

**EXAMINING POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION PERCEPTIONS OF  
FORMER FOSTER CARE YOUTH**

by

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Nationally, youth with experiences in the foster care system are enrolling and graduating from postsecondary education institutions at rates that are far behind their non-foster peers, with less than 10% earning associate's degrees or higher (Rios & Rocco, 2014; Wolanin, 2005). This study examines the perceptions of former foster care youth to gain a deeper understanding of how they perceive the role of postsecondary education, as well as their potential to succeed. Foster care youth are the most important stakeholder in terms of their care, yet their voice is the least present in the existing literature.

The qualitative design of the study merges Emerging Adulthood Theory (Arnett 2000, 2007) and the concept of social capital (Coleman, 1988) to frame the priorities of older foster care youth as they prepare to transition out of the foster care system. Study participants included eight former foster care youth, ages 18-21. Hermeneutic phenomenology is the methodological approach utilized to underscore commonalities between the lived experiences of the study participants, as well as how they discern the significance of postsecondary education. Data was collected through in-depth, in-person, semi-structured interviews and coded for themes.

Major findings illustrate: (1) complex family dynamics that greatly influence the lived experiences of foster care youth; (2) long-term mental, emotional, and behavioral health effects

of multiple transitions and placements; (3) deteriorating outlook on school based upon K-12 educational experiences after entering foster care; (4) unclear pathways, or general disinterest, in postsecondary education immediately upon exiting the foster care system; and (5) priorities, as well as self-defining success, after leaving foster care. The theoretical, research and practical implications encourage care providers and educators to reconsider the traditional approaches that have been utilized when working with and supporting foster care youth.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

*“Throughout the foster care system, teenagers are viewed as delinquents, victims, or mental health patients, rather than students, sons, and daughters. They are thought of as potential homeless shelter residents, prisoners, and welfare recipients, not as future college students, employees, business owners or professionals. This perception has been all-consuming and self-fulfilling.”*  
(From *Reversing the Failure of the Foster Care System*, Krebs & Pitcoff, 2004, p. 361)

Currently, there are more than 400,000 children and youth in the United States foster care system, with more than 23,000 older youth aging out on an annual basis (US Department of Education, 2016). While the individual experiences of the youth in foster care vary, one commonality is that many are placed in out-of-home care arrangements during their time in the foster care system (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). For many foster youth, their lived experience is marred by physical and emotional trauma, educational instability, multiple home placements, lack of support, and a variety of other inconsistencies that impair their well-being and quality of life (Schroeter, et al., 2015). These youth do not leave these experiences at the door when they enter foster care. These life-altering experiences are deeply rooted in their everyday lives and influence every aspect of their lives both inside and outside of the foster care system.

Once youth enter foster care, multiple entities are entrusted with making decisions and providing care that is in the best interest of foster youth due to court termination of parental rights. As exemplified in the Krebs and Pitcoff (2004) quotation at the beginning of the chapter, older foster youth are frequently and systematically written off, through no fault of their own, if

providers approach their work with these youth from a deficit perspective. For foster youth, fragile relationships with adults can be the result of varying levels of maltreatment they have experienced, including "physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, death of a parent, and/or abandonment which resulted in their removal from their homes of origin" (Stott, 2013, p. 219). If providers hold negative perspectives of the older foster youths' promise, this can permeate and impair the attitudes that youth hold about themselves and their capacity to achieve and succeed as they transition out of the foster care system.

## **1.1 BACKGROUND**

### **1.1.1 Key Terminology**

The following select terms serve as a point of reference to better understand fundamental concepts as they relate to the foster care experience for older youth. Although the federal government provides guidelines for states receiving federal funds to support foster care youth, states establish individual policies and legislation to carry out this work. The following terminology as defined by the Pennsylvania Juvenile Law Center (2010) is relevant for this study:

Age Out/Emancipate: Judicial emancipation is a court order that says an individual under 18 years of age has the rights of an adult; the termination of court jurisdiction over youth in care.

Board Extension: When youth stay in care after the age of 18. Under Pennsylvania law youth are entitled to remain in care until age 21 if they are in a course or program of treatment or instruction.

Child Welfare System: The government system that is responsible for taking care of children who are abused or neglected, or whose parents are not able to take care of them.

Dependency: When the court finds a youth requires some care or supervision by the county children and youth agency because the youth has been abused or neglected, does not have someone to care for them, is habitually truant from school, or is determined to be ungovernable.

Substitute (Dependent or Foster) Care: Youth living in out-of-home placements other than with their biological parents.

### **1.1.2 Transition from Foster Care – Guiding Policies**

For some youth in care, services are abruptly terminated on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday or the point at which they reach majority age to leave care in their respective state. This moment simultaneously opens and closes doors that both provide and restrict the level of support that these youth grew accustomed to during their time in care. Atkinson (2008) noted, "no one expects adulthood to occur overnight, but that is exactly what happens to youths exiting the foster care system" (p. 183). Some of the provisions these youth no longer have access to include caseworkers, social workers, healthcare provisions, housing, financial assistance, and care provided by foster families and group homes if those were a part of their arrangements (Atkinson, 2008). The foster care system is designed to offer minimal post-emancipation transitional planning for the youth who take advantage of these services, but there is a permanent

loss of some of the resources that dissipate when older foster youth age out of care. The level of preparation and forethought to this process could affect how these youth envision postsecondary education as a part of their future planning.

#### **1.1.2.1 Transition plans.**

Federal law requires child welfare services to develop a transition plan for youth exiting foster care during the 90-day period before the youth's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, or the minimum age at which they will age out of the foster care system as determined by the state (United States Department of Education, 2016). In the state of Pennsylvania, prior to "being discharged from care youth are to have a plan that includes a safe and stable place to live, a job, financial aid for education, health insurance, medical and/or mental health treatment providers, emergency contacts, healthcare records, and school records" (Juvenile Law Center, 2010, p.5).

For foster youth who desire to attend college, transition planning needs to happen much sooner than three months before they exit the foster care system if they want to increase their likelihood of being accepted to college and being prepared for this transition. The truncated planning timeframe is an inherent flaw in the transition plan requirement. Ideally, conversations about postsecondary education planning would take place no later than the onset of the student's senior year of high school. If a foster care youth's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday happens to fall towards the end of their high school career, many important college planning conversations will be delayed and will have an adverse effect on the postsecondary transition experience. As foster care youth prepare to exit foster care, the transition plan is one of the final formalized pieces of documentation that they receive from staff associated with the foster care system (US Department of Education, 2016).

### **1.1.2.2 Independent Living Program (ILP) services.**

In 1999, the United States Congress passed the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act that expanded ILP services that were created in the mid-1980s. The federal government gives flexible funding to be used on the state level for older foster care youth to provide services such as financial support, life skills training, and other support. ILP services should be customized to supply youth with "educational assistance, vocational training, mentoring, preventative health services, and counseling" as they transition out of care and into independent living (Fernandes, 2006, p. 3).

ILP services are designed to extend aspects of the services that were provided to youth while in foster care, prolonging care to include ages 19-23 (US Department of Education, 2016). For most ILP programs in the state of Pennsylvania, these services are extended to youth in care who are 16-21 years old, even if they are no longer in foster care. ILP can serve as a valuable resource for former foster care youth who wish to extend many of the provisions provided by foster care beyond their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. These services can also provide an additional layer of support as these youth transition to adulthood.

## **1.2 PROBLEM AREA**

The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) was established to collect information on youth who receive ILP support on the state level. In 2012, NYTD released its first Data Brief that provided outcome measures and related data to better understand how former foster care youth fare in their transition to adulthood across six areas: financial self-sufficiency, educational attainment, connections with adults, homelessness, high-risk behaviors, and access to health

insurance (Administration for Children & Families, 2012). Since that time, cohort data has been collected to provide insight on salient transition concerns for former foster care youth at ages 17, 19, and 21. Multiple factors influence how older foster care youth formulate their perceptions of postsecondary education, both before and during their transition to adulthood. The NYTD outcomes of educational attainment, high-risk behaviors, and connections with adults are explored to better understand issues related to older foster care youth during this transition phase, which can also affect their perceptions of postsecondary education.

### **1.2.1 Educational Attainment**

Today, achieving a high school diploma or General Equivalency Degree (GED) is a minimum standard for postsecondary education pursuits. Only 5% of former foster care youth reported earning a vocational certificate or license, and only 3% reported earning an associate's degree or higher (National Youth in Transition Database, 2016). Regarding K-12 education, compared to youth in the general population, foster care youth are more likely to perform below grade level, twice as likely to repeat a grade, and far more likely to experience out-of-school suspension, expulsions, and high drop-out rates (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004; Day, Dworsky, Fogarty & Damashek, 2011; Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2012; Vacca, 2008). There is a grave need to explore reasons and factors that affect the educational experience for youth with experiences in foster care to better understand issues that influence their engagement, performance and achievement.

#### **1.2.1.1 K-12 educational placement instability.**

Educational placement instability and excessive absenteeism due to frequent moving and transfers continue to be among the greatest detriments to foster care youths' educational

progress. On average, foster care youth enter dependent care between 11 and 14 years old and experience a range of seven to 13 different foster care placements. This amounts to youth moving, on average, between placements every 6-12 months (Atkinson, 2008; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Schroeter, et al., 2015; Stott, 2013; Wolanin, 2005). Consequently, foster care youth attend an average of nine different schools by the time they reach 18 years of age, amounting to a loss of between 28 – 42 months of educational instruction (Atkinson, 2008; Kelly, 2000). This instability can affect how foster care youth view the role and importance of education at all levels, as the level of absenteeism can tarnish how these students view school as a priority.

#### **1.2.1.2 Postsecondary aspirations.**

Regarding postsecondary education, youth in foster care are often dismissed as students without the potential to thrive (Hines, Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005; Rios & Rocco, 2014). More than 70% of foster youth have aspirations to attend college, but only 20% enroll in postsecondary education (Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004; Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen & Colvin, 2011; Nixon & Jones, 2007). Less than 10% of these students will persist to earn postsecondary education degrees (Hallett & Westland, 2015; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Wolanin, 2005). Due to overwhelming caseloads, administrative obligations, and other limitations, caseworkers and social workers are not typically actively engaged in the postsecondary education application process for older foster care youth, nor do they sufficiently explain education benefits to available foster care youth who are close to emancipating in a timely fashion (Casey Family Programs, 2004; Cox, 2013; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005).

Older foster youth exit the foster care system with disjointed educational experiences and the adults and providers entrusted with their care all too often do not set high expectations for

these youth to succeed in the higher education environment (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). Consequently, these youth can begin to internalize the low expectations that are set for them, which makes it difficult for many older foster care youth who transition from foster care to have a positive attitude towards postsecondary education, and perhaps limit the ways in which they view their potential to thrive in this environment (Hines, Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005).

### **1.2.2 High-Risk Behaviors**

The National Youth in Transition Database (2016) collects information on three high-risk behaviors that may impede former foster care youth in their transition to adulthood. These behaviors include substance abuse, incarceration, and parenthood. By the age of 17, over half of foster care youth reported a history that involved at least one of the aforementioned high-risk behaviors, including 28% who are referred for substance abuse assessment or counseling, 37% who are incarcerated at some point, and 7% who have birthed or fathered a child (National Youth in Transition Database, 2016). Unfortunately, these statistics align with the "all-consuming and self-fulfilling" provider perceptions that are highlighted in the Krebs and Pitcoff (2004) quotation at the beginning of the chapter. Many of these youth may be pre-dispositioned to these cycles of high-risk behaviors due to hereditary and/or exposure to environmental issues that condone these types of actions (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; McMillen, Vaugh, & Shook, 2008; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Zetlin & Weinberg).

Although a past that involves high-risk behaviors will not prevent former foster care youth from attending college, it is entirely possible that these youth will need higher levels of support to counter some of the barriers to postsecondary education that these high-risk behaviors might pose. Foster youth providers can help to combat, instead of perpetuating, the bleak

outlook that is often forecasted onto these youth by providing information and support that encourages them to make positive choices that can prepare them for postsecondary education. Connecting these youth with a caring adult who is invested in their future could be the difference maker that steers them towards pursuing postsecondary education.

### **1.2.3 Connections with Adults**

According to the National Youth in Transition Database (2016), "establishing a positive, consistent and lasting relationship with at least one adult is a critical component in ensuring youth make a successful transition from foster care to adulthood" (p. 4). Wolanin (2005) suggested that children gain skills and competencies to prepare for life as an adult by emulating actions of adults whom they have sustained close and caring relationships with, most often their parents. However, this is less likely to be the case for youth in foster care, as their primary reasons for entering the foster care system are due to issues of abuse and neglect from their parents. Wolanin (2005) goes on to indicate that familial connections for foster care youth are often "replaced by a kaleidoscope of strangers – law enforcement officers, social workers, judges, teachers, counselors, and foster parents" (p. 12). Communication between and among these systems is complex and often lacking, which can complicate processes and cause additional stress and trauma on foster care youth starting at a young age (Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2012). While not all of these relationships are sustained after youth relocate or exit the foster care system, these adults have the potential to be positive influencers and critical change agents in the lives of foster care youth.

### **1.2.3.1 Mentorship.**

Relationship building and networking, both formal and informal, are key components of the adulthood and college transition processes (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott, Jr. & Tracy, 2010). Depending on the experiences of a foster care youth, they may not have an opportunity to build sustained relationships that withstand multiple placements and frequent moves, in addition to possible turnover of staff within foster care agencies and school systems. This is compounded by the fact that it may take these youth longer to open up to adults and administrators if they have been mistreated in the past, as trust is an essential element to establishing relationships (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Although in a majority of the states foster care youth age out of the system at 18 years of age, many of them have not reached a level of self-sufficiency or resourcefulness that will sustain them as independent adults (Dworsky & Pérez, 2010; Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott, Jr. & Tracy, 2010; Peters, Dworsky, Courtney & Pollack, 2009; Vacca, 2008).

Due to frequent transitions, it is quite possible that emancipated foster youth will leave the system with broken or non-existent meaningful relationships with adults to help them transition to adulthood and/or life as a college student. Relationship structures such as presence, frequency of contact, and quality of contact matter. These deep levels of mentorship, created both before and after the postsecondary education transition, can promote resilience and positive development for former foster care youth (Munson & McMillen, 2008; Osterling & Hines, 2006; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). While there are a number of positive and supportive relationships and interactions between foster care youth, school teachers, educational administrators, and foster care professionals, the negative exchanges between these entities have a deep and lasting

effect on blocking opportunities for these youth to take advantage of the postsecondary educational experience (Rios & Rocco, 2014).

### **1.3 PURPOSE OF DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE**

There is a need to deeply explore factors that can affect postsecondary enrollment for former foster care youth, including those factors that have implications on how these youth perceive the role and process of continuing their educational attainment beyond the high school diploma or GED. Much of the existing research captures the perspectives and viewpoints of foster care youth enrolled in primary and secondary education, adults responsible for providing care for foster youth, or through the reflective lens of former foster care youth who are enrolled or formerly enrolled students in postsecondary education institutions. This dissertation in practice provides a platform for former foster care youth ages 18-21 to share their perspectives on postsecondary education. Subsequently, these narratives shed light on the disparate gap between the large percentage of foster care youth who aspire to pursue postsecondary education and the low numbers who persist and graduate.

Foster care youth are the most important stakeholders in terms of their care, yet their voice is the least present in the literature. As chapter two shows, there is a void in the literature which reflects a lack of insight from the perspectives of recently emancipated foster care youth who are in the midst of transitioning from care. In order to provide the best level of support possible to empower these youth to consider postsecondary education, researchers need to create a space in the literature that honors their voice in order to gain a deeper understanding of their needs and perspectives.

## **2.0 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

In this section, I review aspects of the literature that frame the need for greater inclusion of foster care youth voice in decision-making processes that affect both their transition out of foster care, and postsecondary education planning. As older foster care youth prepare to leave care and transition to adulthood, factors such as barriers to postsecondary education enrollment, transition priorities, and resilience are salient as they age out of care and begin to plan for the next phase of their lives. The theory of emerging adulthood, combined with the concept of social capital, are also explored as a lens to situate the significant developmental and practical priorities for these youth during this period when they consider the possibilities of postsecondary education.

### **2.1 RELATED LITERATURE**

#### **2.1.1 Barriers to Postsecondary Enrollment**

Zetlin, Weinberg and Kimm (2005) collected data through the use of archival records and documentation from social worker foster care youth case files. They focused on the relationship between information shared between the social workers and educational liaisons within the school system to better understand the educational needs and performance of the foster care youth. Over a period of 18 months, pre- and post-intervention data was collected from case files

and social workers for 307 foster care youth. The study findings indicated that social workers that received training and had access to an education liaison had increased knowledge about the school system and were more likely to gather current educational data on the foster youth, as well as comment on educational needs in the foster youth's case files. A strength of the study is the focus on both the social worker/child welfare agency and educational support systems of the foster care youth. This study is relevant to the dissertation in practice for several reasons. Proper and detailed record keeping and case file notes are essential for seamless transitional care and support for foster care youth, who often have multiple placements during their time in care (Atkinson, 2008; Stott, 2013). Incomplete and outdated paperwork can be detrimental to the educational transitions for these youth and can add to the barriers that they often experience if their intake and assessment is delayed due to communication and documentation errors.

While research from the provider perspective has its place and merits in the care of foster youth, in order to expose the root of the challenges and barriers faced by these youth, it is imperative that their voices are intentionally sought and included in the research about their experiences. Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek and Fogarty (2012) acknowledged that "among foster care youth, the voices of young people experiencing or on the cusp of experiencing the transition from high school to college have been conspicuously absent from this research" (p. 1009). To this end, their study examined challenges faced by youth transitioning from high school to college. Forty-three high school and college students across the state of Michigan who either were currently or previously in foster care participated in two forums with state policymakers to inform them of barriers they faced completing high school and accessing college. Participants gave testimonials to legislators and representatives from workforce

development, higher education, corrections, public health, mental health, business, the courts, human services, K-12 education, and other special interest groups.

After the forums, transcripts from the testimonials were transcribed, and eight major themes emerged that reflected what the current and former foster care youth identified to be barriers to their postsecondary success. These barriers included: 1.) lack of stable relationships with caring adults, 2.) desire for competent and available teachers, 3.) teacher flexibility and sensitivity to their special needs, 4.) basic unmet school-related needs, 5.) denied opportunities for afterschool and extracurricular activities, 6.) concerns of personal safety both in and out of school, 7.) access to appropriate mental health services, and 8.) more support and independent living skills training for those aging out of foster care. This study is valuable in that, while not exclusive, it included the voices of foster care youth who were embarking on the transition from high school to college. These are the youth who are approaching the point where they will age out of the foster care system and begin to transition into adulthood and postsecondary education. Related studies that focus on postsecondary education needs and barriers for youth in transition include former foster care youth who are enrolled in college and are on the other side of the transition, which captures their reflective, versus active, thoughts (see Hines, Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005; Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2012).

Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek and Fogarty (2012) connect to the Rios and Rocco (2014) study that examined factors that influenced the educational pathways to college for former foster care youth. The authors indicated, "What is particularly needed is data that reveal, from the emerging adults' perspective, the factors that support and hinder their educational journeys toward enrollment in postsecondary institutions" (Rios & Rocco, 2014, p. 228). In this study, 24 college students who grew up in foster care were interviewed to learn about their

perspectives and related factors that impacted their college transition process. This research connects to the study as it specifically addresses the high school preparation and experiences of foster care youth and their needs during the transition phase of high school senior to college freshman.

