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Aging Out of Foster Care and Support Services

Sandra Ifenyinwa Ogbonna
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Sandra Ifenyinwa Ogbonna

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Walden University

2021

Abstract

Aging Out of Foster Care and Support Services

by

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MSW, Michigan State University, 2011

BA, Enugu State University of Science and Technology, 1995

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

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Abstract

Youth aging out of the foster care system face many difficulties in transitioning to adulthood. In this exploratory study, the strategies used by foster care social work case managers to help youth successfully age out of foster care were investigated.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory provided the framework through which the research questions were explored. Eight social work case managers experienced with aging-out foster youth participated in qualitative interviews, in which they were asked to define success for youth who age out of foster care and describe the effectiveness of existing strategies for improving the transition into adulthood among youth emancipated from foster care. Thematic analysis of qualitative interview data revealed seven themes: (a) role, career in foster care field, and accomplishment plan; (b) importance of services; (c) early enrollment in emancipation programs; (d) aging out obstacles, successes, and housing concerns; (e) empowerment and self-advocacy skills; (f) independent living program skills, social support, and outside resources; and (g) perception of the foster care system. Findings suggested a need for long-term, tailored, supportive services for youth as they enter adulthood. Recommendations include providing housing resources to prevent homelessness among emancipated youth and providing support to professionals to identify adequate resources for youth aging out of foster care. The implications for positive social change include using the findings to teach foster parents and social work case managers how to prepare and educate youth to successfully transition into adulthood by ensuring availability of critical services and housing resources before emancipation.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral research to my son, Chidera Martin Ogbonna, and my daughter, Chisom Christina Nnemba Ogbonna, for their inspiring vision to pursue higher education for the promotion of more positive social change, and for their prayers, motivation, spiritual guidance, unconditional love, support, faith, and sacrifice. I thank you both for always believing in me and providing me with daily encouragement to succeed. In addition, I dedicate this study to my elder sister, Adaora Patricia Ede, and my mother, Caroline Nwobodo, for their prayers and providing encouraging words throughout my studies. I also dedicate this research in memory of my late husband, Attorney Michael Chinweuba Ogbonna, and my deceased father, Chief Charles Ogbonna Nwobodo, who initially motivated me toward this goal. Although you are no more, I experience your motivation through my dreams. I know you are happy that I am able to achieve this milestone as you always desired.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

According to Fowler et al. (2019), an estimated 20,000 eighteen-year-olds age out of foster care each year; this process of aging out is also known as emancipation. Aging out refers to children who remain in government or social service foster care systems after graduating from high school or attaining the age of majority (Fryar et al., 2017). Youth between the ages of 18 and 21 years old who are aging out of foster care often encounter vastly different challenges compared to those who did not grow up in the foster care system (Rolland, 2015). Such challenges include being unable to depend on their biological parents emotionally, financially, or socially; being unable to afford basic needs; and being exposed to harsh living conditions. These challenges are compounded by unstable past experiences with different caregivers, placements, schools, and health care providers (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Early parenthood, poverty, and homelessness are other common risks (Courtney et al., 2016). While previous researchers have investigated this topic, the research findings are inconsistent.

In this qualitative study, I explored the strategies used by social work case managers in northeastern Georgia (United States) and their perceptions of the success of those strategies in improving the transition to adulthood of youth aging out of foster care. Data were collected via semi structured interviews. Chapter 1 contains a review of the background, a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, key definitions, theoretical/conceptual framework, nature of the study, assumptions, limitations, scope, and significance. The chapter concludes with a summary and transition to Chapter 2, the literature review.

Background

Youth enter foster care for many reasons such as abandonment, neglect, or abuse (Williams-Mbengue, 2016). Children under the age of 18 years old who are removed from their parents' homes are often placed in a residential group or foster home or enter therapeutic kinship care with relatives. Placement change typically involves moving to a new neighborhood, resulting in disruption of a foster child's social, educational, and familial experiences with each move. Repeatedly displaced foster children may experience an increased sense of rejection and impermanence as well as difficulty forming attachments or trusting adults and other children (Bederian-Gardner et al., 2018). Thus, frequent moves within foster care can also disrupt children's relationships with peers, family, and society. Jedwab et al. (2020) examined data obtained from the State Automated Child Welfare Information System and found that a significant proportion of children placed in out-of-home care in the United States experience placement instability, which has deleterious effects on children's well-being. Moreover, placement stability differed for children in different types of placements, such as in residential treatment centers, kinship care, foster care homes, and group homes.

According to Vreeland et al. (2020), studies in the field of foster care have explored factors associated with placement disruption, including elements related to children's backgrounds and features of foster placement. In a comprehensive review of 26 studies of children in foster care, Bederian-Gardner et al. (2018) found that older child age at placement, prior history of residential care or placement, and child behavior problems were significant correlates of placement breakdown. Using structural equation

models, they evaluated how variables such as instability, mental health problems, and attachment insecurities are connected in foster and at-risk, nonfoster youth. Specifically, youth emotional or behavioral problems have been found to be associated with greater risk of placement disruption in virtually all studies and are regarded as the most robust predictor of placement breakdown. In addition, placement disruption may be more likely for children with social skill deficits, poor skills to cope with stress, and educational challenges (Goemans et al., 2018).

