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"Tomorrow is another problem" The experiences of youth in foster care during their transition into adulthood

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Abstract

This study gathered qualitative information about the experiences of youth transitioning out of foster care into adulthood, from the perspectives of youth themselves, as well as foster parents and professionals. Data was gathered from 10 focus groups comprised of a total of 88 participants, including youth currently in foster care ($n=19$), foster care alumni ($n=8$), foster parents ($n=21$), child welfare professionals ($n=20$), education professionals ($n=9$), Independent Living Program staff ($n=9$) and other key professionals ($n=2$). Findings of key themes included: (a) self-determination; (b) coordination/collaboration (c) importance of relationships; (d) importance of family; (e) normalizing the foster care experience; (f) the Independent Living Program and (g) issues related to disability.

Keywords: Foster care; Adolescents; Disabilities; Emancipation

1. Introduction

Every year, approximately 20,000 youth exit foster care when they reach the age of majority (typically 18 years old; Carroll, 2002). These young people often move into adulthood with very little assistance from their families, communities or government. Youth aging out of foster care are typically not afforded the luxury of a gradual transition into adulthood or the safety net of family if they find themselves unprepared for the challenges of independent living. Rather, upon

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emancipation from foster care, these young people move abruptly into sudden adulthood, typically with no opportunity to return to the child welfare system if they find they are unprepared to make it on their own.

Consequences of the instant adulthood these young people experience can be seen in multiple studies documenting the poor outcomes of youth emancipated from foster care. The National Evaluation of Title IV-E Independent Living Programs for Youth in Foster Care revealed that 2.5 to 4 years after youth had aged-out of the child welfare system, 50% had used illegal drugs, 25% were involved with the legal system, and only 17% were completely self supporting (i.e., not receiving public assistance; Westat, 1991). In addition, most youth exiting foster care are underemployed; for example, data from Missouri indicated that 62% of youth did not have a job when they were emancipated from care, and almost one-third had no work history (McMillen & Tucker, 1999). In a study conducted in California, Illinois and South Carolina, youth emancipated from foster care had less than a 55% employment rate and typically received wages that fell well below the poverty level (Goerge et al., 2002). Youth in foster care also are less likely to graduate from high school (Avery, 2001; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 1998), and are under-represented in college preparatory classes compared to peers with the same skills living with their biological families (Blome, 1997). Recently, two large-scale studies examining the transition of youth in foster care have been conducted (the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth and the Casey National Alumni Study), which further document the hardship and disadvantage these youth encounter in early adulthood. In comparison to same age peers in the general population, the Midwest Evaluation found that young adults in their study were twice as likely to have at least one child and were significantly more likely to be a single parent (Courtney et al., 2005). Consistent with earlier studies, the Midwest Evaluation also confirmed that youth exiting care had substantially lower levels of educational attainment and employment than their peers of the same age in the general population (Courtney et al., 2005). The Casey study found that the household income levels of young adults who had recently left foster care were 35% lower than the general population and that within the first year of leaving foster care, one out of five alumni experienced homelessness at least one night (Pecora et al., 2003).

The troubling outcomes of foster youth exiting care is receiving national attention and important legislation has been introduced to address the needs of these youth. For example, the 1999 Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) created the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program and doubled the federal money states receive to provide foster youth with independent living services (Massinga & Pecora, 2004). Typically, these services are delivered through Independent Living Programs (ILPs) and focus on employment, education, housing and skills related to daily living. In addition, federal law stipulates that youth in foster care, 16 years and older, have a written Independent Living (IL) plan that describes "the programs and services which will help such a child prepare for the transition from foster care to independent living" [42 U.S.C. § 675 (1) (D), cited in Pokempner & Rosado, 2003). The Promoting Safe and Stable Families Amendments of 2001 (PSSFA) provides federal dollars for Chafee Independent Living Educational and Training Vouchers which can help pay for the cost of attending a higher education institution.

While the poor outcomes for youth in foster care continues to gain greater visibility, the transition of foster youth who experience disabilities has largely been ignored, and is not well addressed in legislation passed to support youth aging-out of care. For example, while the FCIA of 1999 requires that transition services offered through Chafee funds are coordinated with programs for youth with disabilities (e.g., special education), there are no legislative guidelines or mandates

regarding this coordination. Foster youth with disabilities have been disregarded in research as well; the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth excluded "youth with developmental disabilities or severe mental illness, and youth who were incarcerated or in a psychiatric hospital" from participating in the study (Courtney et al., 2005, p. 5) while the Casey study did not include young adults who had a major physical or developmental disability (e.g. an IQ score of less than 70) (Pecora et al., 2005, p.18).