Two major themes emerged from the interviews: academic barriers and academic supports. Within each of the themes, barriers and supports were identified based upon four levels: school-related, foster care-related, community/peer, and internal. Significant barriers included: non-empathetic teachers and administrators, lack of academic rigor, uninformed caseworkers, bad foster care placement families, abusive peers, and internalized anger. Major supports included: caring teachers and counselors, stable school placement, education-minded foster parents, education-savvy mentors, and personal perseverance.

The identification of barriers to postsecondary success for older foster care youth can be monumental as they begin to transition out of foster care and into this era of young adulthood. Additionally, if detected early in the transition process, support and resources can be provided to help youth persist past the barrier, instead of allowing it to divert or halt their future success. In order to identify these barriers on the student level, student voices and perspectives should be included in the research, as well as the problem-solving, phases. By including their voices, foster care youth are given the opportunity to have an active role in their care as they prepare to age out of the system. If such opportunities are not created, there will continue to be a steep learning curve for older foster care youth once they age out of care and transition to advocating for themselves as young adults.

### **2.1.2 Postsecondary Education Transition**

Early exposure to postsecondary education options can help expand opportunities for foster care youth after they age out of the foster care system. In order for foster care youth to successfully transition to postsecondary education, it is essential to connect them with campus support and resources before they enroll. Dworsky and Pérez (2010) examined campus support systems that were designed to provide intentional resources, including financial and academic, to students who aged out of the foster care system. Telephone interviews of 45-60 minutes were conducted with 10 administrators from campus support programs in California and Washington. Additionally, a web-based survey, focusing on their perceptions and experiences with the support programs on their respective campuses, was completed by 98 students. This research design provides an opportunity for multiple layers of foster care student support to be explored simultaneously. The college administrator perspective, alongside and not instead of, the student participant's perspective provides a more robust exploration of the gaps and opportunities that exist with improving support for foster care students through this program. A strength of the study is the multiple layers of data that was collected which included input from both students and administrators who are connected with the program.

In their study, Kirk and Day (2011) detailed the Michigan Educational Opportunities for Youth in Care (MEOYIC) program that was established at Michigan State University in 2008. This residential camp was designed to provide resources and services to better prepare foster care youth who are aging out of the system with plans to attend college. Interviews were conducted with program staff in 2008, and separate focus groups were held with the 38 foster youth program participants. Foster care youth were also given a questionnaire to collect demographic data and ask questions about attitudes and perceptions about higher education. This study is

valuable as it showcases a model that college campuses can implement to help transitioning high school foster students become acclimated to living independently prior to college matriculation. The MEOYIC residential camp was designed to better prepare foster care youth transitioning from both foster care and high school to college.

Major themes that emerged from the focus groups included aspects of the camp that the youth deemed most beneficial, such as personal life skills and educational development, experiential learning and development, and leadership by foster care alumni (a majority of the college-aged camp counselors were former foster care youth attending college at MSU). Regarding the transition process, this research underscores the importance of enlisting former foster care youth who are enrolled in college to help provide assistance and serve as peer mentors for youth as they transition out of the system. There could be a mutual benefit to this relationship. The former foster care youth in college are provided the opportunity to give back to younger foster care youth in the system by serving as role models, and current foster care youth could be inspired by seeing their peers with experiences in foster care who are thriving in the postsecondary education setting.

Another aspect of older foster care youths' transition from care is their involvement with independent living programs, which provides resources and services that are tailored to meet the needs of youth who are transitioning from foster care. Lemon, Hines and Merdinger (2005) analyzed the role of independent living programs for foster care youth. These programs assist foster care youth transitioning from the system by equipping them with independent living skills and related support that would prove beneficial in their adult lives. Two levels of analysis were provided as a part of a larger Pathways to College for Former Foster Youth study. First, a comparative analysis using survey data from 81 foster care youth who were enrolled in ILPs

while in foster care as compared to 113 foster care youth who were not. Students on 11 targeted state university campuses were mailed a self-administered questionnaire. Second, an ethnographic analysis was conducted on the interview data gathered from 9 independent living program coordinators from 9 different counties in California were interviewed as well.

Three primary recommendations emerged from the data analysis, which suggested ways in which independent living services may be more beneficial to youth: 1.) the establishment of strong and supportive connections between the independent living program worker and foster care youth extended beyond the mere acquisition of independent living skills, 2.) collaborations with foster/group home/kinship care parent is essential, and 3.) increased educational services focused on postsecondary education are needed. These recommendations demonstrate the benefits of a multi-pronged and multi-layered approach to working with foster care youth in transition to ensure that there is continuity in their care.

Geenen and Powers (2007) reinforce the importance of including multiple entities in the transition support and planning for older foster care youth, which also includes input from the foster care youth themselves. The purpose of their study was to gather information about the experiences of foster youth transitioning to adulthood from multiple perspectives: the youth themselves, foster parents and foster care professionals. Ten focus groups were conducted with a sample of foster youth, foster parents and 40 professionals. Separate focus groups were held for each constituent group, and each session was recorded and transcribed verbatim using a court reporter.

Seven qualitative themes emerged regarding the participants' experiences with the foster youth to adulthood transition process: self-determination, coordination/collaboration, the importance of relationships and family, normalizing the foster care experience, the independent

living program, and disability-related issues. There was a consistent recommendation for more personalized and individualized services that catered to the individual needs of foster care youth instead of comprehensive services designed to address the needs of foster care youth more broadly. It is evident from the research that for the transition of older foster care youth from dependency to adulthood, multiple levels of support and input, including that of the foster care youth, should be incorporated during the transition planning process.

### **2.1.3 Resilience**

Hines, Merdinger and Wyatt (2005) define resilience as "the process by which individuals achieve adaptive functioning in the face of adversity" (p. 381). Youth with experiences in the foster care system have an increased risk of being exposed to adverse situations, including maltreatment, parental abuse and neglect, turbulence stemming from multiple school and home placements, numerous caretaker transitions, poverty, and lack of contact with birth family/parents among other circumstances (Hines, Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005). As such, the level of resilience that foster youth build up over time depends on their threshold to respond and adapt to the many challenging situations that most have endured during their time in care.

It is important to explore foster care youth narratives, and the inclusion of their voice as it relates to gaining a better understanding of how resilience plays a role in their lived experiences. Thomas (2014) uses thematic narrative analysis to increase awareness of the foster care youth as subjects, and not objects, of their experiences in the foster care system. Through analyzing 17 stories of former foster care youth who shared their stories on a public website, three pervasive identities of victim, survivor, and victor emerged to connect the shared experiences. The stories ranged from 17 to 2,304 words ( $M=537$ ), and the author was careful to preserve the authenticity

of the youths' stories by not editing for grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc.; only removing identifying information. Eight stories were characterized as *victim*, and abuse was a central theme of these youths' experiences. These youth spoke of being verbally, mentally, physically and sexually abused and mistreated by family members, foster families. The abuse has had lasting effects on these former foster youth since leaving the foster care system, as many described how the victimization of their experiences in care still affected their daily lives.

Five of the former foster care youths' stories were categorized as *survivor*, as they were able to share their stories from the perspective of "living to tell the tale" (Thomas, 2014, p. 88). While victimization permeated the survivors' stories, it was not the "end of the story" for them (Thomas, 2014, p. 88). These youth overcome the abuse they endured while in foster care and were able to visualize opportunities of a better life outside of the foster care system. Though the survivors wrote about feelings of being scared, lonely, and unworthy, they also described letting go of their past so that they can embrace their future. The final four foster former foster youth stories shared the identity of *victor*, as they spoke of achieving success and maintained agency over their experiences, despite the hardships they endured in the foster care system. These stories reflected how the difficulties they endured provided them with the skills to survive, thrive, and achieve in life after care. This study is significant as it was highly qualitative and included the unaltered voices of foster care youth. The research provides a greater sense of the lived experiences of foster care through first-person accounts of the youth who shared their stories. This study is deeply connected to resiliency as it sheds light on the multiple layers of physical, psychological, and emotional abuse that youth frequently endure in foster care. These traumatic experiences can cause long-term effects that, depending on the individual, can persist long after they exit the foster care system.

Daining and DePanfilis (2007) explored factors that contribute to the resiliency of youth who transition from out-of-home care into adulthood. These youth prematurely encounter the abrupt responsibility of being self-sufficient with limited resources when compared to their counterparts who have family support to assist with their transition into adulthood. Secondary analysis was used to examine the resilience of the former foster care youth. One hundred youth aged 18 years or older who did not reenter the foster care system participated in a computer-assisted interview. The independent variables of the study were social support, spiritual support and stress. The results of the study were centered on the following individual outcome domains: educational participation, employment, parenthood, criminal activity, homelessness, and drug use. This study is valuable to the dissertation in practice as it explores factors and risks that disproportionately impact foster care youth as they transition into adulthood – especially the ramifications of those who do not immediately enroll in postsecondary education. A strength of the study is the data collection method of the self-administered, computer-assisted interview method. This allowed participants to be more authentic in their response in a way that could be limited through in-person interviews. Understanding the foster care youth experience from their perspective is paramount, and the driving force for this dissertation in practice.

Batsche et al. (2014) investigated the extent that the national KnowHow2Go (KH2Go) college readiness campaign prepared first year foster care youth who emancipated from the system. Four major topics: money management, work, parenting, and transportation, emerged from the study as impactful attributes to the students' resiliency and transition from foster care to life as college students. The research study approach was community-based participatory research (CBPR), which is a collaborative effort with community partners to engage in research that is important to community members and utilizes their expertise to contribute significantly to

the research process. Participants were former foster care youth, 18-25 years old, emancipated from foster care within the past five years, and who were enrolled in either a two-year community college, four-year college/university or vocational-technical school that required a high school diploma or GED. Further, the students received services from the Connected by 25 (Cby25) community organization that supports foster youth transition. Twenty-seven former foster care youth in total participated in the research study. This study is relevant as it identifies four primary needs of foster care youth who intend to transition to postsecondary education: providing resources concerning shelter and food, the transition from independent living was too abrupt, the financial aid process is cumbersome, and the stereotypes and perceived stigma associated with being a part of the foster care system. These factors can provide great insight on issues of resilience that may surface as older foster youth transition out of care and into postsecondary education.

Hines, Merdinger and Wyatt (2005) cautioned that “an important development on resilience has been a shift away from isolating correlates in the form of risk and protective factors to understanding the processes underlying the development of resilience (p. 382).” This is important in tailoring the approach when working with youth who have experience in foster care. While their experiences may be disjointed or isolated, they are a part of an individual youth’s continuum of their time in care as it relates to their resiliency. As such, they could be triggered differently depending on the situation.

The Krebs and Pitcoff quotation at the beginning of chapter one exemplifies the risk of having a one-dimensional approach to working with foster care youth, which can be tainted by professionals who enter this work with deficit-based perspectives and regarding the capacity of these youth. If research surrounding post-foster care options for foster care youth is gathered

from professionals holding these perceptions, then the outlook on potential success for foster youth in transition will continue to be bleak. This study demonstrates the importance of also collecting data that incorporates the voices and experiences of foster care youth, unaltered and in their authentic words. By including youth voices, we gain a better understanding of challenges that they face. For example, their viewpoint can potentially help shift the ways professionals assist, and even empower, foster care youth to dream bigger as it relates to their educational aspirations after they transition out of the foster care system.

## **2.2 THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS**

### **2.2.1 Emerging Adulthood Theory**

The progression to adulthood for foster youth can greatly differ when compared to their peers, especially in instances where issues of inconsistency, transition, and abuse permeate the systems and environments of their experiences (Avery & Freundlich, 2009). During this critical juncture, most youth can still rely on parental or familial support to provide guidance or assistance when difficulties arise during this delicate transition period. For older foster care youth, however, this can be a volatile period in terms of stabilization if proper people and support systems are not in place to help guide them through the progression to adulthood (Alquilino, 1996).

Emerging adulthood describes the initial phase of expanded privileges and responsibilities, inclusive of leaving home, entering the workforce, or enrolling in higher education (Munsey, 2006). Arnett (2007a) frames emerging adulthood theory for transitioning older foster care youth according to the following five features of the normative development of

emerging adulthood: the age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in between, and the age of possibilities. According to Kools (1997) foster care youth who primarily emancipate from nontraditional care arrangements, such as group homes or independent living facilities, tend to be distressed and disconnected as they emerge into adulthood. Those who spend much of their childhood experiences in long-term foster care also enter early adulthood with a depreciated sense of adolescent identity development, which can also negatively affect their transition and adjustment into life both as postsecondary education students and young adults (Kools, 1997).

Munsey (2006) elaborates on the precepts of emerging adulthood as the in-between age where young adults reach the legal age that opens doors to expanded privileges and responsibilities, such as leaving home, entering the workforce, or enrolling in higher education. Former foster care youth often lack proper financial resources, family support, and/or parental guidance. This can compromise the exploratory phase of emerging adulthood for foster care youth when compared to their non-foster peers who may have access to these resources, as their focus tends to shift to economic survival (Greeson, 2013; Munsey, 2006). If these youth lack sufficient preparation and stable support relationships, the postsecondary education planning and transition phases could be overwhelming.

### **2.2.2 Social Capital**

According to the literature, the transition outcomes for emerging adulthood and older foster care youth is overwhelmingly dimmer when compared to their non-foster peers. Nonetheless, this transitional phase can also be met with opportunities for positive change, stability and growth for these students if proper structures are in place (Lee & Berrick, 2014; Singer, Berzin &

Hokanson, 2013). Coleman (1988) functionalizes social capital as a variety of resources within a social structure that make “possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible” (p. 98). The acquisition of social capital expands opportunities for increased networking and social support systems, both of which are essential resources needed for postsecondary education students to thrive.

Although older foster care students may not have sizeable quantities of social capital to rely on, it is the quality of the relationships they establish that matters most. Social capital is heavily reliant upon the relationships, trust, and mutual goals among individuals and groups within an organization (Beaver & Weinbaum, 2012). Postsecondary education bound students, in general, benefit from the relationships that can be garnered through social capital, as the establishment of long-term supportive adult relationships is paramount for success in postsecondary education (Cox, 2013). Depending on the experiences of a foster care youth, they may not have an opportunity to build sustained relationships that withstand multiple placements and frequent moves, in addition to possible turnover of staff within foster care agencies and school systems. If connections are made across the high school, foster care agency, and postsecondary education systems early, it could have a considerably positive effect on the transition of foster youth as they progress to becoming postsecondary education students.

To this end, the theory of emerging adulthood and the concept of social capital could be merged to provide a framework to better understand how former foster care youth process and perceive the role of postsecondary education. As these youth begin the process to disconnect from the foster care system, their aspirations for postsecondary education could be either deferred or deterred as they begin to conceptualize and plan for life after foster care. If the postsecondary education planning is not solid at this stage, it is possible that there is a shift in

what these youth prioritize as the immediate social capital they must secure as they begin to exit foster care.

### **2.3 SUMMARY**

This review of the literature highlighted the importance of foster care youth voice to connect salient issues of their experience as it relates to transitioning out of foster care and into postsecondary education institutions. This includes barriers to postsecondary education, the postsecondary transition, and resilience through the theoretical and conceptual frames of emerging adulthood theory and social capital. A consistent theme in the literature on foster care youth is the necessary, but frequently overlooked, role of foster care youth voice in these processes. Also, there has been little research conducted on the experiences of youth exiting the foster care system, which presents a significant gap in the literature (Hines, Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005; McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008). Combined, these two inconsistencies situate the need for this dissertation in practice to explore the postsecondary perceptions of older foster care youth as they transition out of foster care. A considerable amount of the existing literature focused on this phenomenon lack the perspective and voice of these youth, and sheds light on this topic in retrospect from former foster youth who are already matriculating college students. Lastly, this dissertation in practice takes into consideration all forms of postsecondary education, and is not limited to four-year college and university campuses.

## **3.0 METHODS**

### **3.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following research questions will guide this qualitative phenomenological study examining how former foster care youth ages 18-21 perceive postsecondary education:

1. What are former foster care youths' attitudes and perceptions of postsecondary education?
2. How have former foster care youths' life experiences shaped how they view their potential for postsecondary education?
3. What contributes to former foster care youths' decision to pursue (or not pursue) postsecondary education?

### **3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **3.2.1 Constructivism**

In situating constructivism, Schwandt (1994) indicated that perspective is at the root of what is considered to be objective knowledge and truth. A fundamental tenet of constructivism is that our reality is largely shaped by how we individually view and experience the world. Although it is possible to have shared interactions and outcomes, the meaning of these experiences will differ

based upon personal lived experiences and perspectives. For example, in the context of this study, two students might aspire to attend the same college, but their pathways to and perceptions of a college education could vary greatly due to their lived experiences and personal viewpoints. Further, if admitted, these two students would share a common phenomenon of being a college student at the same institution, but they could experience college differently based upon their individual reality and subsequent experiences. Constructivists reject "the notion that there is an objective reality that can be known" as reality will differ depending on the individual (Mertens, 2015, p. 18).

From an epistemological standpoint, in order to maintain the integrity of an individual's experiences, a constructivist opts "for a more personal, interactive mode of data collection" that is primarily qualitative in nature (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 19). The qualitative method of this study is paramount to understanding the lived experiences of former foster care youth. These youth have markedly different personal backgrounds and educational experiences than their peers (Cox, 2013; Schroeter et al., 2015; Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2012; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). Their perceptions of the pursuit of postsecondary education may deviate from those of their peers, even those who are first-generation and low-income, due to the nature of their educational and lived experiences in the foster care system. A qualitative and phenomenological approach is best suited to understand their nuanced perceptions on the role of postsecondary education as either a necessary step or an unlikely option for their future.

### **3.2.2 Phenomenology**

Kafle (2013) suggested that phenomenological researchers aim "to provide a rich textured description of lived experience" (p. 182). The essence of phenomenology rests upon

understanding first-hand experiences around a shared phenomenon from the perspective of the individual(s) at the center. A phenomenological study is best suited for this dissertation in practice as it aims to describe a common or shared experience of multiple individuals. An individual's perceptions and experiences are at the heart of phenomenology; the intent is to understand a phenomenon from their perspective (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998).

There is an opportunity in both research and practice to incorporate foster care youths' perspectives and voice to address their low enrollment and persistence in postsecondary education (Salazar, Roe, Ullrich & Haggerty, 2015). Mertens (2015) emphasized that the placement of the subjective, individual experience at the core of inquiry is the distinguishing feature of phenomenological research. Phenomenology "aims to focus on people's perceptions of the world in which they live in and what it means to them" (Langdrige, 2007, p. 4). This approach provides a basis to identify themes and commonalities among the lived experiences of the former foster care youth participants in this study, as well as gaining a greater understanding of how they discern the significance of postsecondary education.

### **3.2.3 Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

van Manen (1990) provided a distinction between phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology as "phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience, hermeneutics describes how one interprets the 'texts of life'" (p. 4). Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the process, or the *how*, that is involved in understanding lived experiences – making it both descriptive and interpretive, as well as highly reflective. "The meaning or essence of a phenomenon is never simple or one-dimensional. Meaning is multi-dimensional and multi-layered" (van Manen, 1990, p.78). As such, one must be careful when trying to understand

experiences or phenomena. Hermeneutic phenomenology rejects the idea that personal opinions can be suspended when interpreting the experiences of others, as it is a very subjective process. As such, researchers need to be keenly aware and acknowledge the biases they bring to the research environment. This will encourage them to understand and interpret the lived experiences of the research participants in a filtered manner that preserves the participants' perspectives.

