career choices. She consistently verbalized her interest in a career in law enforcement and she felt the cadet academy was an introduction for her. While participating in the cadet academy was a positive experience for Debbie, it also created a sense of being "other" when she was unable to purchase the required uniform shoes because her caseworker did not respond to her requests for a clothing voucher. The first few times she was asked about the process of aging out, she was not willing to discuss the topic, commenting that it was something she would decide when she had to but not before. Closer to her 18th birthday, when asked about how the decision-making was going she said,

> Well, I met with my caseworker a couple of weeks ago, like one week before my birthday. He said I want you to think about this long and hard and don't give this paper back to me until the week after your birthday. He gave me a paper… and said sign it and give it back to him a week later if I wanted to stay in foster care.

She stated that this was her caseworker's way of explaining the process to her. She expressed frustration that this was the extent of the preparation she received for the process of aging out. She expressed gratitude for her foster mother's support in making the decision but was clear that she didn't think she would be forced to make such a decision if she was "a bio kid".

4.5.2. Poor communication with caseworker

Debbie identified several areas in her life where she felt clearer communication with her caseworker would have been helpful but the one she felt most keenly was in the unclear explanation she received about why she had been removed from her bio family. She felt she had never really been told why she was not allowed to go home and, since it was not explained, she came to believe there was something she was supposed to be doing so she could return home. "All I know is it was about my dad…I know there is something I could have done (to get out of care) but I wasn't allowed to get out until I was 18."

4.5.3. Ideas for systems improvement

Debbie had clear ideas of what she thought needed to be different about the foster care system. She felt strongly that she was lucky to have gotten the foster mother she did but there were many things she believed could be done to make it easier for youth entering the system.

> They could improve on a lot of stuff—I just can't point them all out. They could start doing a lot better on … better communication with the family, I guess. Let's see, communication, transportation, jobs, programs that could help us out, activities for in school, activities for out of school.I think they could actually make the foster kids meet the foster parents before they go in. We've had almost 20 kids come in (this foster home) and they were all temporary. When they got there, no one dropped them off. They had to get there by themselves — no caseworker, no nothing. … I would like for caseworkers to tell what the kids are going through first and then give them the benefits, then give them the clothes and everything and if they need therapy or anything … Most of the kids that are in foster care that are going into the system do not know is going to go on. I'm really scared about that because most of the kids have no idea what is going to happen in their lives when they are in there. I would like them to tell them just a little.

During the interview period Debbie made several important transitions. She readily admitted she would not have been successful at these without the help of her foster mother. Despite her appreciation for her foster mother, Debbie is clear that she believes she has been damaged by her time in "the system". She speaks of her biological family as though there was no reason for her to have been put in foster care and she identifies them as the first place she will go when she ages out. Debbie also clearly articulated her ideas for how to improve the delivery of services. Interviewing Debbie for nine months allowed us to watch her achieve a milestone she believed was setting her on her career path (police cadet program) as well as observe her decision-making process regarding whether to remain in care when she turned 18.

4.6. Janey

Janey was placed in foster care at age nine because of sexual abuse. She experienced three foster home placements (including a short kinship placement with a sister) and two periods in residential treatment where she was residing during the interview period. Janey had two brothers and two sisters. She self-identified as Mexican, was 17 and in the 12th grade when she began the interviews and she participated in a total of eight interviews taking place over an eight month period (Nov–June). Key events occurring for her during the interview period included struggles adjusting to being in a residential placement (January) and deciding to remain in the residential setting so she could complete her high school diploma, a family reunion with

her brother who had recently been released from prison (March), her boyfriend going to prison (December), turning 18 (April) and planning for her transition out of residential treatment and foster care. Janey chose to make use of the art supplies offered and had several pieces to share with the interviewer each time. One piece was chosen to be part of an art show, a fact Janey took great pride in.

4.6.1. Gang family

Janey's involvement in the gang was part of a family pattern of gang involvement. Her older brother, the family member to whom she felt closest, was in a gang and had gone to prison because of his gang activity. Janey grappled with the decision of whether to end her gang affiliation. Her indecision about her gang involvement caused her distress and she talked freely about the impact it was having on her emotions.