Most emancipated youth do not successfully transition into independent adulthood (Neil et al., 2019). Therefore, society must bear the economic costs of unsuccessful transition. Fryar et al. (2017) posited that approximately \$4 billion could be used to create support for emancipated youth, including the provision of education and housing. Despite increased federal investments in human services and other U.S. institutions, such as schools and health care facilities, there have been few improvements for emancipated youth (Tiede & Rosinsky, 2019). Little is known about the best ways to help emancipated youth; research is needed to improve their transition outcomes (Fryar et al., 2017). Understanding the strategies used by social work case managers to help these youth and the factors that predict their successful transition into adulthood may foster improvements in programs that serve emancipated youth and, thereby, increase successful transitions.

Problem Statement

Recent data indicated that 24% of former foster youth experience homelessness by the age of 21 years old (Rolland, 2015). Richards (2014) noted that an assessment of

administrative data in Washington State showed that about a quarter of youth experienced challenges of homelessness within 12 months of aging out of foster care. Similarly, two thirds of youth who aged out of foster care without an established system of support went on to experience homelessness within 6 months (Rolland, 2015). Homelessness exposes youth to the dangers of the streets without adequate resources or protection, significantly increasing risks for adverse outcomes. As Poremski et al. (2016) explained, it is difficult for anyone to seek or maintain employment when they are homeless. Adolescent youth whose brains have not fully developed and who may have low literacy levels may find it especially difficult to find and maintain employment (Slavin, 2018).

Researchers have exposed a gap in social service delivery that contributes to the escalation of homelessness among foster care youth who have aged out of the system (Poremski et al., 2016; Richards, 2014). Insufficient support and services hamper the abilities of emancipated youth to find and maintain safe and stable housing (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Inadequate support for youth who have aged out is a problem requiring policy and practice changes that foster resilience and successful transition into the adult domains of housing, education, employment, relationships, and parenting (Lee & Ballew, 2018; Rosenberg, 2018).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory study was to explore how foster care social work case managers in northeastern Georgia help youth successfully transition out of foster care. A successful transition occurs when youth aging out of foster care leave with self-sufficiency skills that enable them to survive as independent adults (Collins et

al., 2018). Findings from this study may help to advance the social work literature to improve outcomes for youth aging out of foster care.

Research Questions

Research indicates that youth aging out of foster care are ill-prepared to transition into adulthood (Fowler et al., 2017). To address existing gaps in the research, I developed the following three research questions to guide the investigation:

RQ1: What strategies do social work case managers use in child welfare situations to help transition youth aging out of foster care?

RQ2: How do social work case managers define success for youth who age out of foster care?

RQ3: Based on social work case managers' perceptions, how effective are existing strategies for improving transitions into adulthood among youth emancipated from foster care?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was based on ecological systems theory, created by Bronfenbrenner (1986). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) theorized that the role of family activities in both cultural and human development is critical to an individual's overall growth. According to ecological systems theory, connections among three major system levels may impact the transition of youth aging out of foster care. These systems include micro (i.e., the immediate environment), meso (i.e., the interrelation between two or more microsystems), and macro (i.e., broader culture and society, which includes other systems). Additional ecological system levels include exo

(i.e., the settings indirectly influencing a person but directly affecting the microsystem), and chrono (i.e., the change or consistency over the life course).

Microsystem

The immediate influences on youth transitioning to adulthood occur at the microsystem level. The influences at this level involve the immediate environment where the person is located such as foster care, family, or school (see Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), the microsystem is a pattern of interpersonal relationships, social roles, and activities experienced by youth within a direct setting. In the context of foster care, the microsystem encompasses the caregiver-child relationship, the attachment between the child and the caregiver, and the family setting.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) suggested youth residing with relatives live more comfortably because these caregivers offer connectedness and continuity for youth separated from their parents. Children separated from their biological parents must cope with emotional trauma, whether they were physically abused or not. Youth who have been separated from their biological families usually experience attachment disorder (Lander et al., 2013). The caregiver-child attachment is often disrupted when children encounter placement instability following the first family disruption. Experiences of instability while in foster care can increase risks for homelessness after a youth has aged out of the system (Dworsky et al., 2013).

Mesosystem

Experiences in a direct interaction can affect another microsystem. Kinship foster caregivers are considerably more likely than nonkinship foster caregivers to feel

responsible for youth and desire to be involved in all aspects of their lives (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Biological parents are also more likely to engage with and visit their children during kinship foster care placement than in conventional, nonkinship foster care placement (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

Macrosystem

Bronfenbrenner (1977) referred to the macrosystem as a cultural blueprint that can affect social structures and practices within the immediate system levels. Elements of the macrosystem include policies, racial/ethnic minority status, and neighborhood factors that affect the specific processes and conditions occurring within the microsystem, including foster caregiver-child relationships. For example, a disproportionate number of youths placed in foster care are racial and ethnic minorities, especially Native American and African Americans (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). According to Font (2014), African Americans in foster care consider their ethnic identity more positively compared to their peers in non-foster care placements.