### **3.3 RECRUITMENT SITE**

The participants for this study will be recruited from a department within a private, nonprofit 501(c)(3) agency that provides support, programs and resources for abused and neglected children and their families in Pennsylvania. This agency encompasses multiple departments that collectively offer services for children in the dependent care system, including adoption, case management, counseling, foster care, truancy intervention, afterschool programming, independent living, and transitional living. The independent living program, which will be referred to by the pseudonym Expanding Horizons, is the appropriate department to recruit research participants for this study due to the specialized services they provide for former foster care youth.

Expanding Horizons is a nonresidential program designed to develop self-sufficiency skills for adjudicated dependent and delinquent youth ages 14-21 to prepare them for normalcy and independence after they emancipate from foster care. In order to qualify for these services, the youth must receive a referral from either the county children and youth agency or juvenile probation. Youth remain eligible for program services until they turn 21 years old, even if they

relocate outside of the county in which they were adjudicated. While all adjudicated dependent and delinquent youth ages 14-21 are eligible for Expanding Horizons' services, participation in the program is voluntary. Each youth participant is assigned to an independent living program caseworker and must have, at a minimum, bimonthly contact; one must be in-person, weather permitting.

Four independent living program caseworkers are responsible for providing individual and group services for all program participants. The independent living program caseworkers serve as liaisons between staff in the court system and schools, as well foster families, and assist with documentation and providing services to the youth participants. They also attend court hearings for the youth and provide progress updates as necessary to supplement information related to the youths' care and education. Further, Expanding Horizons independent living program caseworkers conduct home visits with the youth to help ensure they are living in safe and adequate living conditions with their foster families, and also help older youth who are transitioning out of the system secure basic needs such as housing, transportation, and employment.

Expanding Horizons offers a three-phased approach to facilitate knowledge and skill acquisition that promotes self-sufficiency. The first two phases of the program are mandatory; after completing 32 hours of training in phase one youth progress to phase two. The first phase, *Life Skills Training*, begins with a mandatory orientation for the youth and guardian/caregiver to outline program expectations. *Life Skills Training* consists of eight sessions, totaling 32 hours, of strengths-based activities in a group setting. Activities in this phase include career assessments, vocational and postsecondary education counseling, job interview and search skills,

money management, apartment living tips, transportation, drug and alcohol awareness, sex education, and stress management.

After completing *Life Skills Training*, youth transition to the second phase, *Preparation*, which includes activities that are designed to prepare youth for a life of independence after they emancipate from the placement setting. Biweekly case management and counseling services assist the youth in developing an individualized, comprehensive transition plan that is reviewed and revised every six months. The biweekly individual meetings with their assigned case manager also include discussion topics such as cultural competence, strengths-based assessment, post-care daily living resources, employment, education, budgeting, independent living skills, and support networking and relationship building.

The third and final phase of the program is *Aftercare*. This phase is voluntary and provides youth the opportunity to continue receiving Expanding Horizons support and resources until they reach the maximum program age of 21 years old. These services are extended to youth even if they are discharged from foster care before reaching the maximum age and include educational training vouchers, postsecondary room and board assistance, and emergency room and board stipends. The youths' transition plans are also revisited and revised accordingly during this phase.

Due to the population served, as well as resources provided, Expanding Horizons is an ideal recruitment site to conduct the study for three primary reasons. First, the focus of the study is on the postsecondary perceptions of former foster care youth who are 18-21 years old, which is among the demographic served at the agency. Second, I held a 10-week internship at the agency that provided the opportunity to build relationships with the agency's independent living program staff members. Thus, there is a level of trust that has been established which will be

helpful in recruiting participants for the study. Lastly, the potential study participants will have received postsecondary education planning resources and information, including the transition planning document that is updated every six months, by partaking in the agency's programs and services. To this end, they are in a position to think reflectively and deeply about postsecondary education in general, as well as how they perceive it in their current and/or future trajectory after they emancipate from foster care.

### **3.4 PARTICIPANTS**

The Expanding Horizons independent living program receives referrals to provide services for former foster care youth from two sources – the county youth and children services department, as well as the county juvenile court system. In order to receive assistance from Expanding Horizons, foster youth only need to have had an active case with either organization at any point when they are between the ages of 14-21. As a result, the Expanding Horizons population size for this group fluctuates according to the referrals received. This study will focus on former foster care youth who were adjudicated through the county youth and children services department.

In the state of Pennsylvania, youth enter dependent care one of two ways: 1.) the department of children petitions to the juvenile court for a youth to be removed from their family due to concerns of abuse or neglect, or 2.) a parent voluntary agrees to place their child in dependent care (Juvenile Law Center, 2010). Once youth are in the foster care system, their living arrangements vary and can include: emergency shelters, foster homes, kinship/relative care, adoption, group homes, residential treatment facilities, and other arrangements for

supervised care (Juvenile Law Center, 2010). Accordingly, the participants recruited to participate in this study will have a variety of nonlinear, and often disrupted, experiences within the foster care system (Atkinson, 2008; Kelly, 2000).

Mertens (2015) asserted that constructivist researchers select their samples “with the goal of identifying information-rich cases that will allow them to study a case in depth” (p. 331). Participants for this study will be selected using the purposeful sampling, which focuses on participants who will “illuminate the questions under study” through their alignment with the sample selection criteria (Patton, 2002, p. 273). With this in mind, I received permission from the agency's administration to work through the Expanding Horizons independent living program caseworkers to recruit former foster care youth to participate in the study. I met with the independent living program caseworkers to discuss the best approach to recruit participants who would be willing to share their experiences with me. I also indicated that study participants would need to meet with me for an interview lasting approximately one hour within the timeframe of November 2017 – March 2018, and that participants would receive a \$25 incentive. To be eligible to participate in the study, participants needed to meet the following criteria:

1. had prior experience as an adjudicated foster care youth;
2. aged 18-21 years old;
3. have completed the Expanding Horizons phase one *Life Skills Training* program;
4. reside within a 200-mile radius of Expanding Horizons.

These criteria helped filter the sample population by recruiting participants who could respond to the interview questions from their shared lens as older youth aging out of the foster care system. Out of the 171 youth who received services from the Expanding Horizons independent living program, 66 met the above-stated criteria to participate in the study. It should

be noted that the total population fluctuates according to the number of referrals Expanding Horizons receives from the county children and youth agency or juvenile court system, as well as the volume of youth who age out of foster care upon reaching the age of 21 at any given time. The Expanding Horizons independent living program caseworkers shared my participant recruitment email with eligible former foster care youth who met the participant criteria as stated above. I then scheduled interviews with the youth who expressed interest in participating in the study. A total of eight former foster care youth provided interviews.

### **3.5 DATA COLLECTION**

In-depth, individual, semi-structured interviews lasting 30 – 90 minutes were the principal method of data collection. Rubin and Rubin (2012) acknowledged the value of interviews as they allow researchers to "explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of others and learn to see the world from perspectives other than their own" (p. 3). All participants were asked questions that probed at the development of their perceptions about postsecondary education, and particularly how their educational attitudes were shaped by their experiences as foster care youth. Well-collected qualitative data focuses on "naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings" so that these experiences are presented in a way that depicts "what real life is like" (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014, p. 11).

According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological interviews provide an opportunity for logical and systematic responses that are infused with reflection, which is essential for understanding personal experiences. The use of individual semi-structured, individual interviews allowed follow-up to a core set of questions that asked of the foster care youth to better

understand their experiences, as well as delved deeper into how their perceptions of postsecondary education were formulated. Merriam (1998) discussed the benefit of semi-structured interviews allowing "the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (p. 74). I was careful to do my due diligence to establish trust and rapport with research participants. This helped safeguard against signs that may trigger emotions from the foster care youth based upon their history and lived experiences. While it is important to understand how the youth arrive at their present stance on the role of postsecondary education, there also could have been a triggering risk in asking this population to recall events from their past. These concerns were taken into consideration in the development of the interview script, protocol questions, and subsequent question order.

Interviews took place at neutral locations that were recommended by the participants, in an environment that was convenient and comfortable for them. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to mask their identity in the careful attempt to maintain confidentiality and anonymity to the greatest extent possible. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, with all electronic and print materials being kept in secure password-protected and locked files, as appropriate. Participants also received a \$25 gift card for participating in the study. Due to the nature of these youth having limited financial resources, it was both important and appropriate to remunerate them.

There were some challenges encountered during the data collection phase. In order to gain access to participants, I first had to wait for the Expanding Horizons independent living program caseworkers to obtain the Authorization for Release of Information internal form which allowed them to share the youths' contact information with me so that I could reach out to them about participating in the study. This process took between two-three weeks, which caused a

delay between the youth indicating they were interested in participating in the study and when I could make first contact. There were several youth who initially indicated that they would participate in the study, but did not respond to my attempts to schedule a time to meet. There was one instance where a youth scheduled a meeting with me on three separate occasions, but failed to attend our scheduled meetings. Additionally, there was an unanticipated two month delay in securing participants mid-data collection, as all four Expanding Horizons independent living program caseworkers were out on staggered personal leave. During this time period, there were no Expanding Horizon's Authorization for Release of Information forms being processed, thus limiting my contact with potential participants. Despite these challenges, I was able to have fruitful interviews with eight participants who were willing to share aspects of their experiences growing up in foster care, as well as their perspectives on postsecondary education, which greatly added to my study.

### **3.6 DATA ANALYSIS**

Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) introduced a three-step approach for qualitative data analysis that includes the following elements: a). data condensation, b). data display, and c). drawing and verifying conclusions. I utilized this approach to analyze the data collected in this study, while carefully aligning the data analysis process with the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology. As qualitative data analysis is an iterative process, multiple steps were taken to analyze the data in accordance to themes that emerged from the interviews with the former foster care youth. Data condensation encompasses the process of selecting, simplifying and transforming data so that it is more powerful and robust (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). I

utilized a professional transcription service to transcribe interview data collected from six of the participants, and I transcribed interview data for two.

The data condensation process entailed me reading through each of the individual transcripts, a total of three cycles, to generate an initial set of codes. Across all of the interview transcriptions, I identified 437 codes that were meaningful to the experiences detailed by the participants in relation to their perceptions of postsecondary education. This process aligns with hermeneutic phenomenology in that understanding of the participant's perspectives was gained by using their own words, rather than imposing or assigning language and categories to summarize their experiences.

The second step of the analysis process involves data display, which is information organized in such a manner that permits conclusion drawing and related actions (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). During this sequence of the analysis, the process of categorizing the data by themes took place in order to "develop an overarching theme from the data corpus, or an integrative theme that weaves various themes together into a coherent narrative" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 199). This process helped to identify commonalities across the lived experiences of the participants to gain a greater, collective understanding of their postsecondary perceptions. Categorizing the data by themes is especially useful for phenomenological research that explores participants "psychological world of beliefs, constructs, identity development and emotional experiences" (Saldaña, 2016, p, 200). Five salient themes were identified during the data display phase.

The final process of drawing and verifying conclusions actually happened throughout the data analysis process. "From the start of data collection, the qualitative analyst interprets what things mean by noting patterns, explanations, causal flows, and proposition" (Miles, Huberman

& Saldaña, 2014, p. 13). These conclusions were fluid and changed as I cycled back and forth between the data, taking notes as new themes emerged. Memo-writing, which entails taking notes about the data, was utilized throughout the data analysis process to capture important highlights that I referred back to while processing multiple interviews. In alignment with constructivism, I verified that the themes and conclusions that were drawn from the data are representative of the information shared by the participants from their respective perspectives. Memo-writing helped to capture the meaning on an ongoing basis throughout this iterative process.

van Manen (2014) warned about the role of epoché and reduction when interpreting and analyzing data in hermeneutic phenomenological research. Epoché refers to the need to remain free of presupposition, while reduction calls for being open and subjective when trying to gain understanding from others (van Manen, 2014). These are the two core components that frame data analysis in hermeneutic phenomenology. During this process, the underpinnings of bracketing, or being aware of how one's personal beliefs influence how we interpret the lived experiences of others, will be honored (van Manen, 1990). Bracketing is an important and continual step of the qualitative data analysis process to safeguard against skewed and biased representations of participant experiences.

Throughout the study, I used journaling as a way to capture my personal experiences, thoughts, and reflections to keep them detached from those of the participants. While I did not grow up in the foster care system, there are some shared experiences with many of the youth in foster care who come from broken families and poor backgrounds with limited resources. I understand what it feels like to go through the postsecondary education planning process on my own as a first-generation college student, and lacking parental and family guidance through that

search process, as well as transitioning and persisting through my educational experience. The technique of bracketing through journaling was imperative as I progressed through the data analysis phase of the study to separate my lived experiences from those of the foster care youth, as well as acknowledge when those lines were blurred.

### **3.7 TRUSTWORTHINESS**

I am especially sensitive to the need of accurately representing the voices of foster care youth due to their position of vulnerability throughout their lived experiences in foster care. Lincoln (2009) advocated for researchers to embody trustworthiness by being both deeply and closely involved in their research interest, but distant enough to record the phenomenon of study to wholly represent the participant experience. I believe that this accurately describes my approach to working with former foster care youth in this research capacity. I hope to add to the body of scholarly and practical knowledge concerning this population and strive to contribute in a balanced way that acknowledges my sensitivities while impartially representing the participants' lived experiences. To expand trustworthiness, member checking was extended to foster care youth to help ensure that the transcribed interview data captured and represented their experiences as detailed during their interview. After the interview data were transcribed, I emailed the transcription to each participant that was interviewed. I asked that they forward along any corrections to allow the opportunity for member checking. None of the participants shared edits or corrections to the interview transcripts they received.

From the onset, I openly communicated the intentions and purpose of my dissertation in practice with the Expanding Horizons administration and independent living program

caseworkers. These stakeholders understood the need for this work and openly supported my working with their agency to serve as a recruitment site for participants. This relationship was essential as the Expanding Horizons independent living program caseworkers were actively involved in assisting with the recruitment and referral process for potential study participants. During my internship experience with Expanding Horizons, they were able to gain a better sense of the sincerity of my approach to this work, which directly impacts a subset of the youth that they serve.

### **3.8 REFLEXIVITY**

I was raised by an underemployed, single mother who did her best to provide for my siblings and me. There were periods when we barely scraped by, and I remember living a life that was heavily dependent on government assistance and the generosity of local agencies that provided for families in need. My mother worked two, and sometimes three, jobs at a time so that she could provide for our basic needs, which came at the expense of her not being able to be involved in key moments of our upbringing as she was always working to keep her head above water, so to speak. While I will be forever grateful for her sacrifices, they were not without consequence. I know what it feels like to go to school hungry, be embarrassed to be on public assistance, and live in a home where basic utilities such as electricity, heat, and water were not always guaranteed. While I have known my dad my entire life, his drug addiction left little room for him to be a father and a positive male influence during my formative years. My relationship with him has improved significantly in my adult years, but we cannot entirely turn back the hands of time to recover lost moments and missed opportunities. I have always been curious and

I love the process of learning. I can say that both my parents supported and facilitated this passion. However, I mostly enjoyed going to school because it provided the opportunity to escape the misfortunes of my home life.

I will never forget the day I received my first report card in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Our Superintendent, Mrs. Gwendolyn Tabb, happened to be strolling through the hallways randomly asking students to show her their report cards. When she viewed my report card full of A's, she smiled and said, "I'm proud of you! If you keep this up, you will be the valedictorian of your class!" I replied, "Yes ma'am, thank you!" and hurried to my next class to write down the word "valuedictorian" because I had never heard it before and needed to look it up in the dictionary. As a young, Black female from a low-income household, she empowered me in a way that I will be forever grateful, especially when people who grew up like me were not supposed to make it. That day, she planted a seed that anchored my interests in not only loving to learn but striving to succeed at the highest level in all aspects of my educational endeavors.

Approaching 18 years of age is a pivotal time for foster care youth, as in most states this is the birthday that terminates their relationship with the foster care system. While some states are beginning to extend care and services beyond 18, a significant number of former foster care youth are thrust into the world without the safety net offered by family or resources to support them in a time of need. While not as severe, my mother held a similar mentality – 18 years old was the time to leave home and transition to adulthood. She made it very clear to my siblings and me that after high school we had to establish a life of independence, as she would not financially support capable adults. After we graduated high school she gave us the summer to get ourselves established, but once the fall arrived we would need to have a plan of action that did not entail living with her; she is a woman of her word. I grew up in a very small town, so I

wanted to get out and explore what the world had to offer. I was eager to go to college and to live independently. I left home at 18 years old and never returned to live - only to visit. My mother's philosophy on adulthood made me grow up quickly and make decisions to establish independence. I know that if I fell on hard times, my mother would have allowed me to return home and get back on my feet, but I'm also confident that there would have been a timeline associated with it.

This aspect of my upbringing is how I became interested in the topic of former foster care youth support. From my lived experience, I understand how turning 18 years old can bring about anxiety if one is immediately cut-off from resources and support systems, even if they are broken or deficient. I entered the doctoral program with my intentions set on conducting research focused on how to better support students from low-income and at-risk backgrounds, such as the youth in foster care and homeless youth; I have pursued these topics from the onset. The crux of my professional work in higher education and student affairs has centered in the functional area of multicultural and diversity affairs, which has provided the opportunity to assist underrepresented and low-income students in programmatic, supportive, and academic ways. Though I have not worked exclusively with former foster care youth or homeless students in my professional work, this dissertation in practice has broadened my approach and capacity to work with vulnerable students in a more intentional and empirically-based manner.

### **3.9 RECIPROCITY**

Reciprocity involves ways that the researcher wants to give back to the individuals who are among their research participants (Mertens, 2015). Sampson, Bloor and Fincham (2008) take the

notion of reciprocity a step further as they indicated that researchers do not desire to “exploit the people they researched [they want to] limit harm to participants and often offer something in ‘return’ for research participation” (p. 928). I fully understand that the research participants for my study come from backgrounds that heavily involved them hearing their story shared in public spaces, such as courtrooms, and are often asked to repeat their experiences to multiple entities as a part of the foster care system.

I intend to remain connected with Expanding Horizons past the formal ending of my internship to be a resource and support the work of the agency in supporting older foster care youth. I created a 25-page resource guide for high school seniors who receive Expanding Horizons services, which is filled with information to help guide them through the college planning process. I offered a physical copy of this resource guide to the study participants as well. I have made myself available as a resource to the Expanding Horizons independent living program caseworkers if there are future ways that I can be a partner, or friend, to their work, including hosting tours and workshops at the local college where I work if the youth ever wish to visit campus. I offered this opportunity to each of the study participants in the event they are interested in visiting the campus, as well as serving as a general resource during their postsecondary education planning and experience if they would like to establish a professional mentorship relationship.

### **3.10 LIMITATIONS**

There are multiple considerations that serve as limitations of this study. First, all participants were recruited from a single site, which can limit the generalizability of the study to describe the

experiences of former foster care youth who were connected with a different type of agency, did not receive similar agency assistance, or have backgrounds and experiences that differ from the participants that were interviewed for this study.

Second, the county where this dissertation in practice is conducted refers foster care youth to the recruitment site, Expanding Horizons, through either being adjudicated through the county youth and services department due to issues of abuse or neglect, or through the county juvenile court system for youth who violate conditions of their probation order. The needs of juveniles who are referred through the court system are beyond the scope of this study.

