



A mixed method study on educational well-being and resilience among youth in foster care



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ABSTRACT

This paper, framed by risk and resiliency theory, presents findings from a youth led collaborative social research study exploring the facilitators of educational success and college attendance among former foster youth. A simultaneous component/parallel process mixed method design was conducted to explore factors associated with educational success among youth in foster care. Findings suggest that stability and positive relationships with peers and adult mentors ease transitions, and reinforce emotional connections impacting educational success and post-secondary attendance. This manuscript attempts to raise the volume on youth's successful experiences of education and highlight the implications for trauma informed practice in child welfare and school settings.

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1. Introduction

The importance of a strong educational foundation for youth in foster care cannot be overstated as the experiences of success that a child or youth has in school can positively affect their psychosocial functioning well into adulthood (McNaught, 2004; Pecora, 2006). Particularly for youth in foster care, being in school provides opportunities to build protective factors that may counter trauma-related challenges through forming social connections, building competencies, achieving academic success, and starting on a path toward successful transition to adulthood. However these protective features may be weakened or lost altogether if youth experience school enrollment problems and educational instability as a result of being in foster care (Pecora, 2012).

Studies have consistently demonstrated a gap in school achievement between youth in foster care and other students (Vondra, Barnett, & Cicchetti, 1990; Courtney et al., 2007; Pecora, Kessler, et al., 2006). When compared with the general population, children and youth in foster care are less likely than youth in the general population to graduate from high school (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006) and significantly less likely to attend college (Pecora et al., 2005). In addition, school enrollment challenges, placement changes, grade repetition, emotional and behavioral disorders, and various genetic, environmental and community problems all negatively impact educational outcomes for youth in care (Pecora, 2012).

Although understanding the challenges related to educational success is important, few studies have considered the *facilitators* of

educational success (Pecora, 2012; Salazar, 2011; Schroeter et al., 2015), and even fewer have included the personal insights of youth in care when addressing the topic (Day et al., 2012; Del Quest et al., 2012). Research focusing on why youth succeed can highlight the strengths and resiliency present among youth in foster care. This paper, framed by risk and resiliency theory, presents findings from a youth led collaborative social research study exploring the facilitators of educational success and college attendance among former foster youth. This work attempts to raise the volume on youth's successful experiences of education and highlight the implications for trauma informed practice in child welfare and school settings.

1.1. Theoretical framework

Resiliency Theory provides a theoretical framework for this study which supports a strengths based approach for understanding youth and developing appropriate interventions (Zimmerman & Brenner, 2010). Many children who experience stressful, high-risk situations, such as those associated with involvement in the foster care system, nonetheless have positive long-term outcomes (Masten, 1994). The term resilience generally describes individuals who have successfully overcome significant adversity, despite their exposure to multiple high-risk situations (Fraser & Richman, 1999). Overall, these individuals have managed to adapt to extraordinary circumstances, continue to function well despite their continued exposure to risk, and often achieve positive, and sometimes unexpected, outcomes (Gilligan, 2000; Fraser & Richman, 1999; Werner, 1989). Simultaneously it is important to note that resilience is a dynamic interplay between internal and external risk and protective factors is not synonymous with invulnerability.

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Resiliency theory focuses on understanding the contextual factors that lead to development of children and youth into healthy adults despite risk and adversity. By focusing research on protective factors, the findings point to internal assets and external resources that can be embedded into individual and social interventions in order to overcome adverse experiences (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005).

1.2. Educational resilience

Educational resiliency, defined as the heightened likelihood of school success despite adverse environmental conditions, is enhanced by family engagement and school relationships (Schroeter et al., 2015). Specifically, a consistent adult presence in the school environment augmented by an overall supportive school setting can serve as a protective factor (Benzies & Myusiuk, 2009; Solberg et al., 2007). Bryan (2005) describes facilitators of educational resilience as “positive and supportive adult relationships, opportunities for meaningful student participation in their schools and communities, and high parent and teacher expectations regarding student performance and future success (p. 219).” School stability enhances opportunities for students to build educational resilience through forming social connections, building competencies for academic success, and starting on a path toward successful transition to adulthood.

