



# Voices of youth in foster care and special education regarding their educational experiences and transition to adulthood<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

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

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## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

## 2. Background

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

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

### 2.1. Research on youth's experiences and perceptions

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

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

Most studies examining youth perspectives have focused on exiting foster care. For example, Goodkind, Schelbe, and Shook (2011) conducted one-time individual interviews with 11 youth and focus groups with 34 youth to investigate why youth leave the foster care at age 18 when findings suggest that remaining in care may be associated with improved outcomes. Some of the youth felt forced out and did not understand how the system worked. Other youth exited care because they wanted to be in control of their lives and thought taking care of oneself was an indicator of being an adult. Several youth expressed regret about leaving foster care because they had experienced many hardships. Another qualitative study of exiting foster care (Samuels & Pryce, 2008) involved analysis of semi-structured interviews with 44 youth in three states, conducted in association with the Midwest Evaluation Study (Courtney et al., 2005). Twenty-four of the youth had exited care. Many of the youth described having experienced premature adulthood in having to manage abuse and neglect, family stressors and foster care placements; indicating that they had developed self-reliance. A rare

follow-along study focusing on exit from foster care involved quarterly structured interviews with 404 youth, ages 17 to 19, in Missouri (McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008). Initial interviews were in person and most subsequent interviews were by telephone. DSM based assessments were conducted to assess youth for psychiatric disorders; however, special education status was not reported. The findings indicated that many older youth left foster care in unplanned ways, they were frustrated with the system, and they tended to live with their biological families. Youth with externalizing labels were most likely to leave foster care.

### 2.2. Experiences of youth in foster care and special education

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

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

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

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Participants

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

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