Third, the age parameters for participants for this study was 18-21 years old. This can limit the inclusion of older foster care youth who are in the traditional high school age range of 14-17 years old. These youth may have different, yet significant, viewpoints as it relates to older foster care youth postsecondary education perceptions.

Lastly, this study is limited to studying former foster care youth who were dependents in the Pennsylvania foster care system. Foster care system policies and procedures vary by state, so this can limit the level of transferability to experiences of youth who do not have experiences in the dependent care system in the state of Pennsylvania.

## **4.0 LIVED EXPERIENCES**

As discussed in chapter three, hermeneutic phenomenology centers on understanding the lived experience from the perspective of those who lived it. This chapter provides a more in-depth look into the lives of the eight participants of the study. While these participants have a shared experience of being former foster care youth, their individual experiences are distinct. These distinctions are explored to provide an opportunity for their voices to be independently heard to gain a more profound understanding of their singular stories and experiences. Each vignette in this chapter begins with a profound quotation that was captured from the participants during their interview. These quotations reveal poignant moments that the youth shared, including hopes, challenges, or in some cases frustrations, as they reflected on their experiences in the foster care system.

### **4.1 THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LETRELL**

*“For the longest time, I’ve just wanted to see a change – I’ve been wanting somebody to make a difference, and I’m just waiting for that time to come.”*

Letrell is an 18-year-old, Black-identifying male who is divorced and currently lives in a group home facility. He is a high school senior and has spent over five years in the foster care system,

which has included at least three different placements that he can remember. Although he has bounced around in and out of foster care largely due to issues of abuse and neglect from his birth parents, family is very important to him. He shared,

I love being around my family. I love getting to know my family. As weird as it might sound, I don't know all my family, 'cause my family's so big, not just one side but both sides. More of my Black side, I don't know them nearly as much as I know about the White side. But that's something I enjoy doing every time I get around family.

Letrell has three brothers and two sisters, and considers himself fortunate to have been placed in some foster families and group homes alongside at least one of his brothers. This has been especially helpful in the group home setting, as his older brothers offered a layer of protection against bullying. He recalled,

Kids wanted to fight me, and then my brothers wanted to fight them for wanting to fight me...'cause they put their hands on me for no reason and my brothers wasn't with it, so they did the brotherly thing...my oldest brother got in the kids' faces like, "You put your hands on my brother again, I'm really gonna fuck you up"...and my other brother basically said the same thing...and there were no more problems with those kids.

In addition to challenges transitioning into the group home setting, Letrell also expressed a high degree of frustration with the structure, policies, and staffing in the group home facility environment. He noted,

It only took me two, maybe three, months to remember how everything was or really know how to act and trying to keep my head on straight and be respectful and just play the game... [one staff member] is always so mean and ignorant for no reason...she tries to act like such a hardass and she's really, really, really strict, basically like a

probation officer on steroids. I really feel like they used me for hard labor, that I was doing chores all day.

Although Letrell has attended more than 10 different schools during his K-12 educational experiences, he still has aspirations to attend a four-year college, as well as earn a culinary degree, drawing inspiration from his father who enjoyed cooking. A few weeks after Letrell turned 17 years old, his father was viciously murdered, which drastically changed his outlook on life. After spending some time grieving, he decided to make decisions and choices that would make his father proud of him. He explained,

I spazzed out a little bit that night, and for a little – for weeks, probably months to come...So from then on, whenever I got mad or upset because of the environment that I'm in, I started saying, "On my dad, I'm gonna do this. On my dad, I'm gonna do that"...just because I think of him every day. My dad motivates me to want to do better in getting out of here...I'm gonna show him that I can finally graduate from school even though I'm in placement even though I struggle and it's kind of hard...I'm gonna show him that I can go to college, even with such a rough background.

## **4.2 THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ROB**

*"I mean, I still find that college is useless as anything. It's not useless, but for me it's useless, 'cause it's not really anything I want to do."*

Rob is an 18-year-old, White-identifying male who dropped out of high school in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. He currently lives with a friend and his family, who have taken him in although he is not

officially adopted. He works part-time at a local pizza shop, approximately 30 hours each week, and has had experiences living in at least two different group home facilities since entering the foster care system at age 15.

Rob is an only child and was placed in the foster care system due to issues of neglect as a result of his parents' addiction to drugs. He revealed,

My mom and dad are kind of like, they're separated. My mom is in jail and my dad's off starting to get his life together. They were addicted to heroin and shit, so that's why I like fell off and ended up living with a friend because they couldn't take care of themselves, let alone me.

He expressed a great deal of frustration with services provided by both the foster care system and the court system during his time in care. He admitted,

Honestly, the only problem I have with foster care and CYS (Children and Youth Services) were that they really got on my nerves. They jacked me off and I always wanted to avoid them...usually every 45 days or 3 months I would go to court and see nothing has changed about me and they keep my case open. I was like, you can close it, you know. I'm doing fine.

Rob did not like going to school, which was the root of him missing a lot of days, not turning in assignments, and eventually dropping out. He shared,

Right before I started dealing with CYS I missed 90-something days of school. They put me out in the fall and sent me to [two different] group homes. After that, I kind of came back and did school the regular way, but I didn't do much homework still, and I failed again. Then I was like alright, screw this. All I'm going to do is weld.

Rob has a cousin who has a lucrative career as a welder, which allows him to adequately provide for his family. He would like to take a similar path by obtaining his GED in order to attend a technical or trade school to obtain the necessary certification and training to be a welder. He asserted,

Honestly, since I'm only getting my GED, I'm not going to be able to do much. I'm going to be able to go to technical school and get a job I want. Having a college degree or anything else after that – I'm not planning on it.

As such, Rob's immediate plans entail saving up money from his job so that he can move into a place of his own and study for the GED. He has looked into a few programs at a local technical school that would enable him to pursue a welding career. He does not see value in pursuing a college education in the four-year traditional sense and is eager to take the quickest path that will allow him to learn a trade that to make similar money as his cousin so that he can be self-sufficient.

### **4.3 THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF DAVID**

*“I ended up going to placement. That honestly was probably the best thing to happen to me...because it matured me...I noticed that I got myself into it and that I'm the only one who can get myself out.”*

David is an 18-year-old, White-identifying male and a current senior in high school. He entered the foster care system when he was 14 years old, along with his brother who is four years younger than him. He has lived in multiple types of placements during his time in care,

including living with relatives, foster families, and in group home facilities. David was forced to leave multiple placements due to what he frequently referred to during the interview as "bad decisions," which also caused him to be separated from his younger brother who he lived with at the same foster home at the time. He shared,

I lived with my mom ever since I was born with me and my brother, and we lived with her until I was 14. Then we got placed with my grandma through kinship care. After that, I was being really bad and we got put into a foster home, and then later I got put into a group home. Then we got back together in a foster home and bounced around from foster home to foster home until we finally made it back here [reunited with a previous foster family].

His multiple foster care transitions were eased by the fact that he and his younger brother were always placed in foster homes together. However, this changed when David was placed without his brother in a group home, a placement that ended up changing his perspective, behaviors, and actions. While not a pleasant experience, David credits his placement in a group home facility for changing his trajectory and outlook on life. It provided him with a level of restriction and structure that he had never experienced before and showed him that this was not the type of lifestyle he wanted to live. He reflected,

I mean, it was hard getting removed from my brother, because that was all I had. Then we had to do chores every day, and we had to have evals done, too. We got in trouble if we didn't do things a certain way, and I wasn't used to that. It took a big part of me to get used to it...but I feel like if I wouldn't have went there, I wouldn't be who I am now.

David and his younger brother currently live with a family that they lived with previously, but were forced to leave as a result of David's destructive behavior. David's mother passed away when he was 15 years old, exactly two years after he lost one of his favorite aunts. Shortly after his mother passed, his grandmother died, too. David attributes many of his poor choices to being unable to properly process the grief he experienced from losing so many close family members within a short period of time.

Since being reunited with his current foster family, David has focused his efforts on doing better in school and setting a good example for his younger brother to follow. He asserted,

I'm going to further continue my education while I still can...I'm pretty smart. My brother and my foster parents are the main ones supporting me and pushing me to do better...that's when I stepped my stuff up in school, you know...I have to focus on myself to be the best of my ability to be a good role model, and not just for him. You know what I mean?

David currently works part-time approximately eight hours per week and attends a technical high school in a program that focuses on Sports Therapy and Exercise Science. He hopes to one day have a career as a physical therapist.

#### **4.4 THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF DESTINY**

*“When I was 15 or 16 [after re-entering the foster care] that’s whenever they placed me at the first foster home, and that’s when I tried to kill myself.”*

Destiny is a 19-year-old, Biracial-identifying female; her mother is White, and her father is Black. She earned her high school diploma, and currently works part-time, 24-hours per week, at a local fast food restaurant. Her lifestyle and plans shifted dramatically a few months ago, as she is now five months pregnant with her first child, and living back at home with her mother and three younger siblings.

Destiny has had a tumultuous experience growing up in and out of the foster care system. She is currently working on finding clarity in her life by improving her mental health, with the hopes of being the best mother she can be to her unborn child. Destiny's mother was a high school dropout and had her as a young teen. As a result, Destiny was adopted by her aunt when she was two years old and lived with her for 11 years. When she turned 13 years old, she entered the foster care system after having multiple disagreements with her aunt. She explained,

I was real sad. I remember my aunt used to tell her I used to hit her and be like, “You stole me from my mom!” I guess it was real depressing. When I was 13, I was with my aunt and I started running away from her house and rebelling and stuff. Then I ended up going to placements. I was in and out of placements and group homes...then when I was about 17, they placed me in another foster home. The one foster home I was in for about a month, and that’s the one I tried the suicide attempt. As soon as I turned 18, I was signing myself out and I was so sure of it. I was like, “I’m not staying.”

Throughout her time in the foster care system, Destiny experienced more than 10 different placements and attended more than 10 different schools. However, Destiny spoke at length about her love for school when she was a child. She always earned good grades and remembered crying whenever she had to miss school because of doctor’s appointments.

However, as she got older she began to experience multiple school changes, and it became harder to remain academically focused. She pointed out,

I always got good grades, A's and B's, even as I got older and started hanging with the wrong crowd, I still maintained my grades. Once I started going to placement, it was like my whole education experience changed. When you're bouncing from foster home and placement sometimes it's hard to concentrate in school.

Destiny always wanted to go to college, but never had anyone to help educate her on the process while in foster care. She knew that she had the potential to do well in college, but lacked an understanding of the necessary terminology and application steps. She expressed,

Whenever I started going to placements and they would talk about your discharge plan, I would actually think to myself, “Can they discharge me to a college?”, like, “Can I apply to colleges while I’m in here?” It never really worked out, because, I guess I never got the help to do so. I never really even really understood what I was doing, and nobody had the one-on-one time to help me.

At the age of 18, Destiny graduated from high school and signed herself out of the foster care system. She moved to a larger city that was about an hour away from her hometown and endured several terrible roommate experiences while transitioning to life on her own as an adult. She shared,

I was basically homeless and staying with friends here and there. I met this random guy, and it sounds terrible, but I was like, “I need a roommate”. We moved in together and seven months went by. It started off really good, then things started going bad.

During this time, Destiny had begun working as a dancer in a gentleman's club and made friends with a coworker. She moved in with her and it turned out to be a good experience. Her friend was also attending a local community college and helped show her the steps to enroll in school. She acknowledged,

She had done it all before, so she put it in front of my face and was like, "You have to go. This is what you have to do, and this is how you do it." That helped me a lot. She helped me apply for my SAT class, she helped me take the test, she helped me fill out my FAFSA, she told me once I did that I had to apply to the schools, and she helped me with the deadlines and stuff.

While finishing up the process of apply to colleges, Destiny learned that she was pregnant, lost her job, and returned home to live with her mother. After she has her baby, Destiny intends to enroll in college someday to pursue a career in criminal justice or forensic science.

#### **4.5 THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MELISSA**

*"We lived, I don't even know how many places. We just moved, and moved, and moved."*

Melissa is a 20-year-old, White-identifying female and is currently in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. She is enrolled in Cyber School and is working toward completing her high school diploma. She recently quit her job at a local fast food restaurant due to being scheduled inconsistent hours. She had plans to take a drug test for a job that was approximately 15 minutes from her apartment and paid \$14 per hour. Currently, Melissa and her younger sister, Stacey (also a participant in

this study), live together with two other roommates in an apartment that Expanding Horizons helped them secure and furnish.

Throughout the interview, Melissa continually expressed feeling nervous, and she was guarded with the information that she shared. Though not extensive, she elaborated the most about her K-12 educational experiences and future aspirations. While growing up, she recalls living much of her childhood in fear, as her parents were always worried that Children and Youth Services (CYS) would come and remove them from their home. She revealed,

When we were in care my parents were scared to let us do anything. Like, they were...I don't know how to really explain it. If we wanted to do something, they would be like, "No, 'cause CYS will do this or CYS will do that. They will come and take you away." I feel like they were terrified. We didn't really have much of a life growing up.

As a result, her family moved around a lot trying to evade CYS. This led to multiple transitions throughout her K-12 educational experiences, as she attended well over 20 different schools. She shared,

Well, I'm placed in the 11<sup>th</sup>-grade level because my dad kicked me out, and he waited so long to take me out of school that whenever I re-enrolled, they placed me in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. But, I was really in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade at the time. Like, I had my cap and gown and senior pictures and stuff, then everything just went downhill. I cannot go to the school – I can't explain why I cannot concentrate in a classroom.

Even with all of the educational transitions, Melissa still aspires to attend college with the hopes of one day working in a hospital setting.

#### 4.6 THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF STACEY

*“We jumped schools a lot. I had a lot of issues in school. I was always the outcast, as people would call them, so I didn’t really like going to school and I dropped out.”*

Stacey is a 19-year-old, White-identifying female and is the younger sister of Melissa, who is also a participant in this study. She completed her GED and is currently employed part-time working 25 hours per week at a local chain department store. She plans to start classes to become a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) soon. Similar to her sister, she remembers much of her childhood being spent moving around a lot and bouncing in and out of the foster care system. She recalled, "I pretty much just lived with my parents the whole way through. They would take off, and then we would be in placement for a couple of days, and then just go back with my parents."

Due to constantly moving, Stacey changed schools so many times that she lost count. She lacked confidence in her academic abilities and dropped out of high school in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade as it became too cumbersome to balance working and going to school simultaneously. She declared,

I had ADD where I couldn't concentrate in a classroom like that. I tried online schooling and then I felt like I was stupid because I was working a full-time job and working towards management. I completely didn't do my schoolwork, so that was kind of hard with online school because they had me in higher level classes where it was like college work to me. I wasn't ready for that, so I just took myself out of that and went for my GED.

Stacey would like to continue her education to earn CNA certification and likes that the program has small classroom sizes. She continues to struggle with anxiety and lacks family support and encouragement regarding her educational pursuits. She maintained,

Well, most of my family, like my parents and stuff, didn't really go to college, so I don't really get that support from them. Sometimes I feel like they don't think it's necessary for me, but, I mean most of my family are like, "Oh, you can't do this, you can't do that. You don't have what it takes." I mean, I don't have the emotional support or anything like that.

Both Stacey and her sister Melissa intend to remain connected with Expanding Horizons until they reach 21 years of age for support and access to resources, as they no longer communicate or have a relationship with their biological parents.

#### **4.7 THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF VICTORIA**

*"I barely went to school, because I really didn't like school, so my mom just didn't make me go."*

Victoria is a 19-year-old, White-identifying female who graduated from high school despite being a teenage mother. She got pregnant in the ninth grade and gave birth to her child while in the tenth grade. She missed an entire academic year after giving birth, but put in the extra effort her senior year to take online classes while still attending school physically and balancing her responsibilities as a new, working mother. She stated, "My senior year, that was when I lived here by myself...it was very hard because I was working, plus going to the school, plus taking [my child] to preschool. So, it was rough, but it went by fast."

Victoria entered the foster care system when she was 16 years old, and had multiple placements, including living with her father, with a foster family, as well as in a group home. She stated,

We were all in foster care, my brothers and sisters. There's 11 of us all together and we all went to different places. My mom was on drugs and stuff, so it was like we were moving all the time and it was hard to keep a place. So, we were always moving and jumping around. I went to live with my dad, but it took a while for them to approve it.

When Victoria turned 18 years old, Expanding Horizons helped her secure a house and furnish it. She admits that she never liked school, but after graduating high school, she continued to obtain her Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) certificate and is gainfully employed in this career today. She recalled,

Through elementary school and the beginning of middle school I was like, "I like school." But then once I go to the harder grades I was like, "I hate school". I just didn't want to go. I wanted to stay home and sleep.

She credits her Expanding Horizons independent living program caseworker for motivating her to complete high school and enroll in the CNA program. She recounted the following conversation with her independent living program caseworker, "Well, whenever I first met her I was like, 'I'm never going to college. Stop talking about it.' Because she always talked about it and stuff so I'm like, 'Stop talking about it. I'm not doing it.'"

However, Victoria's Expanding Horizons independent living program caseworker remained persistent in her encouragement and exposed her to a career that she now loves. She hopes to eventually work her way up and earn both her Licensed Practical Nursing (LPN)

certification and Registered Nurse (RN) degree within the next five years. She plans to become a Traveling Nurse when her child is a little older.

#### **4.8 THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ELYSE**

*“Education is not really important to me. I could just drop out and get a job somewhere else.*

*Doesn’t matter to me.”*

Elyse is a 19-year-old, White-identifying female who is currently a first-year student at a local community college. She also works part-time, approximately 35 hours per week, balancing two jobs, one at a local pizza restaurant and the other at an entertainment center. She lives at home with her father and sibling, and due to her demanding schedule does not have much free time. She indicated,

I usually work, and so I do not have a lot of time to do other things. I just go to class, come home, do homework, and go to work. I go to the [West] campus, that's only like 15 minutes away. Then I go to the [North] campus once a week on Wednesdays, and it's an hour away.

Elyse has been in kinship care for the entirety of her foster care experiences and has attended three different schools. She was involved with a couple of programs in high school that sparked her interest in her current academic and career path. The Jobs Corps program at her high school provided exposure to hands-on job skills and training and also provides scholarship funding for college. Through Future Farmers of America, Elyse was exposed to working with plants and that developed into her current major in college. She stated,

At [the local community college] I am in the biotechnology program. But I'm gonna transfer to [the large state university] for plant science and biotechnology. One of my teachers went to [the large state university], and she told me to start out at [the local community college] and then transfer to [the large state university]. The program pays for my school right now. I like where I am right now, probably just because of my teacher. She said that I should probably go for botany 'cause it's something I like. The counselor put me in my classes and said that Job Corps will pay for them.

Elyse hopes to one day have a career working with plant genetics. While her family always encouraged her to go to college, she indicated that she would be fine if she only worked and did not go to school. Due to her work schedule, she does not have time to be involved in extracurricular activities at the community college. She does know one person on campus who she went to high school with, but does not see her often because they are in different academic programs and classes. However, she looks forward to the prospects of meeting new people and establishing friendships after she transfers to the state university.

## **5.0 FINDINGS**

The previous chapter captured the individual lived experiences of the study participants through vignettes. This chapter centers on the participants' perceptions around the shared phenomenon growing up in foster care. Salient aspects of their lives are also explored to help to increase understanding of how these youth form perceptions of themselves, their transition to adulthood, and potential for postsecondary education. While the youth in this study each experienced foster care differently, there are patterns represented across the themes outlined in this chapter that highlight how they make meaning of the world around them and how this frames their mindset and priorities as they prepare to exit the foster care system.