In addition, the environment in which a child grows greatly affects development. Huang et al. (2016) investigated the relationship between geographic neighborhood change and the risk of delinquency for adolescents in foster care settings, finding that neighborhood characteristics, such as high criminal activity and instability, contribute to out-of-home placement for children. As a result, they concluded that neighborhood selection is key to ensuring successful outcomes when considering where foster youth should be placed.

Huang et. al (2016) also noted that understanding the impact of changing communities can inform decision making around placement criteria for fewer disruptions and more successful family reunifications. Other research also lends evidence to the importance of the environment on children's well-being. Some studies have reported that over half of the youth entering foster care come from families who struggle to meet their basic needs, suggesting that poverty is a key hindrance in keeping families together (Pelton, 2015). Both low-income status and poverty status have been found to be associated with child abuse and neglect, regardless of class (Pelton, 2015).

Exosystem

The exosystem consists of interrelations between two or more settings, one of which directly affects the developing individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). For example, the quality of the relationship between a caregiver and child may be impacted by larger systems indirectly experienced by the child, such as social support and involvement of child welfare advocates or professionals. The exosystem outlines the significance of the kinship foster caregiver experience with the social support network and education in foster care centers (outside the family), which may influence caregivers' relationships with their children.

Chronosystem

The chronosystem involves change or consistency, such as economic or historical events, over the life course (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Welfare reforms can influence social benefits and transition outcomes among foster care youth (see Williams-Mbengue, 2016). An economic slump may affect funds and resources allocated to foster

care homes and result in denial of basic resources and services for youth aging out of foster care (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Nature of the Study

In this qualitative study, I employed an exploratory research design. The goal of the study was to provide an opportunity for social work case managers to describe the resources needed to support transitioning youth who became homeless after they aged out of foster care. Ultimately, my intent with this study was to provide this information to policymakers and professionals who work with foster care youth. Data were collected via semi structured interviews to explore the strategies used by social work case managers in northeastern Georgia to improve the transition to adulthood among youth who have aged out of foster care. I also designed this study to explore social work case managers' perceptions of what successful transition entails and their beliefs about how effective existing strategies are for helping this population.

Definitions

Aging out: According to Fryar et al. (2017), aging out refers to young children in a government or social service agency foster care system who remain within the system after graduating from high school or attaining the age of majority. Youth who age out have failed to find permanency with a suitable adoptive family, get adopted, or reunite with their biological families.

Child welfare workers: According to Child Welfare Information Gateway (2018), child welfare workers are those case managers tasked with providing services designed to ensure that children are safe and that families have the necessary support to care for their

children successfully. They work with children, youth, and families to achieve family reunification. In the event that reunification of child and family fails, they arrange for children to live with kin (i.e., relatives) or with foster families when safety cannot be ensured at home, arrange adoption, or forge other permanent family connections for children and youth leaving foster care.

Foster care: The Child Welfare Information Gateway (n.d.) defined foster care (similarly called out-of-home care) as a temporary service offered by the government and social service agencies to minors who are unable to live with their parents or families. Youth in foster care can either live with relatives or nonkinship foster parents. Similarly, foster care can include placement settings, such as group homes, emergency shelters, residential care facilities, and supervised independent living.

Placement disruption: Fryar et al. (2017) defined placement disruption as a mental health situation that can lead to a break in the placement of young children during foster care.

Social support: The American Psychological Association (2020) described social support as the provision of assistance of comfort to others, typically to help them cope with biological, psychological, and social stressors.

Social workers: Social workers, also known as caseworkers, are professionals responsible for providing personal, emotional, academic support, and education to parents and youth.

Social workers' perceptions: The perceptions of practitioners involving the reasons, practical insight, and experiences surrounding various issues (Gerritsen-McKane, Hunter, & Ofori-Dua, 2013).

Successful transition: According to Collins et al. (2018), a successful transition is a state in which youth aging out foster care leave with self-sufficiency skills that enable them to survive as independent adults.

Assumptions

In this study, I made several assumptions. The first assumption was that participants' responses would represent authentic experiences of social work case managers who work with youth in the foster care system. I assumed their authentic sharing would elucidate how social services supported or hindered their efforts to secure resources, such as stable housing for youth before they age out of foster care. The second assumption was that participants would provide true stories of their experiences working with youth after they exit foster care and sign back into the system. My final assumption was that the use of the ecological framework provided me with an understanding of the relationship between social work case managers, youth, and their environments. In addition, this study focused on social work case managers' knowledge, perspectives, contributions, and experiences in working with foster care youth in the transition process from a social work systems theoretical framework (see Noel-Ikulala, 2018).