Some of the only information regarding the outcomes of foster youth with disabilities stems from the National Evaluation of Title IV-E Independent Living Programs, which noted whether youth emancipated from care had an identified disability (47%), and compared the outcomes of these youth with peers in foster care who were not designated as having a disability. The evaluation found that foster youth with disabilities were less likely to: (1) be employed, (2) graduate from high school, (3) have social support and (4) be self-sufficient than youth in foster care who did not have an identified disability (Westat, 1991). Similarly, a recent study by Smithgall and colleagues revealed that only 16% of foster youth in special education with a primary disability classification of emotional disturbance graduated from high school; even more worrisome, they found that 18% left school because they were incarcerated (Smithgall, Gladden, Yang, & Goerge, 2005). The academic failure of foster youth, particularly those with disabilities, is emphasized in a recent report by the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth (Administration for Children and Families [ACF], 2003). Foster youth with disabilities are listed as one of the most educationally needy group of students who are "too often not provided the opportunity to reach their full potential" (pp. 109).

Oversight regarding the transition experiences and outcomes of foster youth with disabilities is surprising given their over-representation in the child welfare system-studies have consistently shown that 30–40% of youth in foster care receive special education services (Advocates for Children of New York, 2000; Courtney, Piliavin, & Grogan-Kaylor, 1995; Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, 2000; Geenen & Powers, 2006; Goerge, Voorhis, Grant, Casey, & Robinson, 1992). Indeed, this figure may be an underestimate as the special education needs of these students may go unnoticed because they lack a consistent educational advocate and educational setting (Advocates for Children of New York, 2000; Wingerden, Emerson, & Ichikawa, 2002). The frequent omission of youth with disabilities from foster care research is also remarkable given that the poor transition outcomes of youth with disabilities in general have been well established.

While legislation like the FCIA and PSSFA have resulted in an increase in much needed funding for transition support of youth in foster care, it is important to ask the stakeholders themselves, "Is it helping?" and "What needs to change or improve?" In particular, it is important that we ask foster youth with disabilities this question as they likely require unique transition supports and services to move successfully into adulthood. This study was designed to address these important questions by inviting current foster youth (including youth with disabilities), recent foster care alumni, caseworkers, educators, foster parents, and staff from Independent Living Programs to discuss the following questions: What is transition like for youth in foster care (including youth with disabilities)? What are the barriers? What helps? What needs to change if outcomes for foster youth are to improve?

2. Method

Purposive sampling was used to recruit a total of 88 participants from an urban area on the west coast (27 foster youth, 21 foster parents and 40 professionals). Youth, parents and professionals from the county in which the study was conducted were mailed a flyer with information about the

focus groups and an invitation to participate. Incentives for participation were provided, including food, drink, a stipend of $50 and transportation, if necessary.

2.1. Participants

2.1.1. Youth

Youth were recruited through the state Department of Human Services (DHS) foster care program and the Independent Living Program (ILP) for the county in which the study took place. Participants included 19 youth who were currently in foster care and 8 youth who had recently aged-out of care. Among youth participants currently in foster care, 7 indicated they were African American, 8 were Caucasian, 2 were Native American, 1 was Hispanic and 1 was bi-racial; 13 participants were female. Ten of the foster care youth were 17 years of age, 6 were sixteen, 2 were fifteen, and 1 participant was 14 years of age; 13 youth were residing in a non-relative foster care placement, 4 were in a kinship placement and 2 were in a group home. The majority of youth (13) reported that they received special education services and/or identified themselves as having a disability.

In regards to youth participants who had been emancipated from care, 2 described themselves as African American, 5 were Caucasian, and 1 was bi-racial; 6 participants were female. Six of the foster care alumni were 18 years of age, while the remaining two participants were 19 years old. Five alumni reported that they had a disability and/or that they received special education services while in high school. Across all 27 participants, 3 indicated they had been in foster care less than a year, 11 were in care from 1 to 5 years, 8 were in care 6 to 10 years, and 5 indicated they had been in foster care for over 10 years.

2.1.2. Foster parents

Foster parents were recruited through the state DHS foster care program, with a total of 21 participating in focus groups. The majority (18) of foster parents were female; 7 foster parents indicated they African American, 10 were Caucasian, 3 were Hispanic, and 1 was Native American. The length of time participants had been a foster parent ranged widely from 15 months to 18 years, with the average being 6.9 years and the median being 4.4 years. Four parents were providing kinship care (i.e. they reported that they were related to at least one of the foster youth placed in there home).