### **5.1 THEMES**

#### **5.1.1 Family: Complex Structures and Dynamics**

For the youth in this study, the notion of family is multifaceted and, in some cases, convoluted. This section focuses on the complex relationships and connections that these youth have with their birth parents, siblings, and foster care families. Although each of the study participants has varying degrees of contact and communication with their families, family was a common topic that was discussed across all interviews in some form. Unlike their non-foster peers, these youth

were placed in family arrangements that the courts deemed to be in their best interest. Particularly for these youth, family can mean their birth family, foster family, adopted family, any combination of the three, or none of the above. Some of the youth lived with friends and their families and considered them to be their family, while others lived in group home settings and had distant or nonexistent relationships with their birth families.

Depending on the age of their placement in foster care, as well as the extent of their memories, recollections of and connections to family could stir up an array of emotions for these youth, including joy, pain, hurt, fondness, fear, and disdain. As such, matters relating to the construct of family are left unrestricted with space for these youth to frame and provide a context of who they consider to be family, as well as what family means to them. For many of the youth in this study, family was not structured in the traditional, nuclear sense, and was not a comfortable topic to openly discuss as it triggered a plethora of emotions and memories.

#### **5.1.1.1 Fragile relationships with birth parents.**

There were five overarching themes that captured how the study participants formed relationships with those they consider family. These dynamics encompassed birth parents, including issues related to substance abuse, incarceration and loss of a parent; sibling connections; and foster families. The relationships these youth have with their families ranged from supportive to estranged.

All of the participants articulated their relationships to their birth parents, with some of them maintaining healthy relationships and frequent contact. Victoria, for example, indicated that her parents are very supportive of her and her child, although she does not live with either of them. She stated,

I have a lot of family support, like my mom and my grandma. [I had a lot of support] when I lived with my dad after I had my son. He got a new house and everything so that he could have more rooms and stuff for me and my baby.

Victoria has since aged out of the foster care system and is living independently, but during her time in foster care she was placed with her father when she was 17 years old through kinship care placement. Her father took the necessary steps to bring his home up to court-mandated standards so that she and her child could leave an undesirable foster care placement to live with him instead. Likewise, Elyse did not mention any type of relationship or connection with her mother, but she currently has a good relationship with her father and lives with him and her younger siblings.

Sisters Melissa and Stacey harbor unfavorable feelings towards their parents and have since severed ties with them. They live together in an apartment with two other roommates and have infrequent contact with their parents. Stacey blames her parents for causing many of the mental and emotional conditions that she and her sister developed while living with them, including Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and anxiety. Both sisters continue to struggle with managing symptoms related to their ADD and anxiety in their adult life. Stacey prefers to discontinue contact with her parents, while Melissa has hopes that she will be able to mend her relationship with her mother. It is important to recognize that there may be a level of fragility between these youth and their birth parents.

#### **5.1.1.2 Birth parent substance abuse and/or incarceration.**

Problems related to drug and alcohol abuse, as well as incarceration, have strained and limited the amount of contact many of the youth have had with their birth parents. Parental drug and alcohol abuse are sometimes profoundly rooted issues that cause a fluctuation of emotions and

cycles of damaging patterns that these youth grapple with throughout their experiences in care. For those who shared that their parents had drug abuse problems, this was also coupled with incarceration at some point as well. As a result, the dynamics of their relationship and contact with their parents were mostly dependent upon the level of sobriety and incarceration status of their parents.

This was the case for Rob, as he is an only child to parents who both used drugs and spent time in jail. Although his parents were making an effort to improve their lives as recovering drug addicts, Rob views them as unreliable and considers his friend's family to be his primary guardians, as they have welcomed him into their home. Still, Rob attempts to maintain communication with his biological parents. He stated,

I talk to my dad pretty often. My mom tries to call me from jail, but she doesn't have any money on her stuff, so I can't accept her calls. It's not like I have a lot of money either, I'm working at a pizza shop.

Victoria similarly shared that her mother's drug abuse was the reason that she and her 10 siblings were separated and placed in foster care. Drug and alcohol misuse was also a common factor in both Letrell's and Destiny's separation from their parents and placement in foster care. They both hold a degree of resentment towards their mothers and blame them for some of the negative experiences they endured in foster care. Destiny was adopted by her aunt when she was two years old due to her mother's drug abuse. She eventually ran away from her aunt's home after she started rebelling in her early teenage years. Later, Destiny requested to live with her mother, but the situation did not turn out as she had hoped. She recalled,

They placed me with my mom at one point, because I told them that's the only way I was going to be good. The situation wasn't as ideal as I thought. I just ended up leaving my mom's house and going back to placement.

Destiny finished high school while in foster care, and afterward lived on her own for a few years before becoming pregnant. She currently lives with her mother, on what she hopes is a temporary basis, while she prepares to give birth to her first child. Destiny indicated that it has been difficult transitioning to living back at home with her mother, as they do not have a healthy relationship. However, she is doing her best to adjust as she anticipates needing her mother's support after her baby arrives.

#### **5.1.1.3 Effects of the death of a birth parent.**

Two of the participants, David and Letrell, talked about the difficulty of being a teenager and losing a parent and other close family members while in foster care. David lost his mother when he was 15 years old, and his grandmother, who he and his younger brother lived with at the time, passed shortly after his mother died. When Letrell was 17 years old and in foster care, his father was murdered. Both David and Letrell shared how they resorted to a level of defiant behavior to cope with the emotions they otherwise did not know how to express. They shared that the destructive behaviors they displayed were in response to the suppressed grief they experienced after losing a parent.

Letrell harbored a lot of pent-up anger towards his birth mother, which was exacerbated by the untimely death of his father. He faults his mother as the reason he did not have a closer relationship with his father, and whenever he spoke about her during the interview, it was from a place of resentment. He shared,

After my dad was murdered, I didn't wanna see my mom. I didn't wanna talk to her, I didn't be around her or anything like that, because I didn't want anything to do with her. But, I mean, I was holding a grudge.

The death of a parent can be a life-changing moment for any teenager, and it had a profound effect on the two youth in this study who lost a birth parent while they were in foster care. Both David and Letrell had an amicable relationship with the parent that they lost and hoped to continue their connection with them after they emancipated from the foster care system. Unfortunately, this is no longer possible in the physical sense, but both shared how they continue to have a spiritual relationship with their deceased parent, which continues to motivate them daily to make better decisions that would make them proud. David avowed, “My mom, whenever she was alive, always pushed me to do better...I want her to be proud of who I am now.” Letrell expressed that, even after his death, his father continues to be his top motivator and provides him with a greater sense of self-confidence. He stated,

I know that he's really proud of me, and I know he's always still with me, every day, every second, everywhere I go. And I don't have nearly as much fear as I had before he passed, to where I am much more confident in knowing that I always got him with me.

Relationships with birth parents were significant for a number of the participants in this study. For many, the relationships they had with their siblings were equally, if not more, meaningful for these youth during their time in foster care.

#### **5.1.1.4 Maintaining sibling connections.**

Except for one, all study participants have siblings who were, or who are currently, in the foster care system. Some of their siblings were placed together with them in the same foster homes,

but many were separated at some point during their time in foster care. These youth spoke very highly of their relationships with their siblings and felt that they did better in their foster care placements because of the comfort provided by being placed together in the same environment. For those who were separated from their siblings, reunification is among their top priorities as they age out of care, and in some instances more important than reuniting with birth parents and other relatives.

Sisters Melissa and Stacey currently live together and have a good relationship. They help support each other with their school and work obligations. For David, his younger brother helps motivate him to be the best big brother and role model that he can be. At one point, David was heading down a destructive path, but he turned his life around because he did not want his brother to imitate his bad habits. David shared how his brother pushes him to make better decisions, as he stated, "He's just going to do what I do and if I ain't going to do good, then he ain't going to do good. That's what I don't want to see." As such, David is more intentional about the decisions he makes, as he wants to set a good example for his younger brother to follow, and also wants his brother to consider him as a positive role model.

Four study participants disclosed that they have siblings with experiences in the foster care system, as well as half-siblings that they did not have a strong connection with, but wanted to get to know better. Victoria has 11 siblings on her mother's side, and when they entered the foster care system, they were all placed in separate living arrangements. She shared, "We all went into foster care at different places. There was actually eight of us, I think, well I believe back then, but now my mom has had more kids." Victoria did not speak much about her current relationship with her siblings beyond the fact that she hopes to remain in contact with them in

some fashion. Elyse lives with her younger siblings on her father's side, but did not go into detail about her relationship with them.

Letrell and Destiny spoke of having half-siblings with whom they did not have a strong connection. When Destiny turned 18 years old and checked herself out of foster care, she went to live with a sister on her father's side that she did not know. Due to their lack of connection, this ended up being a short-lived living arrangement for her. She shared,

I went to live with my sister when I was 18, which I had no relationship with. I never talked to her for 18 years; I literally had no relationship with her – she's on my dad's side. That failed, so I started bouncing from house to house.

Destiny also has younger siblings on her mother's side, and she currently resides with them. She has a closer relationship with her younger siblings, who are in elementary school, and shared that she enjoys spending time with them and helping them with their homework.

Like Destiny, Letrell also has siblings on his father's side that he does not share a strong connection with, but he grew up closely with the siblings on his mother's side. He shared, "I have three brothers and two sisters, but I don't really know my sisters all that well." Although Letrell was young when he was placed with his first foster care family, he still vividly remembers experiencing feelings of loneliness and confusion when he was separated from older brothers, as he recalled,

The first time, it was scary; it was back in '03, so I was, like, four. None of it really made any sense to me, because – well, like I said, I've got two brothers and they put me by myself. I'm the youngest, and they put the other two together for whatever reason. And they never asked me if I wanted to go with them or if it was – they never

told me if it was a possibility or not. They separated the youngest from his brothers, and I was isolated from my family.

Since his first placement, Letrell has spent the majority of his life bouncing in and out of the foster care system, including foster family and group home placements. Many of these included being placed with at least one of his older brothers. When he was older, Letrell especially appreciated having at least one of his brothers living with him at the group homes, as they helped to defend him in situations that involved fighting and/or bullying. He recalled, "My oldest brother that I lived with, he was really good at breaking up the fights, and he always protected me."

Most of the participants shared instances of at least one positive sibling relationship that they experienced during their time in the foster care system. Sibling connections provided a sense of comfort and familiarity as they transitioned through multiple placements in foster care, especially for those who were placed with at least one of their siblings at a foster home or group facility. While some of the youth did not share aspirations to maintain relationships with their birth parents after they emancipated from foster care, all those with siblings expressed a desire to remain connected with at least one of their siblings after they aged out of the system.

#### **5.1.1.5 Variable relationships with foster care families.**

Living with foster and adoptive families was not a singular experience among the study participants. While the youth did not talk in-depth about their relationships with all of their foster care families, they did share defining moments, some good and some bad, that reflected on their time living in the foster family setting.

Rob's experiences were unique when compared to other participants' foster family experiences. He is an only child, and both of his parents have a history of drug abuse and

incarceration; his mother is currently incarcerated. Rob stays with a friend's family that informally took him in; he was not placed with the family through the foster care system. He enjoys his current living situation and feels supported by his friend's family. He shared,

Like, for most of the time I stayed here. This is one of my friend's houses. His family took me in, the dad kind of adopted me. I mean, everybody here [at his friend's house] is always there for me, and they're backing me. They check on me, and they kept me out of trouble when I was doing my thing and being a rebellious teenager.

For Rob, the relationship with the family that took him in is meaningful for several reasons. They provide a level of structure and stability that he did not experience with his birth parents. His friend's family supported him even when he was going through a rebellious phase and allowed him to remain in their home, though they did not have a formal obligation to do so as he was not officially placed with them through the foster care system. He spoke very highly of his respect and gratefulness for his friend's family as they continue to allow him to live with them after he dropped out of high school.

Letrell shared both positive and negative experiences he had with the multiple foster families he lived with before transitioning to group homes. Although he had a difficult time transitioning to living separately from his older brothers, he had fond memories of his first foster care placement family. He lived with several foster families, but this is the only family that he used endearing terms such as "love" to describe how he felt about his foster parents. He recalled,

My first foster family was cool because they let my brothers come over and stay with us a couple times, just so we could have brother time together, which was cool...I loved them. They treated me really good...whenever I left that foster home, my foster

mom was bawling her eyes out whenever she heard that I was going home [he was reunited with his mother]. And she wouldn't stop hugging me, like she didn't want me to go but she was happy for me, too, so she was sad but had tears of joy at the same time. My foster dad, he didn't really show any emotion, but I think he was pretty upset, too.

Letrell appreciated the expressions of emotion and concern that this foster family openly shared. He also enjoyed the fact that this foster family allowed him to remain connected to his brothers so that they could maintain their bond.

Not all study participants in foster care were placed with strangers; some were placed with relatives to help maintain family ties. David and his younger brother were placed in the care of their maternal grandmother through kinship care when they first entered the foster care system. However, after his grandmother passed, he was placed in a variety of living arrangements, including foster families and group homes. He experienced varying levels of treatment from his foster parents throughout his multiple placements. He shared,

When we got into foster care, we lived with this old guy. It was just me, my brother and him, and it was kind of weird. He used to always do things with us and take us to the movies every weekend. Then, after a while, he kind of called the caseworker behind my back and asked for a 30-day removal and then one day they just popped up, and we left.

David was blindsided by this foster father's sudden request to have he and his brother removed from his home, as he thought the placement was a good fit for them. He appreciated the foster father spending time with both he and his brother, and he spent quality time with them by taking them to activities. It was difficult having to suddenly be uprooted and move further

away to live with a different foster family that did not treat him and his brother well. He recalled,

It was a pretty sad deal. We went all the way out to a family that was two hours away. It looked real nice, like the house looked really nice – it had everything that a kid would want. I mean, it had a pool, a trampoline and all that stuff. But the foster parents were just horrible.

This placement was a turning point for David. After leaving, he entered a phase of what he described as making poor decisions. He and his brother were both initially placed with the current family that they are staying with now. However, after a period of poor decision-making, David was taken out of the foster family setting and placed in a few group homes. His brother remained with the current foster family while David spent time in the group home facilities. After being separated for some time, David was reunited with his brother, and they are both living together with their current foster family. Both David and his brother like their current foster family, mainly because they treat them well and take them on out-of-state family vacations to participate in outdoor activities such as hiking and fishing. His current foster family placement provides both exposure to amenities and experiences that he may not otherwise have the opportunity to enjoy, in addition to having a foster family that treats him and his brother well.

Similar to David, Destiny was also initially in a kinship care placement as she was adopted by her aunt when she was two years old. Destiny's aunt adopted her to remove her from the foster care system, after being placed in care as a result of her mother's drug abuse and subsequent negligence in caring for Destiny. While in her aunt's care, Destiny was still able to interact with her mother. Destiny was young and did not fully understand why she could not live with her mother, which caused her to build up resentment towards her aunt. She felt as if her

aunt purposely kept her away from her mother, and she did not have a good experience growing up in her aunt's care. During the time she lived with her aunt, Destiny recalled,

We went through the process of adoption and everything. It wasn't a good experience growing up with her. [After leaving her aunt's care] I went to other foster homes, and I didn't have good experiences there either.

Out of all of the participants, Destiny had the most foster care placements as she lived in more than 10 different foster care homes and group home facilities after leaving her aunt's house at the age of 13. Though Destiny did not talk in-depth about each of her different placements, she did share her overall disdain for her foster care placement living arrangements by stating, "I didn't like the foster care homes at all."

Victoria and Elyse also experienced kinship care as they were both placed in the care of their fathers. For Victoria, being placed with her father removed her from a very degrading foster care family experience. She had recently given birth to her son, and was placed with a new foster family. She described this unpleasant living arrangement:

I remember I went there at 3:00 in the morning and it was just really weird. For a week the lady was really nice and stuff and then...it was just a bad time there. They would say stuff to me about my son like, "You're not taking care of him right." And were telling the other kids, "Don't go in that room, she's dirty," and stuff like that.

Victoria's father worked hard to make the necessary improvements to his home and personal life to meet the standards set by the court system so that both Victoria and her son could live with him. For Victoria, this was pivotal as her father's efforts helped to remove her from a foster care placement that she described as toxic in many ways.

The experiences that these youth have had living in various foster care arrangements have oscillated from enjoyable to reprehensible. For many, the uncertainty of their many foster and adoptive family placements have significantly affected how they perceive the role and purpose of family, as this is not a linear or traditional concept for them. Destiny shared how her fragmented experiences in the foster care system transformed how she personally views the role of family while in foster care. She expressed,

Everyone was focused on finding me a family or whatever...but I saw it as they're just giving me a caregiver. I'm going to be placed here, I'm going to be placed there, and I'm going to be placed here. It's like they will always have a place for me to live, but I'm still pretty much on my own.

Destiny's perspective illustrates a contradiction between how she and the foster care system view the role of foster care family placements. Based on her experiences, Destiny did not connect with the familial aspect of the foster care placements, as she saw the placements as merely providing for her basic housing needs. By not interacting or engaging with the foster families where she was placed, Destiny was not able to cultivate lasting relationships that would extend beyond her time in their care.

Though some of the youth eagerly await the day they can be reunited with their birth parents and families, there are others who have no desire to reestablish any familial connections upon their emancipation from the foster care system. Likewise, some youth hope to maintain relationships with their foster families, while others intend to sever all ties after they age-out of the foster care system.

## **5.1.2 Experiences Growing Up in the Foster Care System**

The participants in this study shared that their way of life was significantly altered upon entering the foster care system. It was quite an adjustment to have their daily lives dictated by administrators, systems, and structures that are put into place to make decisions that are in their best interest. They each shared about the joys and frustrations they experienced through their interactions with systems and personnel, such as the courts, social workers, foster care caseworkers, K-12 education administrators, counselors, and other staff with decision making authority over their lives. This section will highlight some of the prominent experiences the youth shared concerning how their way of life was altered as a result of growing up in the foster care system.

### **5.1.2.1 Multiple transitions.**

Most of the participants in this study entered the foster care system at or after the age of 13, and each experienced numerous placements. Between the eight participants, they attended a total of 56 different schools during their K-12 educational experience and had a combined 24 different foster family placements. Each of these transitions was met with a different level of disruption and adjustment as they became acclimated to their new living and educational environments.

In addition to enduring numerous home and school transitions, these youth also have to acclimate to new providers, administrators, and staff at each transition point, which can also be tiring and overwhelming. These youth have endured a considerable amount of traumatic experiences, and it takes time to open up and trust people with their personal stories and lived experiences. Letrell shared his frustrations of continually having to re-tell his story, as he indicated, "I don't got no problem about anything I have to say. I just don't know how to

continue from where I started, basically 'cause I've told my story to so many people...I just don't know."

On top of continually having to recount his personal story, Letrell also mentioned that he is more guarded and intentional about the information he chooses to share with authority figures. He shared an instance where he confided in a school counselor, which resulted in him and his siblings being removed from his mother's care and placed back into the foster care system. He stated,

So, eventually – well, it was my fault we even got put back in foster care, but I didn't know better. I went to school telling I think it was my guidance counselor – I mean, since I didn't know better, I was just talking to her – she asked what was going on at home, so I told her. And I guess she called our caseworker and she talked to her supervisor. Then they came to the house and they put me and my brothers back in foster care.