Limitations

This study was subject to several limitations. First, my primary objective was to explore the experiences of social workers who support transitioning foster care youth to

understand youth's access to social support services relating to housing. Because an attempt to address all types of support services was not made, this study was limited in focus on housing concerns and may not be generalizable to all youth who age out of foster care. In addition, the study sample focused on social work case managers who were experienced in securing stable housing for transitioning youth who age out of foster care, and as such, may not be representative of all child welfare workers.

Second, I faced several language and communication barriers that may have served as obstructions to the success of this study. Language barriers can pose a problem depending on the accent of interviewees or interviewers (Hepworth et al., 2017). I faced communication challenges as a multicultural woman who speaks with a foreign accent and has a diverse cultural background. To combat these challenges, I utilized the culturally sensitive strategies described by Brady et al. (2016) to incorporate knowledge regarding the diverse cultural values systems of the study participants. Having an open mind, being culturally sensitive to participant social norms, and using specialized vocabulary and/or nonverbal cues also helped moderate this potential limitation. Throughout the study process, I monitored any assumptions, preconceived notions, or biases and examined all emotions that arose while working with study data.

Third, several aspects of the qualitative research process were limitations. Recruiting adequate participants is a concern with any study (Crawford-Jakubiak et al., 2017). To minimize this barrier, I conferred with my dissertation committee to determine the best methods to ensure adequate recruitment. While qualitative research allows for deep exploration of a research topic, qualitative data are time consuming to collect and

analyze. Participant accuracy is also a concern because interviewees who provide inaccurate or false information during interviews may undermine the trustworthiness of data (Filippelli et al., 2017). I minimized this barrier by providing a thorough informed consent process for the study and ensuring participant concerns were addressed prior to beginning data collection.

Finally, financial constraints limited the study to a small geographical area for data collection (i.e., northeastern Georgia).

Significance

This qualitative study has significance at the micro, meso, macro, exo, and chrono social-ecological levels. On the microlevel, study findings may be used to improve outcomes among youth aging out of the foster care system including a reduction in homelessness. Findings may also be used to empower, strengthen, and encourage youth to develop life skills for successful decision making. On the meso level, results may contribute to increased community awareness and involvement related to foster care issues (see Fowler et al., 2019). On the macrolevel, findings may provide a foundation of knowledge of social work in the field of social sciences. Findings may also contribute to the development of evidence-based practices for improving outcomes among youth aging out of the foster care system (see Courtney et al., 2016). Social workers will be able to empower, strengthen, and encourage youth to work toward goals and develop strong life and decision-making skills by applying these findings. Results may also help social workers create a better awareness of the needs of youth and available intervention strategies while partnering with youth to help them plan for successful transitions (see

Neil et al., 2019). Finally, study findings may contribute to policy and procedural changes and recommendations to improve outcomes for youth emancipated from foster care (see Peters et al., 2016).

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the history of foster care and highlighted the contribution child welfare made in advancing the well-being of children. Social support networks for foster youth require additional attention and strengthening. The discussion encompassed the influence that social support networks have in preparing children to transition out of the child welfare system. Unlike their younger peers who may have the opportunity to test responsibility and learn from their mistakes while residing in the comfort zone of their families and under the tutelage of their caregivers (Fordyce, 2016), older foster care youth are often left to transition out of the system before they are adequately prepared. Researchers have documented a disproportionate gap in the delivery of social services, leading to the escalation of homelessness among foster care youth who have aged out of the system (Poremski et al., 2016; Richards, 2014). When there is an unsupportive system in place, transitioning youth's ability to find and maintain safe and stable housing is in jeopardy (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Lack of support for youth who have transitioned out of the foster care is a critical concern needing policy and practice reevaluation on housing, education, employment, relationships, and aspects of parenting (Lee & Ballew, 2018; Rosenberg, 2018).

In Chapter 2, I will present a review of the literature on topics related to social workers' inability to access and provide social support services to transitioning youth out

of foster care. Chapter 2 will also include a description of the ecological and social stress frameworks because they contribute to a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Literature usually portrays aged-out foster care youth as homeless, poor, uneducated, early childbearing, and unsuccessful people without a college degree or high school diploma (Curry & Abrams, 2015). The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine how foster social work case managers care in northeastern Georgia help youth successfully age out of foster care. Through an ecological systems lens, research on the struggles faced by foster care youth transitioning to adulthood is presented in this chapter.

Literature Search Strategy

I searched several databases to locate the peer-reviewed literature discussed in this chapter, including Scholar Works, Verify Peer Review, Google Scholar, and Thoreau Multi-Database Search. The following search terms were used: *foster care*, *aging out of foster care*, *case managers' experiences*, *foster care youth*, and *supporting services*. Extant literature from this search is reviewed in this chapter as it relates to aging out of foster care, challenges youth face in foster care, and a focus on present programs available for youth transitioning out of foster care (see Fowler et al., 2019).