2.1.3. Child welfare professionals

Twenty child welfare professionals participated in the study, all of who were recruited through the state DHS foster care program. The majority of participants were caseworkers; two participants were supervisors and one was a kinship placement certifier. The average length of time participants had been employed in their current position was 6 years, 4 months. The majority of child welfare participants were Caucasian (16), 3 were African American and 1 was Asian; twelve participants were female.

2.1.4. Education professionals

Recruitment of school staff focused on professionals involved in transition planning and was conducted through a large urban school district in the county where the study took place. A total of nine professionals participated; all were vocational/transition specialists. The average length of time participants had been in their position was 9 years, 6 months. All participants reported their ethnicity to be Caucasian; six were female.

2.1.5. ILP professionals

ILP case managers were recruited through the Independent Living Program for the county in which the study took place. Nine staff participated and all were involved in providing direct service to youth; the average length of time in their position was 1 year, 1 month. Seven participants were Caucasian, 1 was Hispanic and 1 was African American; four were female.

2.1.6. Other professionals

A member of the state's Citizen Foster Care Review Board (CRB) participated in the group. The CRB program consists of trained volunteers who help the courts by ensuring that foster care plans and services meet the needs of youth. He reported his ethnicity as Caucasian and had held this position for 2 years, 3 months. In addition, a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) took part in a focus group. CASAs are trained volunteers who are appointed by the courts to advocate for the best interests of the youth. She indicated her ethnicity as Caucasian and had been serving in this role for 7 months.

2.2. Procedures

Separate focus groups were held for each constituent group (the CRB member participated in the educators' group; the CASA took part in a focus group for child welfare professionals). Focus groups lasted from 60 to 90 min and involved five to nine participants. In instances where a large number of participants had signed-up for the study, more than one focus group was held for a constituent group (youth, foster parents and child welfare professionals); however, each participant attended only one group. A total of ten focus groups were conducted and each was recorded and transcribed verbatim using a court reporter. Every participant was assigned a number; names and identifying information were not reflected in the transcripts.

The protocol for focus groups centered broadly on exploring the perspectives and experiences of participants' regarding the transition of youth in foster care into adulthood. Initial questions were intentionally open-ended to permit each participant to share his or her own perspective or story, without being immediately affected by possible biases from more focused questions from the facilitators. After the group responded to broad questions, the researchers asked specific follow up questions to prompt more in-depth answers and to encourage more detail regarding the transition planning experiences of youth in foster care, and foster youth with disabilities in particular. Focus group questions included: (1) What is it like for teens in foster care?; (2) How prepared are foster youth for transitioning into adulthood?; (3) How do foster youth prepare for adulthood?; (4) What formal transition planning happens for foster youth?; (5) In preparing foster youth for adulthood, what strategies are most helpful? What hasn't helped?; (6) Is there anything that's different for youth in foster care who are getting ready for adult life (vs. their peers in their general population)?; and (7) Are there other things (like one's cultural background, having a disability, being a girl or boy) that make it different for youth in foster care to get ready for adult life?

2.3. Data analysis

Transcripts of all focus groups were transferred into computerized files using a software program called Ethnograph and coded according to constant-comparative procedures described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Utilizing this approach, transcripts were reviewed electronically and emerging themes were identified. Initial categories were developed based upon identified themes, and at the conclusion of coding the first set of transcripts (approximately 20%), researchers reevaluated

coding categories and made adjustments accordingly. Additional categories were developed to accommodate themes that emerged in the initial coding phase. Transcripts that were previously coded were revisited and updated using the new coding theme list. Approximately one-third (30%) of the transcripts were reviewed by both a primary and secondary coder to control for possible coding biases; any coding disagreements were discussed until agreement was reached.

3. Results

A number of key qualitative themes emerged with respect to participants' experiences with the transition of foster youth into adulthood, including (a) self-determination; (b) coordination/ collaboration (c) importance of relationships; (d) importance of family; (e) normalizing the foster care experience; (f) the Independent Living Program and (g) issues related to disability.

3.1. Self-determination

Foster youth and alumni described a frustrating paradox where they have little or no opportunity to practice skills of self-determination while in care, but are expected to suddenly be able to control and direct their own lives once they are emancipated.

> We need to see what's out there, what's out there for me, so I make my own mistakes and I can learn from them. I don't think they (caseworkers) should push you into something you don't want to do just because they think it's the best thing for you. They're not going to hold your hand for you when you get out (exit care) so ultimately it should be my decision not theirs.

Many youth emphasized the importance of young people taking part and having a say in the important decisions that impact their lives while in care, and expressed annoyance that professionals and foster parents often disregard their input and opinions. For example, one youth stated anger at caseworkers "making plans behind your back and then informing you after it's done" while another youth stressed the importance of "letting youth learn from their mistakes instead of making their decisions for them." The need to let young people have some say about choices that impact their lives was a common theme among the youth participants.