Letrell shared that his father had disciplined him and his brothers by spanking them, and after he shared this with his guidance counselor, they were removed from their home, thus returning to foster care. He did not intend for his guidance counselor to share this information with their caseworker, but later understood that she had to report the incident. After this incident, Letrell indicated that he was reluctant to share similar incidents for fear of being removed from the home and placed back into the foster care system.

### **5.1.3 Mental, Emotional and Behavioral Health Concerns**

The youth who participated in this study entered the foster care largely due to issues of abuse and neglect. These painful experiences are often exacerbated by other actions, such as multiple

transitions, placements, and continuously struggling to adjust to new families and schools. These transitions can trigger, as well as cause, additional mental, emotional, behavioral, and other health-related issues. Several of the youth shared receiving counseling and mental health services to help process and heal from negative experiences they endured while in care.

Each of the participants has automatic counseling and psychological services that are provided as a result of them being in foster care. There was a varying degree of how these youth took advantage of these services that were provided, with some finding them beneficial and others who described the sessions as merely going through the motions because they did not have a choice. Letrell shared,

I was depressed all the time and I didn't really know how to handle it. I started acting out, I was acting up, and I got a service that they had to come to my foster home and talk to me, like once a week for a really long time. Actually, the whole time I was there.

#### **5.1.3.1 Anxiety and depression.**

All of the study participants disclosed that they are currently dealing with issues of anxiety and depression or have at some point in their past. They experience a great deal of emotional stress which has led to many of them being diagnosed with mental and behavioral conditions, as well as being prescribed medication to help alleviate related symptoms. Destiny, for instance, shared that she was feeling so hopeless and frustrated at one of her foster family placements that she actually attempted suicide. During her interview she disclosed,

I was in one foster home for about a month and I had a horrible time there. That's the one I tried the suicide attempt. I'm going to counseling right now, because I am

trying to learn who I am and more about myself. I really don't have any hobbies, I don't have any interests, and I don't know.

Destiny is taking steps to improve her mental health so that she can be in a better emotional and psychological state as she gets closer to the due date of her first child. She discussed this as a priority through indicating, "I'm just trying to better myself for myself and for when my baby gets here."

Both Melissa and Stacey spoke of their daily struggles with anxiety, which limits the amount of contact that they desire to have with other people. Stacey has delayed her return to school to pursue her career as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) because she is hesitant to be in a large classroom setting. She indicated that due to her anxiety she,

Wasn't looking to go into a classroom unless it really needed to be done...I'd rather do it online, [but the classes for the CNA program] are small, they're like 10 people. It'll get me to where I'm comfortable with getting to know people around me first before jumping into a whole group of 1000 people.

Letrell shared several examples of how he continues to grapple with bouts of depression, anxiety, and grief. He, too, receives counseling services to help in this process. According to him, some of his mental and emotional struggles are rooted in feelings of homesickness (as he is currently in a group home placement). He still grapples with emotions associated with grief, as he continues to mourn his father's death.

### **5.1.3.2 Behavioral issues.**

A few of the participants divulged that they had behavioral-related problems throughout their time in the foster care system. Many of these negative behaviors surfaced in the school setting through instances of fighting with their peers. Similar occurrences took place in the group home

facilities as a result of the bullying they experienced. Rob stated, "I've always been kind of hard-headed and stubborn. I don't really listen to a lot of people either. I just kind of do my own thing" as his approach to interacting with others, especially those in authoritative or administrative roles. David and Letrell also shared instances of fighting within some of their group home facility placements, and as they changed schools as a means of self-defense from bullying and other types of harassment. Letrell recalled,

I got into a fight because I went to a predominantly white school, and some kids were being ignorant, just talking about – I'm not sure, making fun of me. But they were talking about how I was Black, they called me a nigger, and so, I basically just blacked out and I started punching on one of the kids, and I got suspended. But people knew why I did it, but – I mean, my anger problems were a lot worse back then.

These instances provide a glimpse of the frustrations that many of the participants endured as a part of their experiences growing up in foster care, especially as they related to multiple transitions and the impact on their mental, emotional, and behavioral health. Counseling and psychological services were provided to all of the participants in the study as a part of their mandated treatment provisions while in care. These services assisted many of the youth as they adjusted and transitioned to growing up in the foster care system.

#### **5.1.4 Deteriorating Outlook on School: K-12 Educational Experiences**

Each of the participants shared that they had an intense love for school during their elementary years, which for most, was before entering the foster care system. They fondly reflected on how they enjoyed attending school and discussed what types of careers they were interested in pursuing at that point in their lives. Destiny recalled,

When I was younger, like elementary school, I loved going to school. I used to cry if I had a doctor's appointment and they were like, "We're just going to hold you home that day." and I'd be like, "No! Could I go before? Can I go after? Like, can I go at all today?" I loved school. I looked forward to going to school.

Likewise, David also had warm memories of school during his elementary years before being placed in foster care. He shared, "Before foster care I always had fun. I always had friends – I always had a good time in school." Victoria echoed the sentiments, as she indicated,

Things changed when I got into foster care. Like, through elementary school and the beginning of middle school I was like, "I like school." But then once I got to the harder grades, I was like, "I hate school."

This was a common thread across all of the participants' experiences – there was a drastic shift in their affinity towards school when they approached their middle school years, and after entering foster care. In most cases, this turned to complete disdain by the time they reached high school. They had become disengaged with school, and this disconnection was more significant for those participants with multiple foster care home and school placements during their later years.

#### **5.1.4.1 Constant school changes.**

Five participants indicated that they attended more than five different school placements during their K-12 educational experience. Three of those youth attended more than 10 different schools, with most of those transitions happening at the middle and high school level. They expressed that it was very challenging having to continually reestablish themselves in a new school setting

multiple times throughout the academic year. Melissa recalled, “Sometimes we went to three different schools in one year. It was horrible!”

Many of the students expressed frustrations when they transitioned to new schools and were often automatically placed into an alternative education setting upon transferring to a new school, instead of into the traditional classroom setting with their peers in the same grade level. Destiny shared how this practice caused her to become generally uninterested in school because she did not feel challenged.

They put you in, I don’t know what the word – alternative schools. Which I hated, because it’s like you’re not experiencing the full school experience. You also are in a class with – I was in ninth grade in a class with 9 through 12 graders, so we were all learning the same thing and we’re not all at the same level. Then I would go to another placement, or I would go to another grade, and I would still learn the same stuff, because, like I said, they’re teaching 9 through 12 graders all the same thing. I really think that’s messed up.

Transitioning in and out of schools throughout the academic year also presented challenges for some of the youth as they were not placed in the appropriate grade-level. Some were placed into courses and grades they felt were far above their academic and comprehension levels, while others felt academically disengaged by being placed in grade levels and classes they felt were too low. This perpetuated their disengagement as they felt they were learning redundant information.

#### **5.1.4.2 Feeling detached and lonely.**

Frequent school transitions made it difficult for many of the youth to establish friendships and connections. They shared challenges that were inherent to always being the new kid at school,

which often resulted in them being treated as outcasts by their peers. When David entered the foster care system in the eighth grade, he considered himself to be a very social person, but still had difficulty making friends.

I wouldn't say I was anti-social, but nobody would talk to me. I was a new kid coming from placement and nobody wanted to talk to me or anything. I didn't have really any friends. I mean, it was difficult adjusting to that and then it was every year I kind of gained friends and then I lost some. It was just back and forth through that.

Sisters Melissa and Stacey recalled similar feelings of being ostracized by their peers when they transitioned to new schools. They had difficulty making friends, which also contributed them feeling stressed and anxious at school. For Destiny, constant school transitions hurt her ability to focus in school as well. She added, "When you're bouncing from foster home and placement sometimes it's hard to concentrate in school." Feelings of isolation can pose barriers that limit the ability for these youth to successfully transition into a new school setting. These types of hindrances can impair their ability to fully integrate into the educational environment and damage their ability to socially connect with their peers.

#### **5.1.4.3 Declining academic performance.**

For some of the participants, school proved to be very overwhelming for a number of reasons. Some of the youth had issues with satisfactory academic and attendance performance, while others balanced responsibilities that were innate to being a new teen parent or found it difficult to attend school while working. These realities translated into truancy and poor academic performance, as well the reason that some chose to take a break from school or drop-out altogether. David's academic difficulties surfaced in middle school. In addition to encountering

challenges socially adjusting to school, he also underperformed academically, at times resulting in failure or being held back a grade level.

I wasn't doing what I was supposed to do. I was always failing. I was never going to school. I failed sixth, seventh and eighth grade. I went to summer school for sixth and seventh grade, but eighth grade I didn't go, because my mom told me I had to pay for it if I wanted to go. I didn't want to listen, so I just didn't go and I failed.

Victoria became a new mother at the end of her 9<sup>th</sup> grade year. She was overwhelmed with trying to balance school with the responsibilities of being a single-parent while working a part-time job. She ended up failing two classes during the semester she had her child, and stopped-out of school for the entire following academic year to adjust. However, she was determined to graduate from high school, so she worked very hard when she returned to school for her senior year as she recalled,

I had to catch up [from not attending school for a year]. I paid for Cyber School my senior year, in addition going to regular school, [in order] to make up those two credits from when I failed two classes. I had to do it [Cyber School] from home, on top of going to school and my vo-tech [Certified Nursing Assistant] program, too.

Victoria sacrificed a lot during her senior year to meet the academic standards to graduate with her high school diploma. She also completed a vocational training program that allowed her to graduate with a certificate as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), the job that she currently holds.

Two of the participants, Stacey and Rob, dropped-out of high school and decided to pursue their GED instead. For Stacey, it was difficult concentrating in the traditional classroom

setting due to her anxiety and ADD, and it was also complicated for her to balance working full-time while attending high school. As a result, she dropped out of high school in the 10th grade and earned her GED.

Rob also dropped-out of high school in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade at the age of 15. He missed over 90 days of school while he was in high school, and as a result of his truancy, was placed in a group home facility. When he returned to high school, he continued to be disengaged. He regularly failed to complete his homework and other assignments, and decided to drop-out of high school due to his poor academic performance and general lack of interest in school. During his interview, he shared his plans to begin studying for his GED so that he could enroll in a welding program at a local trade school, but had yet to make any progress towards reviewing for or signing up to take the GED test.

Melissa is currently 20 years old, and completing her high school diploma through Cyber School. She prefers the online learning environment so that she can finish assignments at her own pace without any distractions, as she found it difficult to focus and concentrate in the physical classroom setting. She experienced a setback during her senior year of high school due to changing schools and her father waiting too late to enroll her at her new school after they moved. When she finally re-enrolled she was placed in the 10th grade because of her academic performance level. This was upsetting to her, because she had hoped to graduate with her senior class at the end of that academic year. Instead, she is currently enrolled in Cyber School and is working towards completing her 11th-grade year. For Melissa, it is important to earn her high school diploma, versus a GED. She also expressed concerns about physically being in class as a 20 year old among classmates who were nearly four years younger than her. This was a primary reason she elected to earn her high school diploma through attending Cyber School.

For many of the participants, their early enchantment with school changed to feelings of disengagement and disconnection. Frequent placements and school changes made it difficult for them to connect with their peers and also caused significant disruptions to the continuity of their educational experiences. School gradually became a hassle and an inconvenience as they approached their high school years. Their disposition towards school waned when compared to the optimistic outlook and affinity they had towards school and their education while in elementary school and/or before entering the foster care system.

### **5.1.5 Postsecondary Education Interests and Priorities Entering Adulthood**

Across the board, each of the youth who participated in this study agreed that there were benefits to postsecondary education, even if it was an option they did not want to pursue immediately after graduating high school or obtaining their GED. Some of the youth were excited about the idea of college, but they felt that they did not have the proper guidance or support to make it a reality for them. Others lacked confidence in their ability to succeed in the traditional four-year college setting and instead hoped to pursue certificate-based programs that created a shorter path to obtaining employment.

It was apparent for some that the adverse effects of their high school experiences tainted the views some of the youth held about postsecondary education options as well. Victoria professed, "I don't like school that much already in high school, so I don't want to go for another four years or something." Stacey shared that college was not a priority due to tumultuous K-12 educational experiences. She stated, "I've known some foster kids that don't even want anything to do with college because of the way we grow up. Most of us kids don't want to just jump right into college after we get out of high school." While the participants' postsecondary education

aspirations were varied, the goal of living a normal and successful life was a connecting factor across all of the youths' priorities for their impending independence from the foster care system.

#### **5.1.5.1 Shifting and disjointed postsecondary education aspirations.**

All of the participants acknowledged that postsecondary education was beneficial as it not only provided an opportunity for increased learning and knowledge, but more importantly enhanced prospects for a wider variety of better-paying job and career options. However, some did not realize their potential for success at the postsecondary level after learning more about the necessary steps that led to the careers they initially wanted to pursue. Rob, for example, stated,

All the way up until the end of middle school I wanted to be an architect. Then I started learning about being an architect, what you got to do, and I was like I can't do that. It was too much for me.

As a result, Rob no longer wishes to pursue becoming an architect because he was overwhelmed with the process entailed with pursuing this career. Now, he wants to become a welder because it would only involve passing his GED and enroll in a trade school; the process is not as complicated as his original desire to pursue a career in architecture. Rob has also accepted the fact that his decision to drop-out of high school limits his ability to pursue postsecondary education until he earns his GED. He declared,

Maybe if I was younger and someone talked to me about it and opened my eyes a little bit and told me more about what I can do with college or anything, I probably would have stayed in school. College gives you more job options. I'm not going to have too many job options.

David shared a similar change in career track aspirations. He initially wanted to become a surgeon and attend an Ivy League university, but his plans changed as he began to limit his academic and career options. He stated,

When I first got to high school I was like, "Oh, I want to be a surgeon." I wanted to be something in the medical field and go to a nice college like Harvard. But that's not realistic for me now. I go to a tech program now, so after high school, I'll go to a community college just to get the basic stuff done. Then if I go to college, it will be for sports therapy or exercise science.

David's postsecondary education aspiration plans drastically changed as he progressed through his high school career. He did not share in-depth why his plans to be a surgeon changed, but current college plans shifted significantly when compared to his initial hopes to attend Harvard University. Stacey shared a similar change of plans in which she scaled back her initial aspirations to pursue a medical career. She stated, "I did want to become a pre-med or a doctor, and then I was like, 'Eh, my life goals are too high and I can't accomplish that.'"

While David, Rob and Stacey shared experiences of downsizing their initial postsecondary education plans, there were a few participants who developed ambiguous career plans. These plans lacked clarity and a clear path to their intended college majors and subsequent careers. For example, in terms of her college and career aspirations, Melissa indicated,

I want to double major in criminal investigation and nursing. I'm not sure what kind of nurse I want to be though. I want to work in a children's hospital I guess you can say. I mean, a social worker is kinda of interesting to me, too, just because I grew up

with them basically a lot of my life. So, I'm in between the nursing and the social worker thing.

Comparably, Destiny shared several disconnected career options that she hoped to pursue within the next 4-5 years. She stated,

I want to do Criminal Justice, so I want to go back to school and I also want to be working as a correctional officer while I'm doing online classes for Criminal Justice. That way I can get my degree and maybe move to Forensics or a police officer. I mean, you don't have to go to school to be a police officer, but I kind of am debating between a police officer and Forensics because I want to be involved with the crimes. But if I do Forensics, I can just investigate it instead.

Letrell also spoke of multiple career paths he planned to consider regarding his postsecondary education path. He indicated that he wanted to go to a mid-size state university located in his hometown near his family. There, he intended to take culinary classes so that he could obtain the proper certification to be a chef (although this particular school currently does not have a culinary arts program), as well as pursue a double-degree program in social work and psychology. These three youth articulated career and postsecondary education paths that lacked guidance and understanding of the requirements necessary for completion, or as in the case of Letrell, selected a major/program that does not exist at the institution he plans to attend.

Elyse is the only participant who is currently enrolled in postsecondary education, as she attends a community college. She shared contradicting viewpoints about how she sees the value of college. On the one hand, she is interested in completing her Associate Degree then transferring to a four-year institution, but at the same time, indicated during her interview that college was not important to her. She shared that she would be perfectly fine dropping-out of

college and working at a local restaurant, but knows that if she did so, both her father and a supportive teacher that she respects would be very disappointed.

#### **5.1.5.2 Inadequate postsecondary education planning assistance.**

There are varying degrees of postsecondary education exposure, planning, and aspirations among the study participants. Some of the youth have participated in tours of local college and universities through their connections with the Expanding Horizons, and some have even participated in college fairs at their high schools and other local establishments. For the most part, these youth lacked continuous personalized planning and guidance to show them the proper steps needed for the college application process.

Destiny indicated that while in high school no one took the time to discuss college options with her, so she did not really think or talk about it. After she graduated from high school, she was overwhelmed with the college application process that she tried to learn on her own as she would be a first-generation college student. She recalled,

It never really worked out, because, I guess, I never got the help to do so and I never even really understood what I was doing. Plus, when I would get home my mom – when I was living with her, because I did live with her temporarily, she doesn't know. She didn't go to college. She dropped out of school early, so she doesn't have any experience, so I kind of didn't know what I was doing. Nobody helped me with my FAFSA. They told me about it, but nobody helped. I still don't know what to do. They would tell me to apply for college and then I'd be like, "What are you talking about, like transcripts? What are transcripts?"

Planning for college can be a cumbersome process, so the key is early planning. For some of these youth, there is a lack of continuity and consistency engaging in conversations and

actions to help them begin to imagine what postsecondary education can look like for them, considering their unique circumstance of being in the foster care system. Due to extensive school transitions, an aspect that foster care youth lose is dedicated professionals and adults that they trust to assist them in preparing for postsecondary education.

### **5.1.5.3 Immediate priorities after aging-out of foster care.**

Over the course of the interviews, it was clear that a top priority for all of the participants upon exiting the foster care system was to find a personal sense of normalcy that was void of court systems, caseworkers, and the bureaucracy that is inherent to the foster care system. Although having a "normal life" looked different depending on the youth, most shared desires for housing, transportation, and employment stability, as well as continuing their education beyond the high school diploma/GED in order to pursue their career goals. Rob shared his anticipation for exiting the foster care system, as he exclaimed,

Honestly, the thing I've been like really thinking about a lot and kind of excites me sometimes is living my own life, doing things like I want to do, and being on my own feet, supporting myself

*Freedom and independence.* Collectively, the youth who participated in this study are looking forward to being free from court mandates, required appointments, group home facilities, and routine meetings with caseworkers. These are among the aspects of independence and freedom that are innate to adulthood for the youth. David articulated that he is, "Most looking forward to freedom. Oh man, I can't express that enough. Freedom, definitely." Melissa echoed these sentiments, as she looks forward to "Not really having to worry about Child and Family Services. I'm just tired of seeing them. I've seen them for so long."

*Defining success for themselves.* As with aspirations of normalcy, success was individually determined, but was a common goal among the youth participants. Some described success in terms of education and careers, while others described living independently and starting their own families. There were also some youth who indicated their success would be determined by proving naysayers wrong, and accomplishing goals despite their backgrounds as former foster care youth.

David's ideals of success are intricately entwined to his younger brother's success. He indicated,

Well, I hope to still be in college with a really good job paying more than minimum wage, obviously. I'll have an apartment, and my brother will still be in school or starting college. In the long term, I hope to just be sitting in nice big house with wife and kids and having my own a physical therapy place.