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

Aging Out of Foster Care

Youth age out of foster care for many reasons. According to Slavin (2018), children are placed in foster care after the home environment has been deemed unsafe due to maltreatment including abandonment, neglect, or abuse. Behavioral issues and mental health problems can also lead to children being removed of their family environment and placed in foster care (Lam, 2015). Sommer (2013) revealed key reasons

why young people age out of the foster care system, including placement in foster care after age 15 and the inability to find permanency through reunification, adoption, or transfer of permanent legal custody to a relative before age 18. Older youth are less likely to live with kin and more apt to be placed in group homes. Young adults who have not found permanency by age 21 are often forced to leave the foster care system and struggle to learn self-sufficiency skills (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019).

Challenges Youth Face in Foster Care

Hepworth et al. (2017) described seven factors that affect youth aging out of foster care, including the need for support, early parenthood, relationships with others, poverty, homelessness, incarceration, and education/duration of foster care. Collins et al. (2018) reported that youth who age out of foster care are less prepared for adult responsibilities, such as employment, independent living, and education completion. These youth are also more likely to experience victimization, incarceration, and homelessness. Rolland (2015) found that 25% of youth who aged out of foster care had criminal records, and 37% experienced one or more negative outcomes, including sexual assault, victimization, homelessness, or incarceration. According to Collins et al., approximately 80% of youth who aged out of foster care earn a General Education Development certificate or high school diploma by age 26, as compared to 94% of the general population of the same age. Only 4% of foster youth achieve a 4 year college degree by the age of 26 (Greeson, 2013). While foster parents need to promote the development of independent survival skills, relationship building skills, and provide other crucial types of support, some feel ill-prepared for these tasks (Murray et. al, 2010).

Many children in foster care face disruptions in their foster placements; these disruptions are associated with several negative outcomes and can lead to increased instability in the life of a child (Koh et. al, 2014; Vreeland et. al, 2020). Prior research has shown that multiple foster care placements are associated with increased risk of care disruption and even engagement in criminal activities (Pilkay & Sungkyu, 2015).

Need for Support

The need for support consists of financial assistance, social support, and emotional support. Prior research has indicated that assistance from others, particularly in the form of supportive relationships, has a positive impact on youth (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Financial support is usually provided by childcare organizations to foster parents. Emotional support is provided by friends, family members, foster parents, and social workers. Social support includes support provided by extended support family, social workers, friends, foster or adoptive parents, and neighbors. However, youth who age out of foster care often lack reliable and stable support systems (Fryar et al., 2017).

Early Parenting

Teen parenting is another obstacle experienced by foster youth while transitioning into adulthood (Svoboda et. al, 2012). In a study conducted in Maryland, Shaw et. al (2010) found that the birth rate for youth in foster care was approximately 3 times as high as the statewide birth rate among the general population. Crawford-Jakubiak et al. (2017) also suggested early parenting creates additional burdens for youth aging out of care because they lack basic resources and skills and are still in their formative years. Crawford-Jakubiak et al. asserted young parents are more likely to engage in criminal activities, such as drug trafficking and illicit sex, to meet their basic needs.

Relating and Connecting to Others

Strong and supportive relationships throughout adolescence are essential to life success (Collins et al., 2018). The types of youth relationships frequently studied include connections with peers, connections with family members, and connections with nonfamilial adults, such as teachers, mentors, or other vital individuals. Familial relationships are essential to positive youth development during the transition to adulthood because adult family members serve as role models in the development of positive social relations and communication competence (Kaniušonytė & Žukauskienė, 2018).

According to Curry and Abrams (2015), families contribute to developing adolescent self-esteem through integral support systems and connections during the transition to independent adulthood. Young people are progressively less dependent on their families but maintain close family relationships during the transition to healthy

adulthood. In contrast, a lack of relational connections and support can impair development. For these reasons, foster youth with little family contact are less likely to experience a successful transition to adulthood (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Peer groups also strongly influence the transition to adulthood. Fowler et al. (2017) asserted foster care youth often experience poor peer relationships because of frequent moves within the foster care system. Supportive relationships with nonfamilial adults, such as mentors, can positively influence the emotional and social development of adolescents. Youth who are removed from abusive circumstances are often emotionally and physically disconnected from siblings and parents when placed in foster care, making connections to nonfamilial adults vitally important to their success.

Poverty

Pac et al. (2017) found that foster youth are more likely to live in poverty when compared to youth who live with their parents. According to Hedenstrom (2014), youth who cannot access basic needs of food, housing, and clothing often experience negative transitions to adulthood. Lee and Ballew (2018) revealed that of 110 former foster youth in the state of Georgia, 94% earned no more than \$10,000 annually, only 65% attained high school education, 55% lacked health insurance, and just 30% enrolled in college. Multiple pregnancies were identified in the study sample, and 50% of youth had no more than \$300 upon discharge from foster care and had little or no contact with caseworkers. Häggman-Laitila et al. (2019) investigated the relationship between total expenditures and outcomes among 120 children aging out of foster care and found that youth aging out

of foster care with limited financial support achieved lower levels of education and higher rates of homelessness when compared to youth living with their biological parents.