> She [my caseworker] came out of nowhere. She called me up and was like, I set you up an appointment for an independent living thing, and I was, okay, you could've asked me because how do you know I even wanted to attend that? I'm just sick and tired of people telling me what to do.

Professionals also expressed concern that the foster care system, which emphasizes the safety and protection of children, may not be addressing the need to help youth aging-out of care prepare for independence.

> We [caseworkers] are making plans for them. And nobody is saying "what do you want?" Sometimes kids want things that are not in what we think is their best interest. But we don't empower them to try it and get the experience of failing. We, I think, try to protect them, and shield them from any negative experience.

Many child welfare professionals explicitly agreed that giving youth more opportunities to take responsibility and ownership for their lives is key to successful transition: "It's not telling them what to do, but helping them figure it out. Those are the things that matter." Another

caseworker remarked, "when a teen has a choice and it makes them feel they are making the decision, they're more likely to have success there." One caseworker noted:

> Their [youth] input rarely makes a difference, and they're smart enough to know that. And I think they kind of close-off. So if you don't have buy-in from the kids around their transition plans and all sorts of stuff, it just isn't going to work. And I think that's where we [caseworkers] kind of fail.

Generally foster parents agreed with youth and caseworkers that young people in care need more opportunities to control and direct their own lives: "I feel so strongly that adolescents should be empowered a little more than we tend to let them… they need to decide what they want for their lives." However, foster parents reported that they feel very restricted by foster care policies in terms of how much freedom they can let their foster children experience, and are held accountable for any mistakes the young person makes:

> My [biological] daughter will tell you that I was overprotective, and I was. But it reached a point where I realized she had to go solo—that what ever I had for her, she would have to take that out into the world and test it before it would really be hers. I don't have that luxury with foster kids because there's a different standard. We are accountable to the courts.

3.2. Coordination/collaboration

A dominant theme throughout discussion groups with professionals, parents and youth was the lack of collaboration among services. Youth are interfacing with multiple systems and the lack of communication between providers is resulting in confusion over roles, gaps in service, and in some cases, a duplication of efforts. As one youth reported:

> In order to get your needs met, you have to go to a variety of people. In order to get somebody to talk to, you have to go to your counselor. In order to get your financial aid forms filled out, you have to go to the ILP. In order to get your school clothes, you have to go to your caseworker. I mean you don't have one set of people who are meeting all your needs.

A caseworker made a similar remark, noting that without coordination "you're running around with your head chopped off." A number of foster parents commented that while foster youth often have numerous professionals involved in their lives, the lack of communication and partnership between the providers renders their services ineffective.

> I find they [foster youth] have an abundance of resources. I'll go to a meeting, and there'll be 15 people there and it's like we have these overwhelming resources. They have lawyers, and their mom has a lawyer, and they have counselors from all these different organizations, all sitting around this table, and you just have all these resources, but nothing is getting done.

3.3. Importance of relationships

Participants across the various discussion groups stressed the importance of youth having a caring, long-term relationship with someone as they move into adulthood. This was often

portrayed as more important than accessing formal services, and was described as critical in providing youth with information and support as they move into adulthood and can no longer access resources through the child welfare system. As a caseworker reflected:

> I've had the rare and wonderful pleasure of being able to have a lot of kids come back after they've left our system, and have a dialogue about what was important for them? What mattered? And what they all say to me is it's all about relationships. That whether you know how to balance a checkbook when you leave this place is less important than who you have you can call to say "I've got a checkbook, and I can't figure out how to get it to add up."

A stable, caring relationship was also described as providing much needed continuity as foster youth experience changes in other aspects of their lives. As highlighted by one parent:

> He's [a foster child] moving from here to here to here, going to a different school. And I think that is just huge, if you have somebody that's consistently there, even if it's just a foster parent. But also connecting with somebody in the community that they can just go back and that's always consistent.

Parents and professionals also discussed the influence of relationships on the self-worth of youth in care, stressing the importance it has on young people feeling valued. One caseworker, when describing what she felt was the key factor among resilient youth who had aged-out of care, stated that it was having "somebody along the line who gave a damn" and that "someone appreciating you" made the difference. The importance of a caring, stable relationship was also depicted as an important foundation of trust upon which new relationships could be formed. As a foster parent emphasized "everything evolves out of the relationship. And not only with you, but then once that relationship can happen with someone, you can help them build on others." Sadly, foster youth and alumni talked mostly about the absence of caring, stable relationships in their lives and the feelings of isolation and disconnection that they experienced as a result.