Destiny aspires to have a career job that is far removed from her current position in the fast food industry. She stated,

I hope to further my education and get me a good career! I don't want to be working at a fast food restaurant for the rest of my life. I want a 9:00 am to 5:00 pm job, you know. I want to live that life of I have to go to work Monday through Friday and I have to get up from 9:00 to 5:00. I just want a regular life.

Stacey hopes to live a life that substantially exceeds the low expectations that many people set for youth with lived experiences in the foster care system. She shared,

Some people don't think that we'll become of anything. I want to prove some of those people wrong and that's the only thing that keeps pushing me forward to try to get

into this college and do better for myself, because I don't want people thinking the same of everybody and be like, "Oh, you're not going to become anything in life."

Although the details of what success ultimately looks like varied among the study participants, what was clear is their determination. They expressed future plans fortified with aspirations of thriving beyond the foster care system and the attached stigmas. Their goals are based upon terms that they establish for themselves, instead of living according to someone else's standards and expectations. The final chapter will synthesize the individual and collective experiences and challenges that were shared by the youth. Their stories and perspectives will ground recommendations that call for critical reconsideration of the ways in which theory, research and practice are utilized to provide insight on their postsecondary education perceptions.

## 6.0 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the postsecondary education perceptions of former foster care youth ages 18-21. During this phase of their lives, these youth are actively exiting the foster care system and entering a new stage of independence and adulthood. Nationally, the number of former foster care youth enrolling in postsecondary education is significantly lower than that of their non-foster peers (Hallett & Westland, 2015; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Wolanin, 2005). However, generally absent from the literature is insight detailing why foster care youth are not enrolling in postsecondary education at similar rates to their non-foster peers. The voice of this transitioning age group of foster care youth is limited as well. The extant literature speaks more about the experiences of foster care youth from the vantage point of others, but not directly from their perspective. This study adds those voices in understanding the priorities of foster care youth as they exit foster care and how they relate to postsecondary education.

The introduction to the study began with a quotation that illustrated how teens in the foster care system had internalized the depreciated outlook that many people hold about them relative to their future success exiting the foster care system. Krebs and Pitcoff (2004) suggest that older foster care youth accepted the "all-consuming and self-fulfilling" perception held by others which predicts they lack the potential to be "college students, employees, business owners [and] professionals" (p. 361). While the participants in this study did exhibit some self-defeating

attitudes about their future potential, they also provided insight on challenges related to multiple placement transitions, school mobility issues, and inconsistent support provided by caregivers, educators, and adults. This study contributes an inside perspective on priorities for foster care youth as they transition out of the foster care system, as well as their self-defined measures of success. The ensuing discussion synthesizes information gleaned from the participant interviews to guide recommendations to improve the support provided during this pivotal phase of their lives.

### **6.1.1 Effect of Volatile School Experiences**

What was clear from the findings is that the secondary educational experiences of foster care youth have a profound effect on their interests, attitudes, and readiness for postsecondary education. For most of the youth, the start of their progressive disdain for school can be traced to their entry into the foster care system in their early teenage years. A majority of the study participants entered foster care and middle school simultaneously. This tumultuous adjustment to both systems proved to be overwhelming for many of the participants. It is important to understand that the damaging experiences at this point in their transition can have lasting effects on how they generally perceive school, including higher education. For these youth, thoughts about their postsecondary education prospects do not reset once their high school experience ends. While they understand the value of postsecondary education, their negative secondary school experiences detract from their desire to enroll immediately, if at all.

### **6.1.1.1 Waning interest in school.**

The gradual waning interest in school for the youth in this study is consistent with prevailing statistics in the literature that more than 70% of foster care youth aspire to attend college, but less than 20% eventually enroll (Hallett & Westland, 2015; Hines, Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005; Rios & Rocco, 2015; Wolanin, 2005). The youth shared several instances of their affinity for school prior to entering foster care. For most, issues of dissatisfaction with school began during their adjustment to middle school and became increasingly worse by the time they reached high school. This progression of discontent is noteworthy as it emphasizes the importance of this educational transition point for foster care youth. Depending on their experiences adjusting to their new school environment, this transition point can have a lasting effect on how the youth formulate their thoughts and opinions about school moving forward, even more so if they do not have a smooth transition.

It is important to understand how critical this juncture is for the foster care youth, as it has the potential to set the tone for their future educational perceptions and career aspirations. These youth dreamed big regarding their career goals before entering foster care, but by the time they reached high school, many of them had rescinded some of the careers they hoped for in their younger years. Many of the reasons they shared for no longer aspiring to pursue careers such as being a doctor or hopes of attending an Ivy League institution reflected a reduced assurance in their capabilities and potential. They used self-defeating rationales of not being smart enough, being educationally underprepared, and feeling that those types of advanced careers and institutions were impossible for students like them who had experiences in foster care. This mentality coincides with the work of Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, and Colvin (2011) which explores the concept of educational expectations, which are defined as realistic and concrete assessments of

future educational possibility. The authors note that foster care youth have an increased risk for lower educational aspirations, which can also be seen in how the youth in this study have scaled back their educational plans and career aspirations based upon their secondary school experiences.

#### **6.1.1.2 School mobility concerns.**

There were several factors discussed that reinforced ways in which these youth felt marginalized and disenfranchised by the time they reached high school, which further tainted their attitudes on the general role and purpose of school. Issues of school mobility served as the primary source of school dissension for the study participants. Zetlin and Weinberg (2004) reported that high levels of residential and school mobility for youth in foster care had an adverse effect on their learning, academic achievement, and school performance, which is supported by the findings of this study. Many of the study participants' school-related issues, including academic level placement and forming peer social connections, were compounded by continually changing schools. It is difficult for these youth to feel settled and connected in a school setting, as some reported switching schools more than three times in the same academic year.

Academically, the youth shared frustrations about being placed in alternative classrooms upon enrolling in a new school, which made them feel isolated from other students in their same grade level. For some participants, being placed in an alternative classroom with students ranging from grades 9 – 12 was detrimental to their learning. In this setting, they were forced to cover information below their grade level, as well as above their grade level. These experiences caused feelings of academic disengagement as at times they felt they were learning repetitive information and not being academically challenged, while at other times they felt overwhelmed due to being taught information that was above their grade and comprehension level. These

types of academic placements in alternative classrooms frequently happened for some participants, consistent with the findings of Wolanin (2005) that indicate on average, foster care youth lose four to six months of educational attainment with each school change. This level of educational disruption can be detrimental as it limits opportunities for foster care youth to engage in consistent college preparatory and advanced-level courses.

Further, study participants also expressed feelings of being socially ostracized by their peers due to stigmas associated with being in foster care. Many shared how difficult it was for them to acquire friends when transitioning from school to school. One participant indicated that when he entered foster care in middle school, he considered himself to be a very social person, but no one wanted to be his friend because he was in foster care. This stigmatization was echoed in the experiences of other study participants as they reflected on the feelings of loneliness and isolation during their middle and high school experiences due to not having sustained social connections and friendships with their peers in school. Additionally, some of the youth described repeated instances of bullying and fighting that they endured in the school setting. For them, this treatment resulted in them being targets since they were foster care kids. This adds to the challenges and difficulties these youth experience as they try to make friends and establish social connections with their peers at school. These types of occurrences are concerning because they not only limit opportunities for these youth to form meaningful relationships with their peers but also threaten their sense of safety as they adjust to new school environments (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek & Fogarty, 2012).

### **6.1.1.3 Consequences of school disengagement.**

The study participants demonstrated disengagement in high school in some ways. They shared instances of truancy, not completing homework and assignments, failing grade levels, and in

some cases dropping out of high school. Foster care youth are more than twice as likely to drop-out of school before completing high school when compared to their non-foster peers (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas & Tis, 2017; Courtney, Terao & Bost, 2004; Fogarty & Damashek, 2011; Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2012, Vacca, 2008; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). As these youth progressed through middle school and high school, they increasingly felt less connected to their school environment. For some, they were merely going through the motions because it was required of them, but they did not enjoy school and were not actively engaged in the learning process.

Two of the youth in this study dropped-out of high school in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and decided to pursue their GED instead. Multiple factors contributed to their decision to drop-out of high school, including being overwhelmed with constantly changing schools and feeling further behind and a lack of social connection with their peers with each new placement. These students, in particular, were not interested in enrolling in a four-year institution after high school and saw immediate benefits in pursuing their GED as they instead focused on their short-term goal of improving their employability. They looked forward to the self-paced nature of the GED program, and could obtain it more quickly than a high school diploma. Both were dissatisfied with their high school experience and missed a significant amount of school due to truancy. Once they reached the age in which they could legally withdraw themselves from high school, they did. They immediately went to work full-time, which was a priority for them as well since they were both supporting themselves financially. Part of their disengagement in school was due to working a considerable number of hours while attending high school, which was difficult to balance.

There was, however, one aspect of the school experience that a few of the youth shared as a positive highlight of their high school experience. These students participated in vocational

programs that took them out of the traditional school setting and immersed them in a hands-on experience that provided technical skill development in the form of a trade. The vocational experiences culminated in the students earning a job certification, which increased their prospects of directly entering the workforce upon completing high school. Those participating in such programs described the benefit of their technical program being disconnected from their typical high school classes. They also felt as if they were learning skills and certification that would immediately benefit them in securing a better paying job after high school when compared to their peers who did not participate in similar programs. This finding was important in that it underscored an experience that foster care youth considered to be an engaging and beneficial aspect of high school when juxtaposed to their standard classroom experiences.

These findings add to the understanding of salient issues and pressures that contribute to the volatility of these youth during their secondary school years. For many, a perpetuation of negative experiences throughout middle school and high school, including multiple school transitions and difficulty establishing friends and peer connections, tarnished their outlook on the educational system as a whole. While the study participants articulated the importance and potential benefit of postsecondary education, some did not view it as a viable option for them. As a result, a majority of the youth did not have plans to immediately continue their education after high school.

### **6.1.2 Inconsistent Support Systems**

There was one participant who was an exception concerning immediately pursuing postsecondary education. This youth was enrolled in her first year at a community college, and her experiences exemplify how connecting these youth to supportive adults has the potential to

positively influence their educational prospects. What was surprising about this participant's story was her general ambivalence towards her enrollment in college. Although she was attending community college with the goal of transferring to a four-year university after earning her Associate degree, she could not articulate why she was enrolled in college beyond the fact that she did not want to disappoint her father and a supportive high school teacher who steered her to select her intended major. While she indicated she was doing well academically in school, she gave no indication that she was enjoying the experience. Moreover, she stated that she would be perfectly fine with dropping out of college and increasing her hours at a local restaurant where she was employed, but the fear of disappointing two of her major support systems kept her from making such a drastic decision.

This participant's experiences differed when compared to the other study participants. She had both parental and long-term mentor support to keep her encouraged to pursue postsecondary education. This was not the case for many of the participants, as they lacked sustained and consistent relationships with adults to motivate them to pursue educational and career goals. Many experienced complicated relationships with their parents and other family members, in addition to having inconsistent support from adults to guide them as they transitioned out of foster care and into a life of independence.

#### **6.1.2.1 Complex family relationships.**

An unexpected finding was the degree to which family emerged as a theme of the study, as the focus of the inquiry was on the postsecondary education perceptions of foster care youth, and not the dynamics of their family relationships. Even so, all of the youth shared substantial ways in which family played a role in their lived experiences in foster care, as well as how family influences their priorities upon exiting the foster care system. Five major themes emerged

regarding how the participants engaged in conversations about the role of family in their personal lives, including relationships with their birth parents, issues of birth parent substance abuse and incarceration, death of a birth parent, sibling connections, and relationships with foster care families. These themes are indicative of the complex ways in which family intersects with foster care youths' experiences.

The varied ways in which the youth shared about and engaged with their parents and families added to the complexity around how the participants involved family during their time in care and as they embark upon transitioning out of the foster care system. Some participants shared ways in which the relationships with their birth parents is cyclical in nature, and their contact with them is dependent upon their birth parents' sobriety from drug and alcohol, or incarceration status. Some birth parent relationships are very fragile, while others are solid depending on the individual. The youth spoke of a spectrum of emotions related to the relationship they have with their birth parents, from angry and holding grudges for past actions, to open with contact and connections encouraged. Two of the youth experienced the death of a parent, and they shared about the resulting strain this had on their mental and emotional well-being.

Another important family dynamic discussed was the relationships the youth had with their siblings. For most, their connections with siblings were the most important aspect of their family dynamic. Some of the participants were placed alongside one or more of their siblings while in care, and others look forward to being reunited with siblings after they exit foster care. Reunification with siblings was among the top priorities for many of the youth, as well as establishing connections with siblings with whom they previously had limited contact.

Maintaining and establishing kinship relationships proved to be very important for foster care youth who had undesirable experiences with foster families during their time in care. While some youth experienced pleasant foster family placements, a majority did not. For them, preserving family bonds is restorative, as they hope to have better connections and treatment than they did with their foster families while in care. In contrast, other participants do not desire to have any contact with family after exiting foster care. They attribute the multitude of negative experiences they had while in care to one or more of their family members, namely their parents. Some of the youth explicitly stated that they do not wish to have any open lines of communication with their parents after leaving care. Family dynamics are important to consider, as depending on the youth, plans to restore or establish relationships with family is an immediate priority upon emancipating from foster care and is more significant than the immediate pursuit of postsecondary education.

#### **6.1.2.2 Provider and educator turnover.**

A majority of the participants in this study shared that they lacked consistent adults to help guide them throughout their lived experiences in foster care, especially concerning postsecondary education preparation. Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, and Tis (2017) discussed the importance of foster care youth having an adult who was invested in encouraging them to finish high school, in addition to providing consistency, persistence, and access to opportunities and resources they may not otherwise have at their disposal. These youth revealed challenges they faced with social workers, caseworkers, guidance counselors, teachers and other professionals due to issues of staff turnover, in addition to their constant placement transitions. Many of the participants were frustrated by what they considered subpar provider service, as the professionals who were assigned to work with them were not fully aware of their needs, goals, and potential.

These inconsistencies limit chances for the youth to build trusting relationships with the care providers and professionals, which can inhibit the ability for them to engage in long-term planning, goal-setting, and related follow-up.

It is important to recall that during this time of transition, foster youth are not only adjusting to a new school environment, but also new home environments, teachers, counselors, and foster care system providers as well. Study participants revealed adjustment challenges that happen during these transitions related to establishing trust and relationships with new authority figures at school and within the foster care system.

### **6.1.2.3 Lack of long-term adult mentors.**

Steadfast adult mentorship and support was not a common experience across the youth who participated in this study. There were sporadic instances of adult support systems, but the youth spoke of them in more transactional ways, or in other words, a means to an end for a particular, isolated resource. There was little mention of sustained mentors who provided consistent support and encouragement during their time in foster care. Geiger and Beltran (2017) proposed adults who step in to serve as substitute parents are integral in supporting foster care youth success. Further, Lovitt and Emerson (2009) found that foster care youth who have at least one influential adult in their lives to encourage and motivate them to excel academically can enhance the lives of foster care youth as they transition to adulthood. Opportunities to form lasting relationships with caring, reliable adults can be transformational for foster care youth. The resulting mentorship and guidance can help provide a stable support system for these youth to trust and depend on, especially if the relationship can withstand any placement transitions the youth may experience.

### **6.1.3 Postsecondary Education Misunderstandings**

#### **6.1.3.1 Narrow concept of postsecondary education.**

Many of the study participants had a very narrow idea of what types of institutions and programs comprised postsecondary education. For them, postsecondary education exclusively meant four-year colleges and universities. On the whole, these students were reluctant to apply to four-year institutions for a number of reasons, including being overwhelmed with the process to apply, not wanting to immediately commit to enrolling in college, a desire to immediately enter the workforce, and doubting their potential to succeed at a college or university. Instead, these youth preferred to focus on vocational and certificate-based programs that would provide a more immediate training and education acquisition that would allow them to enter the workforce sooner after high school or obtaining their GED.

Most of the participants in this study viewed these types of programs as inferior to four-year colleges and universities instead of recognizing them as valuable postsecondary education opportunities. Further, the participants generally lacked an understanding of how Associate degree and certificate-based programs could serve as stand-alone degrees and certifications. Additionally, these degrees and certifications could serve as an initial step in transferring to a community college or four-year degree granting program upon completion, but for the most part, these youth were unable to articulate this pathway to enrolling at a college or university. There was little by way of the literature that addressed how foster care youth conceptualized or made meaning of multiple paths to higher education. This study contributes to the perspectives of youth in transition to the research to provide insight on how they conceptualize the process as they begin to prioritize their next steps after exiting the foster care system.

### **6.1.3.2 Convoluted intended career paths.**

A second concern rising from the findings was how the participants articulated their intended educational and career paths. These youth misunderstood how college majors and programs connected to intended careers. Their plans for degree attainment were both disjointed and unrealistic. Several participants shared plans to pursue degree paths with significant variance in program requirements, such as nursing and social work, as well as pursuing majors that did not exist at their intended college or university. Many shared that they lacked guidance in streamlining their postsecondary education aspirations in a way that could practically lead to their chosen career path. This reflected a lack of exposure to intentional conversations around career planning and postsecondary education programs with educators and child welfare caseworkers/staff.

Zetlin, Weinberg, and Kimm (2005) focused on improving ways in which foster care social workers and K-12 educational liaisons shared documentation about foster care youths' educational needs and performance. The goal of this approach was to promote seamless intervention and support to the foster care youth, as both entities would have richer and more holistic information concerning the youths' records. This tactic can also promote cross-conversations between professionals in education and child welfare services and increase opportunities to provide a continuity of care that would ultimately benefit foster care youths' educational experiences. As voiced by study participants, they would benefit greatly if their care providers and educators would increase their communication amongst each other. The youth also shared that they were especially confused with processes and terminology related to pursuing college, so it is also imperative to present and simplify information in terms that the youth can comprehend.

#### **6.1.4 Immediate Post-Emancipation Priorities for Stability**

What was evident from the findings is that the top priority for foster care youth after emancipating from foster care is securing a sense of stability. Their time in foster care was marked by frequent home and school transitions, turbulent relationships with family, turnover in service providers, and the uncertainty of having others making decisions that were intended to be in their best interest, although this was not always the case. As such, their primary focus is on stability, as their lived experiences in the foster care system were mostly unstable and marked by frequent transitions. As a result, these youth are most interested in securing essentials for their survival, namely housing, employment, and transportation.

Because of their marred educational experiences, many do not want to transition immediately into the college/university setting but are open to pursuing certificate-based programs that will increase their employability and wage earnings. There is an opportunity for educators and service providers to better articulate resources outside of the classroom that foster care youth may not be aware of, but could benefit them regarding stability as they transition out of foster care. For example, as housing is an immediate need identified by the youth, it may be advantageous to discuss security and amenities provided by housing and residence life on college campuses. Employment is also an immediate priority that was identified by study participants, so they may benefit from personalized information about their financial aid package, as well as opportunities for work-study student employment positions.

The study participants are also eager to live a life of independent decision-making that is couched in the freedom to set their own personal expectations for success. As they transition out of care, the youth are optimistic about their potential to prove naysayers and doubters who assume they will fail wrong. They are adamant about their ability to thrive beyond the foster

care system, even if pursuing postsecondary education is not an immediate priority upon their emancipation from care.