Homelessness

Youth aging out of foster care who have lived in poverty are more likely to be homeless than youth living with biological parents (Fryar et al., 2017). Dworsky et al. (2013) reported that previous experiences of foster care are predictive of homelessness rates that are 33% higher than those experienced by youth who are not placed in foster care. Homelessness also increases challenges associated with earning an education and obtaining employment, hampering progress toward a self-sufficient adulthood (Collins et al., 2018).

Incarceration

Rolland (2015) indicated that former foster youth have a higher rate of imprisonment compared to youth not placed in the foster care system. Rolland described how incarceration hinders progress towards independent adulthood and creates difficulties assimilating into society. Youth emancipated from foster care also experience more barriers to education and employment, increasing the likelihood of criminal behavior (Fryar et al., 2017).

Educational Achievement Barriers

Many youth aging out of foster care depend on public assistance and are less likely to be employed compared to youth who have never been in foster care (Courtney et al., 2016). Fowler et al. (2019) found that youth leaving foster care give birth to more

children during their 20s than those not brought up in foster care. High rates of substance abuse and criminal involvement among foster youth may contribute to early parenthood.

Programs Available for Youth

Independent living programs (ILPs), initially created during the 1980s, stemmed from a federal initiative to address the basic needs of adolescents aging out of foster care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). ILPs focus on providing basic needs, building life skills, and job readiness and retention. Other services offered by ILPs include educational assistance and transitional housing services. Although many youths have participated in ILPs, programs vary in effectiveness based on their features and individual attributes (Sommer, 2013).

A program available for youth in Georgia is the Georgia Resilient, Youth-Centered, Stable, Empowered program, which is an ILP housed in Georgia's Division of Family and Children's Services (Georgia Resilient. Youth-Centered. Stable. Empowered, 2021). This program provides services to Georgia youth between the ages of 14 and 26, with some services specifically aimed towards those who are 14+ and have been in the foster care system for at least 6 months. Self-services may help youth in Georgia and surrounding areas meet their independent living plans and goals through support in the areas of education, independent living skills, employment, housing, and permanent connections.

Another program that assists foster youth is The Fostering Connections to Success Act. Under this program, federal funding is provided to states that assist foster youth over the age of 18 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). Youth must be involved in

vocational or school training or employed for at least 80 hours every month to be eligible for this program.

The Healthy Transition to Adulthood Program can similarly help foster youth between the ages of 14 and 23 successfully transition to adulthood and mitigate homelessness (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2021). Youth emancipated from foster care often need help developing independent survival plans, finding affordable housing, obtaining vital documents, receiving training in financial management, identifying and building a minimum of one permanent connection to a supportive caregiver, completing a high school diploma, receiving health care coverage, and gaining and retaining employment (Fryar et al., 2017).

Literature Gaps

Several research gaps exist in the extant literature related to youth aging-out of the foster care system, including a lack of cohesive research findings, deficiencies in participant recruitment, a lack of applied research within the field, and inadequate information about the impact of supportive resources on positive outcomes among youth.

Further study is needed on youth aging out of foster care because findings from existing studies are inconsistent. Specifically, the findings are mixed for much of the existing research on the effectiveness of strategies and programs designed to foster successful transitions to adulthood among emancipated foster care youth. While Curry and Abrams (2015) revealed the need for positive outcome strategies with a sample of this vulnerable population of youth, Fowler et al. (2017) reported consistently poor

outcomes for youth aging out of foster care, including incarceration, poverty, lack of employment, lack of education, and homelessness.

Due to high rates of incarceration and homelessness, participant recruitment and retention is another challenge for researchers investigating youth aging out of foster care. Many existing studies conducted with foster youth had small sample sizes, limiting comprehensive understandings and generalizability (Greeson, 2013). High rates of attrition were often reported due to incarceration and the transient nature of emancipated foster youth. Another weakness in previous research was the lack of focus on racial and ethnic minorities, particularly African American and Hispanic youth (Fowler et al., 2017). Furthermore, while previous researchers documented gender and cultural differences, research is lacking on the ways these demographic characteristics may affect the success of targeted interventions (Connelly, 2016).

In addition, much of the existing research on emancipated foster care youth is theoretical. Accordingly, exploratory research is needed to foster theory development.

Lastly, existing literature lacks an examination of the correlations between resources utilized to support youth aging out of foster care and the achievement of success and positive outcomes.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed existing the literature pertaining to the challenges that youth face as they age out of foster care. The review revealed several key challenges, including the need for social, emotional, and financial support; increased likelihood of early parenting; difficulties relating and connecting with others; poverty, homelessness,

and incarceration; and difficulties with educational attainment. Additionally, I detailed programs that are available for youth aging out of foster care to counter these challenges, including ILPs; the Georgia Resilient, Youth-Centered, Stable, Empowered program; the Fostering Connections to Success Act; and the Healthy Transition to Adulthood program. The last part of this chapter contained an outline of the gap in the literature related to this topic. In Chapter 3, I will detail the research design and data collection method used.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I describe the research design and rationale, including the sampling strategy, instrumentation, and data collection. The analysis plan and ethical procedures used are also described. I detail the measures employed to ensure the reliability of the findings and the strategies employed to guarantee the scientific rigor of the study.