> They [caseworkers] treat you like paperwork. They don't want no one-on-one. Just like foster parents aren't supposed to get attached to the foster kids. My CASA worker got fired for getting too involved in the case. I mean they're not supposed to get attached or nothing, and that's hard to know that you can't really depend on that person to love you like you need to be loved, you know, because they're not supposed to. And that does affect a lot of your surroundings with school and everything else.

Contributing to youths' lack of significant relationships with others was their instability in foster care. Many youth described frequent changes in case workers, foster care placements and schools. Youth talked about the stress of needing to constantly adjust to new rules and expectations with every change in foster home, and how the instability in their current lives impacts their sense of self and who they are.

> I think keeping a child in one foster home rather than bouncing them around their whole lives is a really important thing… by having someone move around too much, it's not gonna show them a sense of where they need to be… they're learning all these different morals and values from all these different people so… it kind of gets them confused, so they're just kind of stuck.

Foster parents and professionals also lamented the unpredictable, insecure lives of youth in foster care and discussed how instability impacted their ability to form trusting relationships. For

example, a caseworker described the multiple losses youth experience as a result of their life experiences before and in foster care:

> They [foster youth] go through a constant state of loss. They lose their families first. Then they often lose one foster family after another for lots of times, things that have nothing to do with them. And they lose their friends. They lose their school. They lose their neighborhood, their sense of who they are and where they belong. And it's just a series of losses until finally, I think a lot of kids just feel empty.

3.4. The importance of family

A salient theme among all the participants was the importance of foster parents, who often were described as a significant influence (both positive and negative) in the current lives of youth and their planning for the future. In particular, many professionals, parents and youth stressed that foster parents could be a valuable resource in helping youth acquire and practice skills for independent living. For example, one youth suggested that foster parents "Do what you do with your own kids. When you are doing something, if you are doing your bills… bring me over and say, this is what I am paying. This is how I am doing it." One ILP provider asserted that in an ideal world, where foster parents were paid and trained appropriately, "we could eliminate the Independent Living Program, because foster parents would be doing that and that would be their job." However, several foster parents underscored their need for more training around transition before they feel comfortable taking on this role.

> I know foster parents have to take ten hours of training a year. I would make that training focus on teaching children to be responsible for themselves, preparing them in advance, because they all know what's coming. They know these kids have to move out on their own.

Caseworkers also pointed out the need for training; in addition, they emphasized the ways in which foster care policies make it difficult for foster parents to provide training and support around transition.

> From conversations I've had with foster parents, foster parents sometimes get frustrated because they get different messages from different caseworkers about what is okay to do with the kids. Like, for example, expecting the kids to do their own laundry or preparing a meal. And I think that part of that is because for the specialty of working with teens, we haven't had any kind of training package like we have for doing permanency work or CPS.

Disincentives to building youths' skills within the special rate system were cited as a particular system barrier. Currently, foster parents receive higher rates of payment for youth identified as the most impaired. Thus, if foster parents provide training and opportunities for their youths to develop skills, parents fear they may have their payments reduced. The need to restructure the special rate system to encourage skill development for foster parents and youth was described by a caseworker:

> The special rates system is messed up… I think the special rates should be based on how much the foster parent does for the kid. I mean, if we are talking about a perfect world, put bonuses in there that if the kid knows how to do his own laundry, the foster parent gets extra money for teaching them, or to successfully cook his own meal or whatever it is… whereas right now if the kid's a huge behavior problem, they get a lot of money, and as

> soon as the kid does well, we cut their money. We say you get less now because the kid's doing well. Well, what's their incentive there?

The role of the birth family in preparing for transition was another common theme. Caseworkers commented that many youth have fantasies of re-uniting with their birth parents after they are emancipated from care, regardless of a caseworker's recommendations or whether the young person has had any contact with their families of origin: "When they're out and about on their own, they'll usually hook up with them [birth parents], even if it's been years since they've seen them or heard from them" and "The teenagers know where they're at [birth parents]. They're going to find them whether you tell them they can't see them or not." Overall, professionals and youth acknowledged that birth families could be an important source of support to young people moving into adulthood, but also expressed concern that their influence could be a negative one:

> They [birth parents] still have the support and time to care and that in some instances the bio parents can be an important source of support to young people as they attempt to live on their own.

> They turn 18 and they reach back to their family, because that's the first place they reach to. And they find the supports aren't there—they just get sucked back into the old family's dysfunctional ways.