> What I don't like about it (gang involvement) is having to have problems with other people for stupid reasons and having to constantly watch your back because you are getting threatened 24/7. The things I like are how… you have people that have your back. I don't know…they treat you as a family member. They (staff at the treatment center) say they want me to work on my gang relationships, but I don't want to change that because that is a big part of me. Like, without being in the gang, I feel like I am losing my family that I ended up meeting and getting attached to because of how my family turned their backs on me. So I found a new family.

4.6.2. Bio family—need and resentment

While living at the facility she maintained regular contact and had visits with her mother and biological family that were both positive and negative. Her ties to her family were clearly strong but she did not feel cared about by them.

> They really hate me. I don't know, ever since I got in foster care they look at me different because I'm a foster kid. Some of them think they are better than me, just because everything I went through never happened to them. I don't know. They just judge me a lot… They always put me down. Then my mom tries to tell me that my family loves me… but when my mom is not around, they just start targeting me and all of that. That was the thing I don't understand, why do they single me out? Why do they treat me different from everybody else? I don't know why. I've done lots of things for them. I don't see them as my real family—like they are my family but I don't see them as real family. You know how families are supposed to be loving, caring, and supporting? My family is nothing compared to that. I don't accept them as family. I showed them respect but they didn't show me respect. I accepted them for who they were but they didn't accept me for who I was.

A stark contradiction to her spoken rejection of her family became evident in the photographs she took with the camera she was provided. Every photo was of her family. She took several hundred pictures and each one was someone to whom she was related. When asked to describe how the photo told a story about her life in care, she said that she didn't know when (or if) she would see her family again and she wanted the photos as a reminder of them.

4.6.3. Caseworker/future planning

Janey was asked what planning had been done with her regarding her upcoming 18th birthday. She shared a conversation with her caseworker, "She said if I get out of DHS, I'm not going to have a future." She went on to add:

> I don't know (about future). My caseworker is coming next week and she is going to sign me up for another program, for after here. I don't want to do that because I honestly don't want to be living in programs. I just want to continue my life and do what my sister got to do. I feel like I am being punished for something, because they never did that to my sisters.

Despite several conversations with her caseworker, Janey still felt unsure of where she was going to be placed when she completed treatment because she hadn't received clear information about it.

> Yeah, she was pissing me off in a way, because she tells me one thing and then she changes it. At first she told me that I would be here until January, and then after that she told me I am going to be here for a month, and then she said just get a job and you can leave and all that. Now she is saying that I would have to be there until I get a job and I would have to be there until, if I don't get fired or anything, then she would put me on subsidy.

4.6.4. Importance of a mentor

The relationship Janey felt had been the most supportive and consistent was a five year relationship she had with a mentor. She, at one point, considered this woman and her husband as a possible foster placement but decided against it because she didn't feel she would be comfortable in an "American" family. She shared feeling as though the relationship had had its ups and downs over the course of the five years, but that her mentor was the one person she believed would be there when she needed someone.

> "Yeah, she has been the one that has supported me and she has been there for me more than my mom has…My mother doesn't understand some of the things I say because she doesn't know what I am going through."

4.6.5. Making difficult choices

Janey remained in residential treatment for the duration of the interview period. While she railed against the restrictions, she also grudgingly admitted she was benefiting from being there. As the interviews with Janey lasted about eight months, we were able to see her shifts in thinking and her acceptance of her situation. She made the tough decision to remain in the treatment facility and not age out when she turned 18 because she knew she would be able to get her diploma if she stayed. "…I told her (her caseworker) I will stay here to graduate and I think that is a long commitment for me to do, because I honestly don't even want to be here, but I really want to graduate and everything. So I really want to prove the point to her that I know I can graduate."

4.7. Amy

Amy was a 15 year old young woman who was interviewed on 8 occasions over a 6 month period (January–June) during her sophomore year in high school. Amy was placed in foster care when she was eight years old in association with her mother's drug use. During 5.3 years in foster care, Amy had 4 placements including her relatively long-term current placement of 48 months. In reflecting on being in foster care, Amy said she loves her biological mom but does not want to live with her because it is too "chaotic."

During the interview period, Amy's life was marked by receiving informational letters from several colleges related to a high ACT score (February); growing conflict with her foster parents over skipping school and spending time with her friends (April–May), suspension from high school for the first time (April); and removal from her foster home at the request of one of her foster parents, temporarily moving in with her biological mother (May–June).