Fewer studies have examined the influences of educational resiliency for children and youth in foster care. Some research suggests that positive peer influences, adult mentors, and college campus based support programs can also facilitate smooth transitions for foster youth and improve participant perceptions of educational outcomes (Kirk & Day, 2011; Day et al. 2012). However, we find a lack of data in the literature that shares the personal perspective of youth in care which could be used to better understand the facilitators of college attendance among the 20% of youth in care who continue on to post-secondary education (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to give voice to the personal narrative and lived experiences of former youth in foster care while providing the field with new understanding about the facilitators of educational resilience and college attendance from the perspectives of youth in foster care. The young adults involved in this study provide a fresh perspective on the challenges and barriers to educational successes that have been given short shrift in the current academic literature.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

2.1.1. Survey

Researchers targeted a purposive sample of youth in foster care ages 15–21. There were 102 youth, ages 15–21, who completed the survey in one small Northeastern state. At the time of the survey, approximately 209 were actively being served by YDP resulting in a response rate of approximately 50%.

2.1.2. Interview

The sample targeted specific participants who had various educational experiences including school stability and school mobility. The ten interview participants were 90% Caucasian between the ages of 18–22, representative of the state's foster care population. Forty percent of the participants were male while 60% were female. All were enrolled in post-secondary education during the time of the interview.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Survey data

The survey included a total of 54 questions of which 30 items were derived from 3 subscales of the Student Engagement Instrument (Appleton, Christenson, Kim & Reschly, 2006). *Student engagement*

was a composite score of the student engagement scale and showed strong internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.88$). Each of the subscales, (a) *Teacher-Student relationships*, (b) *Peer supports*, and (c) *future goals and expectations* demonstrated high reliability/internal consistency as reported in Schroeter et al. (2015). The *teacher student relationships* (TSR) subscale had nine items including “adults in this school listen to me”, “teachers are there for me when I need them”, and “teachers at my school care about students” ($\alpha = 0.94$). The *peer supports for learning* (PS) subscale had a total of six items including “students at school care about me” and “I enjoy talking with students here” ($\alpha = 0.92$). Finally, the *future goals and expectations* (FE) subscale had five items such as “school is important for achieving my future goals” and “going to school after high school is important” ($\alpha = 0.91$). Other variables in the survey included gender, race, age, number of school placements, number of home placements, school status, and educational resilience. *Educational resilience* was the dichotomous dependent variable and was operationalized for this study as college entry or intent to attend college (for those still in high school).

2.2.2. Interview protocol

A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate the interview dialogue. The interviews involved questions related to students' general educational experience while in the custody of the state child welfare system, the events that supported school success, and barriers and challenges with school success. Probing questions were asked in order to gain a deeper understanding of a particular participant narrative related to educational resilience.

2.3. Data collection

The current study was part of a larger project funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. This demonstration project focused on improving collaborative efforts between the child welfare and educational systems to increase educational stability for youth involved in the child welfare system. The research team included faculty and graduate students from a local state university in addition to several undergraduate college students who were formerly in foster care. The study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for human subjects protection protocols.

2.3.1. Survey

The YES survey was administered through the local Youth Development Program (YDP). YDP is a voluntary program that assists youth in foster care ages 14–22 while they transition out of custody into adulthood. The research team included students from a local 4 year college with a program supporting college bound foster youth. The program, called *Steps*, sent volunteers who worked with YDP coordinators to administer the survey to youth during client visits, YDP events, and school. Oversampling of youth in college was completed in order to gain a better understanding of what has helped foster youth successfully enter college.

2.3.2. Interview

Young adults formerly in foster care were recruited and interviewed for this study through a form attached to the YES that asked for volunteers willing to be contacted for a more in depth interview with the research team. Eligible interview participants were at least 18 years old and had previously been in the state's foster care system. The interview participants signed an informed consent form and were given a \$20 gift card for participating in the interview. The interviews varied in length from 40 min to over an hour and took place in an open community setting. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by a graduate research assistant.

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