Youth also described the potential benefits and pitfalls of relying on the support of birth families during transition:

> I honestly think I could do better without my family. They cause me a lot of hard times. I honestly don't think they're there for me, even though they say they are. And they try to prepare me for my future, but yet, they don't go about it the correct way.

> You can learn a lot from them [birth family] because they've been through what you have–growing up and being on your own–like my aunties and mom. It's just not easy being on you own and stuff like that so they can help you out with struggles that you can prepare for or just stuff like that.

Indeed, because many youth are set on having a connection with their birth parents after they leave care, and the potential risks and benefits are so great, some caseworkers recommended that professionals help young people explore their relationship with their birth families before they are on their own. This would give youth the opportunity to explore and clarify the role their birth parents will have with them as adults before they transition, and develop a back-up plan if a healthy relationship with a birth parent does not seem possible. As stated by one caseworker:

> And if they [birth parents] aren't going to help, the kids got to find that out because he's got the fantasy that he was taken away from his bio family, and they didn't do anything wrong. So you have to encourage the contact because either it's going to be good for the kid, or they're going to know that there is a reason I'm not living there anymore.

Caseworkers further recommended that in instances where a foster child is not allowed to have contact with a birth parent, that the decision be re-visited as the child becomes older as immediate safety or care-taking issues are less of a concern.

> They're [birth parents] the ones who are committed… after all the foster home, those are always the ones that'll be there, so I always try to encourage contact. Because the dangers aren't there as much anymore. They're not little kids.

3.5. Normalizing the foster care experience

Being in foster care colors the experiences youth have with typical issues of adolescence, such as managing separation–individuation in the context of tenuous relationships. For example, one foster parent pointed out:

> I think any teen wants to test their boundaries and rebel against what is home and what they've grown up with. They [foster youth] don't have that solid thing. You don't have the security of testing the boundary as that of a child who's remained with the same caregiver their entire life would.

In addition, participants described the increased scrutiny youth encounter in foster care, which further differentiates them from their peers. In particular, youth expressed annoyance with the number of professionals who "are in their business" or are "interfering in their private lives." A youth sharing his frustrations reflected:

> Like, at my school, they don't understand why I have to leave early for a court hearing, and having all the meetings and appointments are time consuming. Living in a normal home without foster care, you don't have to worry about other people besides your parents taking responsibility for you, like your caseworker, or worrying about what your judge is gonna think about what you did. I mean you don't have 50 million other people looking down at you.

The sentiments of the youth were shared by several caseworkers:

> It's like they are under a microscope, even more than a normal teen… I'm writing the report every six months on a kid, and they get a copy of that report. They get to go to court… they're under a microscope on the foster parents telling me what's going on. They're under a lot more scrutiny as a teenager, as they're trying to develop themselves. They're just under this microscope.

Caseworkers stressed the need to understand the feelings and behaviors of teenagers within a developmental context, as the there may be a tendency for professionals to over-pathologize or over-react to typical teenage transgressions and experiences.

> Adolescence is a hard time for any kid, and I think sometimes we over medicate. We over react to really normal circumstances of kids. And we need to look at what is normal development… so when a child says, "I'm sad", the foster parent doesn't need to call the caseworker and say, "Let's get some counseling." How about "why are you sad?" Let's sit down and talk about why you're sad."

Participants were also troubled by the sudden and complete transition many foster youth experience, which they described as developmentally inappropriate in today's society. As one parent argued "Children who are in foster care already have some things that are going to be very difficult to overcome just by the nature of it. And to assume that they can go out at 18 and take care of themselves is a real mistake."

In addition to emphasizing the need for a more gradual transition, participants underscored the importance of foster care having a "revolving door." Youth were generally described as eager to get out of care and direct their own lives. Often however, they did not fully realize the challenges of adulthood until they experienced it first hand. Typically, it is at this point that young adults recognize the usefulness of the resources they were eligible for while in care (e.g. case management, living with a foster parent), but unfortunately these supports are no longer available to them as adults. As stated by one caseworker "There's always going to be those kids that say, 'I don't care. I just want to go.' But if they can go out and fall on their face and still come back, that would make all the difference." While caseworkers recognized the importance of providing youth with a safety net as they exit care, they described a system that precludes them from providing support after a young person is emancipated:

> Almost all of my kids will tell you, "As soon as I'm 18 I'm gone", but then some of them do crawl back. And that's part of my frustration—some of the caseworkers that have done good work and have a relationship going, that when those kids call, it's eating into their time with the new kids that come in. Our system isn't set up to give them credit for doing that work.