4.7.1. Life at home: siblings, animals, and boredom

Amy lived with her two foster moms and usually 6 other girls who she described with uncertainty: "Mary, Sara – Jane is my real sibling –

Nancy, Joan was here for 2 days and then Natasha, then I forgot her real name. Lot of people. I feel like I am forgetting someone, but 6."

She was an avid reader who regularly went to the library and frequently spoke about her school friendships, foster siblings, and love of animals. Her foster home had 5 dogs, 2 cats, 2 beta fish, and 2 birds. She did not take frequent photographs for the study, however those she took were usually of foster siblings, friends, and animals. Amy's communication often featured wit, and sometimes sarcasm. Although living in a busy home, Amy frequently described herself as bored, at one point saying, "Like I just go home [foster home] and go to sleep." She complained that her foster parents made her stay home where she usually just read, slept, and ate.

4.7.2. Am I in or am I out?

Amy had growing conflict with her foster parents who often disagreed with one another about whether to allow Amy to continue living in the home when she misbehaved. Ultimately, Amy was kicked out of the home because she had been skipping school, drinking alcohol, and spending time with friends. Amy described her situation:

> That was bull crap, dude. I got kicked out because I had a friend over… because it was a guy and we were playing stupid X Box in my room. When we got up to leave, [FP1] is outside the door and she throws a fit on him and like threatens to shoot him and then kicked me out. Then [FP2] says I'm not kicked out and [FP1] says I am… It is confusing… Well, it happened last night so I went to bed. I don't know [if I want to stay], because I'm tired of her saying I'm going to leave every other week, dude. But if I do get kicked out, I'm going to my mom's, at least for awhile… I have a couple of places I can go. I spent the whole 4-day weekend with my mom. It went well. I spent 4 days eating Top Ramen and playing videogames. I think I grew roots.

Amy's description underscored her distress over not knowing whether she would be allowed to remain in her long term foster home while also making the case that she has other options.

4.7.3. Going to college and becoming a veterinarian

Amy expressed her intention to volunteer at the Humane Society when she turned 16, to go to college, and to become a veterinarian. During her third interview, Amy casually revealed that, "some colleges were sending me [stuff].asking me to come for a campus visit or something. They got my scores from an ACT test somehow." She confidently asserted, "I am going to go to college. I want to be a vet."

While Amy infrequently mentioned her mentor, she eluded to her mentor's supporting her interest in becoming a vet: "My mentor took me to the vet with her cat, because he was peeing blood. She was going to take me again." And despite experiencing conflict with her foster parents, Amy said, "My moms made me open them all [letters from colleges]. They presented them to me with a speech. I am like, oh, okay and tried to push them off to the side and leave them somewhere else. They made me read them and spend exactly 5 minutes on each letter."

4.7.4. On the edge at high school

Amy described the catch-22 of struggling to meet high school credit requirements and ambivalence toward the low educational demands of her teachers: "I have 9 credits and I need 27 to graduate and I'm halfway through high school…they don't give homework at all. It is really pretty stupid, because then you are going to go to college… I love my no homework. But still it is not logical." When asked about learning, Amy sarcastically responded, "We weren't talking about learning. I just need the paper saying I did it. I have to go to Coney Island and get one of the fake certificates." In contrast, during her next interview, Amy shared that she was making herself go to bed earlier so she would be on-time for school: "I just make myself go to bed at 9:00 because then I feel like I am going to miss it [class]." Thus, while expressing ambivalence toward high school, Amy acknowledged that she was putting effort into attending classes. She explained that she had received two Bs, two As and Cs, indicating, "It's pretty good, all things considered."

Unfortunately in April, Amy was given 10 first-time detentions and a suspension for leaving school for lunch, which was prohibited for sophomores, and for going home when she had a "bad day" with her period. These incidents occurred during the same time frame that Amy's conflict with her foster parent was increasing, when her mentor was in Florida, and when she had stopped going to her therapist because she was "annoying".

At the time of her final interview, Amy was temporarily living with her biological mom. Her foster moms' had evicted her and some of her belongings were missing. She suspected that her foster sisters' ransacked her room. She expressed indifference to moving out yet said she was confused and frustrated. Her caseworker called and Amy asked her if she could live in a house with a curfew and more obvious rules, because at her foster home there are no limits set other than that she stay home all the time. She was still serving detentions at school and said she would like to cut class more often. Amy appeared isolated and spiraling toward an uncertain future.