## **6.2 IMPLICATIONS**

### **6.2.1 Implications for Theory and Research**

#### **6.2.1.1 Emerging adulthood theory.**

Arnett (2000) first proposed Emerging Adulthood Theory as a new way of conceptualizing the ages of 18-25, which encompass the distinct period where teens emerge from adolescence but have not yet developed to the point in which they are independent enough to enter into young adulthood. This developmental period is designed to be highly exploratory for those in their late teens and early 20s.

During this time, they embark upon a transition where "many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, [and] when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most than it will be at any other period in the life course" (Arnett, 2000, p. 469). The pinnacle of Emerging Adulthood Theory is the role of parents and parental figures, as they serve as a safety net to cushion this exploratory phase for the emerging adults. Parents provide resources such as housing, money, food and other material effects that their children in the emerging adulthood transition phase may need in until they fully transition to the next life phase of young adulthood.

An underlying finding of this study was the level of frustration these youth disclosed about challenging dynamics and complexities they experienced with family, namely their birth

parents and foster families. This connects to the work of Greeson (2013) that challenges the dominant use of Emerging Adulthood Theory to frame the experiences of foster care youth. Greeson (2013) claims that Emerging Adulthood Theory is partial towards advantaged youth as they are afforded a level of support, namely family and parental support, to fall back on if they encounter challenges during this transition phase. This claim is reflected in the experiences of the study participants, as many expounded upon strained relationships they had with their birth parents largely due to issues of substance abuse and incarceration. Additionally, some did not form sustainable relationships with their foster families for a variety of reasons and did not intend to maintain connections with them after they emancipate from the foster care system.

Emerging Adulthood Theory is a dominant theory in the literature that is used to situate the experiences of foster care youth as they begin to transition out of care and into adulthood. Conversely, based on the findings of this study, may not be an appropriate approach to frame the transition period for foster care youth who are aging out of the foster care system. Unlike their non-foster peers who have parental or family support, they are not afforded the same opportunities to be exploratory with family safety nets to support them in times of need. Similarly, Kools (1997) asserted that the process of transitioning from the foster care system could be extraordinarily complicated for foster care youth as they have fewer resources when compared to their non-foster peers during this transition phase. Lack of resources was another salient concern for many of the study participants, which they articulated as a need for transportation, housing, employment, and guidance from adults to help them manage their newfound independence. The youth in this study shared a general lack of family support and resources, which accelerated their need to be self-sufficient upon aging out of foster care.

### **6.2.1.2 Social capital and postsecondary education.**

Related to the resources outlined in Emerging Adulthood Theory, it is important to consider the role and access to social capital for transitioning foster care youth. For this study, social capital is defined as a variety of entities within a social structure that facilitate the actions of actors within the structure. These entities, or resources, allow for the achievement of certain ends that otherwise would be impossible (Coleman, 1998). As such, the absence of these resources would significantly reduce the ability of individuals within the system to thrive.

Regarding the findings, the study participants articulated limited access to relationships and resources after they exit foster care, which could pose challenges during their transition. Many of the youth in this study found themselves disconnected and overwhelmed with these transition processes and lacked consistent mentors and supportive adults to guide them during these critical points in their lives. This presents an opportunity to explain to the benefits of community colleges and four-year institutions to transitioning foster care youth. The assistance, including administrative and peer support systems, afforded by many postsecondary education institutions could prove to be beneficial for foster care youth as they approach adulthood. However, study participants had a disconnected view of the role postsecondary education could provide concerning resources and social capital, especially those afforded by colleges and universities that offer housing options. In fact, many of the participants assumed that enrolling in postsecondary education would delay and complicate their transition into a life of independence. They made no connection to ways in which postsecondary education institutions could provide immediate access to resources to help address many of their post-care stability concerns, including housing, social services, and other supports that are provided.

Many colleges and universities also have a degree of embedded freedom and independence opportunities that these students seek as they age out of the foster care system. For example, most college and university campuses have dedicated student support services and life skills programming. There is also the simultaneous benefit of advancing their education, which could increase career prospects and future employment opportunities. However, for the participants in this study, negative experiences during their K-12 education process, especially at the high school level, have deterred them from fully considering the possibilities and benefits of postsecondary education. Also, perceived limitations such as being academically underprepared in comparison to their non-foster peers create additional barriers that can reduce the likelihood of these youth enrolling in community colleges and other college/university options.

#### **6.2.1.3 Reconsider resilience approach.**

Much of the existing literature on the foster care youth experience is situated in the resilience approach. Resiliency is a process predicated on individuals adapting to achieve in response to adversity (Hines, Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005). There is a resulting generalization that these students are inherently resilient due to their experiences in the foster care system, which could be problematic and limiting in terms of tending to the mental and emotional health of these youth. This can be exacerbated if misconceptions that foster care youth innately can absorb the trauma and other hardships continue to prevail. Stott (2013) admonished that upon aging out of foster care, youth are immediately "expected to be able to support themselves and live independently at an age when the majority of young adults in the U.S. are not completely independent of the financial resources, safety nets, and continued emotional support of their parents" (p. 219). As such, consideration should be given to the expectation we have for these youth as they relate to other issues they could be facing.

It would be worthwhile to discontinue perpetuating research from the resiliency point of view and explore a trauma-informed care approach for youth with experiences in the foster care system. This change in tactic can elevate the need to more intentionally and adequately address the mental and emotional well-being of these youth. Trauma-informed care is fundamentally strengths-based and explores the response to trauma that accounts for physical, psychological, and emotional safety, and also provides survivors with the opportunity to regain a sense of control and empowerment (Hopper, Bassuk & Olivet, 2010). Trauma-informed care can help to eradicate the victimization position that is often associated with the foster care youth experience (Hines, Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005).

This approach could also shift the way in which care providers and educators engage with and empower foster care youth. By using a trauma informed-care approach, foster care youth become the authors of their experience, versus the result of their experience. The study participants indicated that freedom and independence are among their top priorities after exiting the system because their experiences in care have largely been dictated by others. Often, the care, treatment, and follow-up that is arranged for these youth is not sensitive to their individual needs, and perpetuates the patterns of resilience that they are then made to adjust to and cope with. If attention is shifted to allowing the older foster youth to provide recommendations on what they feel would best meet their needs. This approach could increase agency for foster care youth and transform the manner in which their voice is captured and presented in the literature.

## **6.2.2 Implications for Practice**

### **6.2.2.1 Reduce setbacks with K-12 education transitions.**

For the youth in this study, the inconveniences, anxieties, and disruptions associated with their multiple school and foster care home placements significantly affected their K-12 educational experiences. The study participants were forced to adjust and re-adjust to the numerous transitions and moves that defined much of their educational experiences. Foster families, child welfare agency providers and educational administrators should work to minimize the uncertainty and adjustment issues that these youth experience when transitioning to new schools and foster family placements. Improved educational record keeping measures should be taken to help ensure that these students are properly placed in the appropriate grade levels, with every attempt made to limit the alternative education placements that are customary to the process when foster care youth transition to new schools. Zetlin and Weinberg (2004) recommended that schools develop and institutionalize policies to build protective supports and facilitate a caring learning environment for foster care youth. It would also be helpful for K-12 teachers and administrators to connect these youth to peer and adult mentors at the onset of their new placement to help ease their transition to their new academic environment, as well as reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness that can be experienced in this process.

### **6.2.2.2 Begin the college planning process sooner.**

Federal law requires that child welfare service providers begin to develop a transition plan for youth who are approaching emancipation from the foster care system, at a minimum, 90 days before the youth's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday or minimum emancipation age determined by each state (United States Department of Education, 2016). For foster care youth who are on track to graduate from

high school, which typically aligns with the 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, this limited time frame could be problematic. For most, this would place the minimum start date for this process during the second semester of their senior year in high school, which is extremely late in the college planning process. This is the time frame in which most seniors are receiving college admission offers, as they would have applied much earlier in their senior year. Also, there are many scholarships and grants specific to youth with experiences in the foster care system, including the Education and Training Voucher and other types of financial aid that could benefit these students ((Nixon & Jones, 2007). In addition to encouraging them to apply for these financial opportunities, early planning could allow students to apply for application fee waivers and begin thinking about information and documentation they will need for the application process that they may not have readily available, such as birth certificates, medical history, and government-issued identification cards. In addition to application materials, students will also need to think about basic necessities and supplies that they will need as they transition to college. The earlier students engage in the planning process, the better.

### **6.2.2.3 Expand access to social capital acquisition.**

Every effort should be made by child welfare providers, K-12 administrators, guidance counselors and teachers, and other professionals who engage with foster care youth to equip them with the social capital needed to successfully transition to life after foster care. The study participants articulated ways in which entities and structures meant to provide assistance during their time in foster care actually proved to be detrimental to their social capital attainment. This was evidenced as they shared about tumultuous foster family placements that were meant to provide stability, feeling betrayed by counselors and educators in whom they confided their sensitive and personal stories, and a lack of opportunity to build sustainable friendships with

peers and mentoring relationships with caring adults due to their frequent transitions. Further, many of these youth are self-selecting out of pursuing higher education because they lack confidence in their academic abilities. Some youth are overwhelmed with the ambiguity and uncertainty that lies ahead if they lack social capital and resources as they exit foster care. Perhaps, if these students are informed of how postsecondary education can expand their access to social capital and supplement their transition into adulthood, they would consider pursuing this opportunity.

#### **6.2.2.4 Transition plan improvements.**

Although the federal government mandates that transition plans are developed for all youth exiting foster care, none of the participants in this study mentioned the document or planning process as a part of their transition out of foster care. The intentional planning of these documents should take place, at a minimum, 90 days prior to the foster care youth's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, or the minimum age that they can age out of care according to state standards (United States Department of Education, 2016). These documents and the process to create them are essential in ensuring that foster care youth have had dedicated conversations concerning their post-care arrangements and related resources.

Guidance for the toolkit recommends that supportive adults, including guardians, caregivers, foster and adoptive parents, court-appointed advocates, social workers, and school administrators, assist foster care youth in compiling the transition plan (United States Department of Education, 2016). In addition to containing vital information such as medical records, emergency contacts, housing options, financial documents, educational resources and employment services materials, this document should also include the foster care youths' written goals for their transition out of care. Transition plans are only useful if they are compiled,

revised and revisited on a regular basis with the foster care youth to ensure that the information is correct and up-to-date. It would also benefit the foster youth if these documents were portable and shared with important care and service providers who have had touch points with the youth throughout their foster care experience. If utilized purposefully, the transition plan can help support providers meet the youth where they are and engage in meaningful conversations focused on their stability after separating from the foster care system.

Many of the participants in the study shared feelings of confusion, anxiety, and lack of direction about their impending transition from foster care. The transition planning process is an excellent opportunity to help alleviate some of the nervousness and concern that may occur during this time. Lemus, Farruggia, Geramo, and Chang (2017) advise that successful transition planning can provide foster care youth with the opportunity to take ownership and control over the next phase of their lives, as well as create in them a sense of self-determination and agency. State and local child welfare agencies should identify measures of progress and accountability to ensure that transition plans are substantive and meaningful.

### **6.3 CONCLUSION**

This research suggests a shift in approach by shedding light on what former foster care youth identify as priorities immediately after transitioning from care. It is important for all those charged with providing support for these youth understand how they individually view the role of postsecondary education. This can help to ensure proper alignment and distribution of resources provided by practitioners and care providers and ultimately help increase the number of former foster care youth enrolling in postsecondary education. Additionally, the results of the

study can catalyze foster care providers and the K-12 education system to more deeply explore how the educational and lived experiences of foster care youth contribute to their perceptions of postsecondary education. This can lead to transformational change by increasing foster care youth voice and agency in these processes and ultimately lead to a redistribution of support to help reduce barriers that perpetuate the low number of these youth who enroll in postsecondary education.

K-12 educators, child welfare service providers, and postsecondary education professionals should move beyond merely preparing these youth for their exit from the foster care system. These three entities need to band together to devise creative and intentional ways to prolong planning and support for foster care youth past their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday that reaches into their emerging adulthood years. Postsecondary education can be a conduit to equip these youth with life skills, as well as an extended opportunity for them to developmentally transition into adulthood with embedded support systems to provide support along the way. However, it is evident from this study that older foster care youth emancipating from care mostly do not feel equipped to immediately pursue postsecondary education upon exiting care.

This study is relevant as it can serve as a means to inform both foster care youth providers, higher education professionals, and postsecondary education institutions on the competing priorities for foster care youth as they age out of foster care. What is clear from the literature is that the conventional approaches that we use to prepare non-foster care youth for postsecondary are not resonating with these youth. There is an urgent need to modify the method, language, and process of informing former foster care youth of the importance of postsecondary education, as well as how demonstrating ways in which it can improve their quality of life after exiting the foster care system.

## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO [EXPANDING HORIZONS] INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM CASEWORKERS

**To: Expanding Horizons ILP Caseworkers**

**Subject: Assistance Request to Recruit Independent Living Program Participants for Study**

Hello [Expanding Horizons] Independent Living Program Caseworkers,

Thank you for agreeing to assist me in recruiting former foster care youth for my study. I am hoping to speak with 8 former foster care youth for 60-75 minutes about their postsecondary education perceptions (including college or any educational certificate/degree program after high school) and how their experiences in foster care have influenced these perceptions. Participation in the study is confidential, and I will provide all study participants \$25.

To this end, it would be helpful if you could share the attached communication with all former foster care youth participating in the Independent Living Program who meet the following criteria:

- Adjudicated into the foster care system.
- 18-21 years old.
- Have completed the Independent Living Program Phase I: Life Skills Training.
- Reside within a 200-mile radius of [Expanding Horizons].

Interested former foster care youth can contact me at [kds67@pitt.edu](mailto:kds67@pitt.edu).

Thank you for your assistance,

Ketwana D. Schoos

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO POTENTIAL STUDY PARTICIPANTS

**To: Potential Study Participants**

**Subject: Seeking Participants for Study about Former Foster Youth College Perceptions**

Hello \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Ketwana Schoos and I am a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh. You are receiving this communication through your participation in the [Expanding Horizons] Independent Living Program (ILP). I am working with ILP caseworkers to share information with potential participants who could assist in my study about postsecondary education perceptions of former foster care youth.

I am seeking former foster youth to participate in a 60-75 minute, one-on-one interview with me. I will ask you to share with me your thoughts about postsecondary education (including college or any educational certificate or degree program after high school) and how your life experiences have shaped these perceptions. Participation in the study is confidential, and after the interview you will receive \$25. If you are interested in participating, please contact me at [kds67@pitt.edu](mailto:kds67@pitt.edu).

Thanks for your consideration,

Ketwana D. Schoos

## **APPENDIX C**

### **INTERVIEW INTRODUCTORY SCRIPT**

Thank you for participating in this research study about former foster care youths' perceptions of postsecondary education. My name is Ketwana Schoos and I am a doctoral student in the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh. I am the principal investigator (PI) for this study, with Dr. Linda DeAngelo, assistant professor in the Administrative and Policy Studies department, serving as my Faculty Research Mentor.

For the next 60-75 minutes, I will ask questions designed to gain a better understanding of your perceptions of postsecondary education, including college and certificate/degree programs after completion of high school/GED, and how they may be shaped by your experiences in the foster care system.

There are minimal foreseeable risks associated with your participation in this study. I will ask questions about your experiences in foster care, but you are free to share as much or as little as you wish, as it aligns with your level of comfort. Depending on your personal experiences, recounting parts of your story may cause some minor discomfort. You are also welcome to take breaks as needed during our interview session, or terminate the interview altogether at any time.

The benefits to participation include: 1.) the opportunity to share your story which will add to the research on foster care youth experiences; 2.) allowing professionals, educators and practitioners the opportunity to learn more about foster care youth postsecondary education perceptions and how to better serve foster care youth.

The information you share with me will be kept confidential and your name will not be disclosed. You are welcome to choose a pseudonym, or I will assign one for you, which is intended to protect your identity. With your permission, our interview today will be audio-recorded. You will also have the opportunity to review the final transcription notes and provide edits once they are available. All records of this study will be kept confidential and securely stored in a locked office.

Your participation in today's interview and this research study is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time. You will receive \$25 for participating.

After the interview, I can be reached at [kds67@pitt.edu](mailto:kds67@pitt.edu) or 419-612-1235 if you have any questions.

## APPENDIX D

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The following semi-structured interview questions were designed to gain a greater understanding of the participant's formation and current perceptions of postsecondary education (including college or any educational certificate/degree program after high school) as they relate to these research questions:

- What are former foster care youths' attitudes and perceptions of postsecondary education?
- How have former foster care youths' life experiences shaped how they view their potential for postsecondary education?
- What contributes to former foster care youths' decision to pursue (or not pursue) postsecondary education?

Based upon participant responses, follow-up or clarifying questions may also be asked.

*I would like to start off with a couple of questions that ask about broad experiences you can recall about your time in foster care.*

1. Can you tell me about your experiences growing up in foster care?
  - Probe: What were some of the positive aspects?
  - Probe: What were some of the negative aspects?
  - Follow-up: How long were you in foster care?
2. What were your living arrangements during your time in foster care?
  - Follow-up: If you experienced multiple placements can you talk about those?

*Next, let's talk about your educational experiences, including elementary school, middle school, and high school, while in foster care. When I use the term "postsecondary education", I am referring to college or any type certificate or degree programs you can enroll in after graduating from high school or earning your GED.*

3. Can you tell me what you recall about your school experiences before you entered foster care?

4. Can you tell me about your school experiences in school after you were placed in foster care?
  - Probe: What are some of the positive aspects you recall about school?
  - Probe: What are some of the challenging aspects you recall about school?
  - Follow-up: Can you share any experiences you may have had changing or attending multiple schools during your time in foster care?
5. Can you talk about the time when you first remember thinking about postsecondary education?
  - Follow-up: Can you tell me about any aspirations you had to attend college postsecondary education?
6. Can you talk about any values, opportunities or benefits you hoped postsecondary education would provide?
7. Can you tell me about any planning you did to prepare for postsecondary education during your K-12 educational experiences?
  - Follow-up: Can you share how adults (parents, relatives, teachers, counselors, social workers, foster care caseworkers, etc.) helped or supported you in this process?

***The last set of questions I have will ask more about your transition out of foster care as it relates to your future plans.***

8. Now that you are transitioning out of foster care, how do you view the role of postsecondary education?
  - Follow-up: Can you talk about any plans you have to attend postsecondary education?
  - Follow-up: If not, can you talk about your decision to not attend postsecondary education?
9. How did being in foster care influence your perceptions of college or any other type of postsecondary education?
  - Follow-up: How did your participation in the Independent Living Program influence or prepare you for postsecondary education?
10. Can you tell me about any significant relationships you had with adults who encouraged you throughout your time in foster care?
  - Follow-up: Can you talk about how any of these adults encouraged you to pursue postsecondary education?
  - Follow-up: Can you talk about any plans you have to remain in contact with these individuals after your transition out of foster care?
11. What do you most look forward to after transitioning from foster care?

- Follow-up: Can you tell me about any successes you have had during your transition out of foster care?
  - Follow-up: Can you tell me about any challenges you have faced during your transition out of foster care?
12. What are some of the future/career goals you have for the next 4-5 years?
- Follow-up: Can you tell me what role, of any, you believe postsecondary education has in helping you achieve these goals?
  - Follow-up: Can you talk about any support systems that are helping you to reach your goals?
13. We have discussed many aspects of your experiences today. Is there any additional information you would like to share about your perceptions about postsecondary education or your experiences in foster care?

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