Research Design and Rationale

The primary purpose of this qualitative, exploratory study was to investigate strategies employed by foster care social workers and caseworkers in northeastern Georgia to support youth aging out of foster care. I also explored foster care social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of previously identified strategies to support youth. I utilized a qualitative research approach as it was best suited to describe the nature of the phenomenon of interest and best aligned with the research questions.

Professional and Personal Lenses

Youth between the ages of 18 and 21 must learn to live independently as adults with little support after leaving foster care (Hepworth et al., 2017). This discovery made me eager to understand the ways social work case managers help these youth succeed in adulthood transitions. Previous researchers have described the factors that influence successful transition out of foster care (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019) and from adolescence to adulthood (Masten et al., 2004); however, all youth in foster care may not have access to these supports. This study was necessary to provide case managers with insights regarding the causes of failing to successfully transition. The semistructured

interview strategy enabled me to better understand social work case managers' practical experiences and knowledge. As a result, this research project can increase social work professionals' understanding of the current challenges of youth aging out of the foster care system. The study findings are expected to enhance social work practice by increasing awareness and providing practical insights for more successful youth transitions.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling procedures are useful when research participants with specific characteristics must be selected to fulfill the study purposes (Engel & Schutt, 2010). The participants of this study were eight social work case managers who all had a minimum of 3 years of experience working with youth aging out of foster care. I recruited participants through online social work case manager associations, including the Network of Professional Social Workers (2,500 members), Social Workers Life (1,700 members), Case Manager Connections Forum (3,200 members) and Traveling Social Workers/Case Managers Community (2,800 members) Facebook and online groups. I obtained permission to post flyers from the administrator of each social work case manager association. Social work case managers who were not associated with any foster care agencies for at least 3 years and who did not possess active social work licenses (i.e., case manager, master level, or clinical) were excluded from the study. By recruiting participants from multiple online social work case manager groups, I obtained various perspectives from social work case managers practicing in diverse settings. Each online

group administrator provided written consent for agency employees to be contacted through the appropriate published employee directory.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

The Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) gave approval for this study on January 21, 2021 (IRB Approval No. 01-21-21-0674714). I sent a request for permission to post the study flyer on five social work online groups (i.e., Network of Professional Social Workers, Social Workers Life, Case Manager Connections Forum, Licensed Master Social Worker/Licensed Clinical Social Worker study groups, and Traveling Social Workers/Case Managers Community) on January 23, 2021. Interested individuals sent me a direct message providing their email addresses. I emailed each interested individual an electronic copy of the informed consent form. Consent forms were emailed between January 24 and February 14, 2021 as individuals expressed interest in participation. Once I received a participant's consent to participate via email, I scheduled their interviews. Interview scheduling began on January 24 and concluded on February 14 when the final interview was completed.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting social distancing protocols, I could not meet with the participants in person for one-on-one interviews; therefore, all interviews were conducted virtually via telephone. The interviewees and I both conducted the interviews in a private room free from distractions, and each interview lasted between 30–60 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded using a secure MetroPCS 4G LTE android phone via a secondary phone number offered by the phone app, Google Voice. I used the Call Recorder application to perform audio recording.

I stored the recorded data on a password-protected computer to safeguard participants' identities. After data were gathered and transcribed, the transcripts were reviewed to ensure accuracy and then stored securely in an encrypted electronic file.

The instruments used to conduct this study included an interview guide and myself as the researcher, who is considered a data collection tool in qualitative research. I used a semi structured interview guide (see Appendix A), consisting of 15 questions and subquestions, to guide my interviews with social work case managers. All participants were asked the same questions.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process consisted of several steps. The first step of analysis included reading all the transcripts during one sitting, without taking notes, to understand the details. The next step involved me re-reading every transcript, again without making notes, to identify and remove errors. This process allowed me to remain an essential instrument throughout the analysis. Next, I imported the interview transcripts into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program. NVivo is often used in qualitative research due its capabilities to efficiently manage and analyze data, including the ability to import data from multiple sources, organize and sort multiple data files, facilitate quick coding, and use data visualization tools to help identify themes (QRS International, 2020). NVivo can store multiple file types, including audio; therefore, copies of the interview audio recordings and handwritten notes were also imported into the program.

Once data were imported, I began the process of coding. I used an inductive coding approach, allowing codes to emerge from the data (see Engel & Schutt, 2010),

rather than using a list of predetermined codes. NVivo allows for the creation of nodes, or “containers,” where similar codes can be grouped; the research questions guiding this study were set up as nodes to guide the initial organization of codes. I reviewed each transcript and highlighted key portions of the text before assigning them a code. Similar codes across transcripts were grouped into common ideas to create themes and organized under the research question node to which they applied. NVivo also helped me capture the relevant quotes associated with the various codes, making it easier to correlate quotes under each identified theme.

Using NVivo helped in streamlining the data analysis process during the final steps of analysis and helped guard against researcher bias, which Hepworth et al. (2017) noted is a concern in qualitative studies. NVivo’s storage and organization features served the dual purposes of safeguarding information and organizing and sorting the data collected to create efficiency when drafting the narrative of results.