5. Discussion

This qualitative study gathered information from youth in foster care receiving special education services to better understand their experiences in both systems. The special education labels of youth in care likely represent the complexity and interaction of individual, family, and systems circumstances that together manifest in youth having problems that are judged to affect their learning. The youth who participated shared their thoughts on the education and transition process and related challenges, disconnections from families of origin, and interactions with case workers. This study was unique in that interviewers met with the participants over an extended period of time, allowing observation of change in the youth's thoughts and feelings about their education and upcoming transition.

5.1. Cross-cutting themes

In addition to giving voice to the stories of individual youth, nine cross-cutting themes emerged across the interviews.

5.1.1. Educational goals and barriers

Several youth discussed connections between succeeding and staying in school and their career and life goals, as well as facing challenges due to restrictive or unresponsive educational placements and having insufficient credits to complete high school. Without a trusted advocate who understood their educational needs and their options within the educational system, several youth had unknowingly made education-related decisions with far-reaching consequences. Greg wished someone had helped him stay in school and not drop out, Debbie ended up on the track to a modified diploma that would disqualify her for most post-secondary education, and Amy undermined her college options by earning grades in high school incongruous with her ability or career interests. John, Janey, Greg, and Amy all spent time in restrictive schools where it was apparent to them they were receiving an education inferior to that found in typical public schools. Joe was clearly motivated by the relationship he saw between his school performance today and his long-term career goals. Moreover, his current foster care placement and a few teachers seemed to provide him the stability to utilize that motivation. But for most youth, the frequent moves to yet another school, the clashes with restrictive placements, issues and crisis with one's bio-family, and the lack of consistent support and acknowledgment for their efforts made the

work of being the student they wished to be very difficult for these youth.

5.1.2. Disempowerment

To varying degrees, each youth articulated a sense of frustration with and distrust of the system. When youth did not understand why they were in foster care or placed in a particular school, they expressed feeling a lack of control. Consequently, they often took actions to regain a sense of power over their situations: sometimes their actions were successful; on other occasions, youth's responses appear to have led to counterproductive results. Furthermore, when youth's lack of control was compounded by making a mistake and not having a chance to repair it, they seemed to become more disengaged in their education or transition process. Unlike youth in intact families who often benefit from being able to make several attempts at decisions, mistakes made by youth in foster care sometimes had far-reaching repercussions. Most of the participants felt they were not provided with practical skills to support their educational and transition decisions. Most youth perceived that they were given a stack of paperwork and expected to interpret it on their own with inadequate information about the consequences of their or other's decisions.

5.1.3. Living in the moment vs. thinking about the future

Interviewing youth several times over the course of the transition process revealed how different youth responded over time to the major uncertainties of their future (e.g. how can I pay for post-secondary education? Where will I live after I leave care?). Whereas Kathy and Debbie did not want to think about the future, Joe had developed a strong belief that nothing within his control could get in his way. These different coping strategies likely have major influences on youth's education and transition success.

5.1.4. Resilience to barriers

This theme emerged from youth who talked about what steps they took to deal with a challenge, how they perceived themselves to be able to cope with barriers, and what supported their resilience. For example, John and Janey made decisions about with whom they would interact as they focused on staying in school. And Joe described his lack of knowledge of banking procedures, which cost him money, as a learning experience worth the price.

5.1.5. Adult allies and mentors

Youth discussed how a caring, committed foster parent or mentor was instrumental, and the possible consequences of a consistent and available adult ally or mentor being present or absent in a youth's life over time were revealed in the lives of several participants. For Greg, the lack of such an adult in his life, compounded by poor support from caseworkers, may have contributed to Greg making decisions that he later questioned (e.g., dropping out of school, exiting care without a plan or prospects). In contrast, while John and Janey struggled against and even acted out with adult allies/mentors, they eventually returned to accepting adult support.

5.1.6. Relationship with bio family

For many youth, balancing their hope of reuniting at some level with bio family while at the same time setting boundaries that provided safety and space to pursue their plans for the future, was of increasing concern as emancipation loomed. Several of the youth were struggling with the process of deciding what boundaries they needed to set with their biological family as they left care and would soon be free to choose, but also have to manage at their young age, with whom they could safely associate.