3.6. Independent living program experiences

The experiences participants had with the Independent Living program (ILP) were extremely mixed. A few youth were assigned ILP case managers, and they described this one-on-one assistance as helpful. However, it was reported that there is a wait-list for ILP case mangers and most youth indicated that they had only attended a few classes or were not actively participating in the ILP. Caseworkers and foster parents also described wait lists for ILP case managers, and felt classes alone were not sufficient as they did not provide the individualized transition support youth needed and were not relevant enough to the real world setting. For example, a foster parent shared the following story:

> I had a young man that's with the Independent Living Program. And he got a good job and he was going to one of his first weeks of work at Safeway [a grocery store]. And anyway he told me he couldn't go because independent living told him he needed to come to this class. And so I called up the independent living counselor and I said what's going on? I said we all agreed that he would get a job and all that. And I said what is the class about? And she said it's about how to keep your job. This is true.

Participants emphasized that the current nature and level of ILP services are not sufficient to meet the transition needs of foster youth. As mentioned earlier, participants also stressed that in an ideal world, foster parents would give the transition support and training that ILPs are funded to provide. This would allow the support to be offered in a more naturalistic setting and would avoid introducing one more professional into the lives of foster youth. However, participants acknowledged that until foster parents receive the training and support to take this role on, the ILP is a necessary resource.

3.7. Issues related to disability

Participants made it clear that youth who experience a disability face additional barriers in their transition from foster care to independent life. In particular, professionals and foster parents

expressed concern that youth with disabilities, because of a lack of accommodations, may not be able to access services available to other foster youth, like the ILP. For example, one foster parent reported that:

> I had a youth who was 18 or 19 years old and he didn't qualify for DD (Developmental Disability) services. He was just a little bit too high functioning. And they put him in the Independent Living Program and he bombed out of that and got in trouble and got kicked out of that program and now he's just kind of out there. He's homeless basically.

An additional barrier facing youth with disabilities appears to be a lack of foster parent training, which can increase family stress and rates of placement disruption. Professionals noted that many foster parents are "not capable of supporting particular needs of students with disabilities", "that they're good hearted people but lacking the skills with special needs kids" and that "children with disabilities are placed in the homes where the parents or caregivers aren't trained." Disruption in foster placement frequently results in a move to a new school and creates yet another challenge. Participants emphasized that a change in educational setting may have a greater impact on youth with disabilities, as their special education needs may be unknown and go un-served in the new school placement. A caseworker stated:

> It's a mess. You have a kid with an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) where one school knew that kid, knew what the IEP was, then you have a whole different set of staff–different teachers and everything–and getting people to follow what the IEP says, or even find it, is a problem.

Another concern mentioned by participants was the lack of information many foster parents had regarding special education and their rights and responsibilities in that process. As stated by an educator:

> Generically, I don't see foster parents as really understanding their role [in special education] when they come to a review function. When we try to address things, particularly if there's an IEP, I find that foster parents often aren't able to respond or answer questions.

School staff acknowledged that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that parents be involved in special education planning, and that an educational surrogate must be appointed by the school district when a biological parent is unavailable (e.g. as is the case when a child is the "ward of the state"). However, the educators disclosed that this often does not happen or there is confusion about the process: As shared by one teacher:

> We may or may not know that they're considered to be the surrogate, and sometimes we get both parents–the biological and the foster parents–and sometimes we don't know who it is [the educational surrogate].

Participants also expressed worry that special education is not adequately teaching foster youth the skills or academics they need to become successful adults. According to several caseworkers participating in a discussion group:

> I think for the kids who are bright but have behavior problems, an extreme problem for them is the drop-out rate, because what they do is get stuck in these behavior classrooms… and they are bored out of their skulls because everything is geared to the lowest common denominator. So these kids with behaviors can have incredible abilities, but they need

> something geared toward them… and so more individualization for kids, to see them where they are.

Finally, many parents and professionals worried about who would help foster youth with disabilities access services as adults. As one caseworker wondered:

> With the kids that do have a disability, who's going to be their voice and their advocate? We can do so much as a caseworker, but who else do they have as an adult that's going to fight for what they need, and let them know where the supports are and how to access things on their own… kids are falling through the cracks and not understanding it on their own.