5.1.7. Presence of career goals

Several of the youth identified career goals and felt like they had a plan for how to get there. Others were not able to identify any career plans. While both Joe and Amy had specific careers in mind, Greg had not explored any career interests and had no skills for finding and keeping a job and Kathy's fears about the future interfered with proactive preparations.

5.1.8. Self-determination/restrictiveness

Youth shared feelings of not being able to make their own decisions or shared ways that a foster parent supported them in learning to make decisions. For example, Debbie felt her foster mother had assisted her with the decision-making process regarding whether to remain in care or age out. She described being allowed to discuss the pros and cons with her foster mother and make the decision on her own. She was unsure whether she made the correct decision but knew her foster mother would be there to help her with any consequences. John, Kathy, Greg, and Janey all described frustration around being prevented from making decisions about their placement, school, or level of contact with family. Kathy and Greg felt that no one helped them develop the skills to make life decisions and that this was a great shortcoming of the care system. When Kathy, Greg, and John, in reaction to feeling restricted, took actions on their own, they learned 'the hard way' from these decisions. Joe discussed his belief that he was basically 'on his own' in learning how to make choices and find his way in the world. For example, when he didn't understand how checking and savings accounts worked he paid the price in bank overdraft fees, but he viewed that as an example of the costs he would have to pay as he taught himself through trial and error about being an adult.

5.1.9. Caseworker support

Several youth shared stories of having been let down by a caseworker who didn't follow through with support or a service, as well as the instances of the caseworker doing the right thing. Both Greg and Debbie had been assured by their caseworkers that the caseworker would complete a task that was important to the youth. When this did not occur, these youth's trust in their caseworker and the care system eroded and this may have impacted these youth's engagement in subsequent steps in the transition process. Janey described frustration with her caseworker making the decision to keep in her in the treatment center but grudgingly admitted the decision meant she would obtain her diploma. Each youth identified the importance of their caseworker and the impact they had on their lives. The relationship a youth in foster care has with his or her caseworker appears to be vital to the success of the youth.

5.1.10. Study limitations

The findings in this study are derived from qualitative inquiry with a small sample of youth in foster care receiving special education services, and thus the findings should not be assumed to represent the larger population of such youth. Although member-checking with youth did not occur after the final themes were derived, incremental check-ins across multiple interviews conducted with each youth served to confirm which life events and transition issues were most important to the participants. Use of the constant comparative method for coding and theme generation and debriefing with colleagues enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings and the authenticity of the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

5.1.11. Benefits of longitudinal follow-along during secondary education and transition

Widening our inquiry to examine both youth's educational and foster care experiences, as well as interviewing youth every few weeks over several months provided additional insights into youth's experiences and perceptions, and how these themes unfold, interact, and lead to consequences over time in the lives of youth. Such information may help educators and service providers identify more optimal approaches and time periods to provide youth needed

information and support as youth make decisions and take actions toward their future.

Additionally, the series of interviews over time offered a window into how some youth attempted to make sense of the complex bureaucratic and legal process involved in special education services, and foster care, and the consequences of the decisions they needed to make. For example, Greg, Joe, Janey, and Kathy described instances in which they strove to understand the system and why things were done the way they were. Even when service providers 'explained' the rules and procedures, these youth often did not understand nor realize the personal and lasting consequences of certain decisions. In the end, some youth ended up making decisions without sufficient information to weigh the long-term consequences of the various paths they might take.

5.1.12. Implications for supporting youth with disabilities in foster care

An important implication of these findings is that the consistent presence of an adult ally/mentor in the life of a youth can provide the support, guidance, and opportunity for reflection needed to set goals and take steps (and missteps followed by repair) toward one's future. An adult ally/mentor can also help youth navigate the complexities of the social system and gain the information needed to understand the consequences of various choices in order to make informed decisions. Foster parents but also mentors and bio-family members may fill this role. A related implication is the importance of youth understanding the consequences of various choices they make during the transition process on their subsequent opportunities. When youth do not understand the long-term results of various decisions, they are likely to exercise choices not in their best interest. Educators and service providers need to develop more effective ways to explain the education and foster care emancipation process in ways that youth can understand so that youth can make informed choices.

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