4. Discussion

This study gathered qualitative information about the experiences of youth transitioning out of foster care into adulthood. Youth currently in foster care, foster care alumni, foster parents, caseworkers, ILP staff, educators and other various professionals involved in child welfare shared their knowledge, opinions and ideas regarding the challenges facing foster youth and recommendations for improving their transition to adult life. Their feedback regarding what is working and what needs to change suggests that a flexible, individualized and creative approach to transition is needed if youth are going to overcome the substantial obstacles to successful adulthood that lay in their path. While the passage of FCIA and PSSFA has generated a modest increase in funding to support the transition of foster youth, there is substantial risk and concern that most of the dollars are going to support a provider-driven system where youth must fit into services and programs that are not relevant or are too diluted to make a substantial impact in their lives. Participants expressed concern that youth in foster care have little opportunity to control and direct their own lives, and that services cannot take the place of meaningful relationships. It was also stressed that families have an important role to play in transition, and that being in foster care can rob youth of developmentally typical experiences. The Independent Living Program, while having potential, was described as being seriously inadequate for many youth preparing youth for adulthood. Indeed, it represents yet another provider that youth must interact with, and the multiple professionals in the lives of foster youth actually contribute to a lack of collaboration and confusion about roles between different systems and agencies. Youth with disabilities face still more obstacles (such as the challenges associated with being in special education) as well as being differentially impacted by the difficulties experienced by all foster youth (such as instability in foster care placements). In summary, information from this study indicates that if limited resources are to truly have a meaningful impact, then bold, innovative strategies must be considered and evaluated; the extraordinary experiences of these youth require extraordinary practices rather than typical services.

Within the field of special education, which has been focusing on transition for almost 30 years, some innovative transition programs have been conceptualized, employed and tested with positive outcomes and model demonstration efforts have identified a number of strategies for promoting successful transition. Many of these same practices were described by the focus group participants as necessary ingredients for successful transition and can be categorized into the following areas: (a) student involvement in personally relevant, individualized transition planning (Halpern, Yovanoff, Doren, & Benz, 1995; Powers et al., 2001); (b) student participation and engagement in general education, including extracurricular activities (Halpern

et al., 1995; Sands, Bassett, Lehmann, & Spencer, 1998); (c) support for student participation in postsecondary education (Clark, 1990, 1993; HEATH Resource Center, 1993; U.S. Department of Education, 1994); (d) student-centered career planning and community work experience in career areas chosen by the student (Hagner & Dileo, 1993); (f) instruction in skills such as self-advocacy, independent living, and self-determination (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997; Powers et al., 2001); (g) mentorship experiences/positive relationship with an adult (Campbell-Whatley, 2001; Powers, Sowers, & Stevens, 1995); (h) support for family involvement in transition planning and preparation (Halpern et al., 1995; Morningstar, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 1995); and (i) interagency collaboration (Hasazi, Furney, & DeStefano, 1999). Currently the authors are implementing a study, entitled My Life, which is designed to support the transition of youth with disabilities in foster care using many of these best practices. Key components of the model include providing youth with skills and information for decision making and self-direction, identifying opportunities for youth to express their self-determination and helping youth learn how to direct support from others. The outcomes of youth participating in the intervention will be compared to those of youth involved in supports offered by a typical ILP program.

Within the adult disability field, the importance of allocating funds to directly support individuals is gaining recognition, so that they are the ones determining what services and supports they receive from whom (Powers, Sowers & Singer, 2006). Along with having individualized budgets based on a person-directed plan, each individual can access a single personal agent or broker who has a primary allegiance to the person rather than the service system, and who assists him or her to learn about life options, access or create supports, and develop self direction and support direction capacities. Emphasis is placed on consolidating funds from multiple sources to support the individual's goals.

This approach has the advantage of supporting the self-determination of the individual; it also creates a competitive market where programs must be responsive to the needs of youth or their services will not be purchased. It would give foster youth the flexibility of utilizing resources to engage informal community or family based support, such as the involvement of birth or foster parents in transition planning. Ideally, youth would have the option of setting aside some of their funds in a rainy-day account, to be used even after they have been emancipated from foster care if they encounter an unexpected bump in the road.

Utilization of self-directed support approaches with foster youth would necessitate significant changes to the current system. For example, multiple funding sources for transition that inefficiently support numerous programs across education, child welfare, employment and rehabilitation systems could be consolidated and made available to support a single integrated transition plan. The efforts of various personnel, such as school transition staff, child welfare caseworkers and independent living program staff could be paired down to connect youth with a single ally who works holistically with a youth during a transition process that begins during foster care placement and phases out as the youth becomes established in adult life and/or accesses adult services. Finally, flexibility would need to be infused into the entire system enabling youth, their foster parents and their allies to carryout those activities identified as important for achieving each youth's individualized plan, and to receive the training that they need to fulfill their roles. As summed up by one youth participant: "I don't live life for tomorrow. Tomorrow is another problem, so I just live for today." The centerpiece of transition planning and preparation should be about young people working toward and achieving their hopes and dreams for the future, and not simply a continuation of "business as usual" within a system reluctant to make bold improvements in how we prepare young people for adulthood.

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