I ensured rigor via the utilization of reflexivity. During data collection, interview questions were asked in a standardized manner to prevent my viewpoints from biasing the process of data analysis (see Hepworth et al., 2017). I analyzed and reviewed the data repeatedly using NVivo to determine the final themes. To maintain credibility, I performed self-analysis when completing data analysis. I explored past assumptions and experiences, such as my background as a foster parent, to enable readers to evaluate the level of investigator bias.

All eight participants reviewed their individual interview transcript to strengthen the credibility and accuracy of the findings. I used a constant comparative method of

analysis to improve the trustworthiness of findings. Confirmability and dependability were maintained via consistent and exhaustive documentation throughout the investigation. I also conducted phone conferences and periodic meetings with my dissertation committee members to discuss the progress of the investigation. The key components that contributed to the rigor and trustworthiness of this qualitative study process included interview audiotapes with verbatim transcripts, the research team, field notes, and transcript review (see Fowler et al., 2019).

Ethical Procedures

I employed multiple strategies to protect participants' rights and privacy over the course of the study. I completed the Collaborative Institute Training Initiative before submitting an IRB request to Walden University. The training provided me with the knowledge required to protect participants and ensure research procedures were satisfactory. I ensured collected data were kept confidential. Only professionals who volunteered and consented to the study were interviewed.

I followed and employed fundamental ethical principles of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) throughout this research study. The first ethical principle applied suggests that social work case managers are responsible for providing services to people in need and solving social issues. Social workers place service to others above their own self-interest (NASW, 2017) and often volunteer their professional skills without financial return. The second ethical principle applied in this study was that social workers recognize the importance of human relationships in fostering change. Social work case managers can connect youth aging out of care with supportive mentors

or adults and help them build better relationships. The third ethical principle applied states that social workers have a role in challenging social injustice (NASW, 2017). Social work case managers can pursue social change on behalf of youth aging out of foster care to find permanent connections, access essential resources, gain employment, and obtain an education. Finally, the ethical principle of integrity was applied to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the study. All research materials, transcriptions, recordings, and consent documents are stored in a secure location and will be kept for up to 5 years; data will then be destroyed to protect participants' privacy. I advised participants they could decline to respond to any question or terminate their participation at any time (see NASW, 2017).

Summary

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the research study design and methodology. This included a description of the qualitative interviewing approach and interview guide that was employed to collect data. A purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants for the study. I detailed the participant inclusion criteria; eight participants completed individual interviews for this study. The data collection instrument used in the study consisted of a telephone audio recorder and me as the researcher. In this chapter, I also provided a description of the data analysis process and the strategies employed to maintain credibility. The chapter ended with a discussion of ethical procedures. Chapters 4 and 5 will include the findings of the study, application of findings for professional practice, and implications for social change.

Chapter 4: Presentation of the Findings

In this qualitative study, I investigated strategies used by social work case managers to ensure youth aging out of foster care into adulthood experience a successful transition. To gain a better understanding of these strategies, I sought out participants who had direct experience working with foster youth. Eight social work case managers from different agencies in northeastern Georgia volunteered to participate. Each participant was qualified for the study and had experience working with foster youth. In interviews, social work case managers were asked about their perceptions of current used strategies used to support youth (see Curry et al., 2015). I provided an opportunity for participants to elaborate on these strategies, challenges, and interventions used when working with foster youth who have reached the age of emancipation and are transitioning into adult society. The findings of this study may inform social work practice and policy by providing information to assist foster care professionals and policy makers as they seek to improve housing services for aging out youth. The study findings may also provide a foundation for future studies of transition planning for youth who are aging out of the foster care system, particular in northeastern Georgia.

A key focus of this study was to gain a broader understanding of the access foster youth have to social support services to aid in the transition from foster care to adulthood. To best accomplish this aim, I employed the qualitative method, enabling me to explore social settings more deeply with social work case managers. Each participant provided insights that enabled me to gain a holistic view of the phenomenon under study (see

Abma & Stake, 2014). I used a semistructured interviewing process, which allowed me to ask questions in a logical order and gave room for clarification or follow-up questions.

Ecological systems theory provided a framework to understand the social workers' perceptions of strategies to help foster youth effectively transition to successful adulthood in society. I used the theoretical framework to develop the following three research questions that guided the study:

RQ1: What strategies do social work case managers use in child welfare situations to help transition youth aging out of foster care?

RQ2: How do social work case managers define success for youth who age out of foster care?

RQ3: Based on social work case managers' perceptions, how effective are existing strategies for improving transitions into adulthood among youth emancipated from foster care?

Data Analysis Techniques

I made a concerted effort to maintain the quality of this empirical study. According to Miller (2020), thematic analysis is a common form of analysis in qualitative research that allows for the identification, analyzation, and interpretation of patterns in qualitative data.

I used NVivo throughout this thematic analysis to identify relevant codes that were then grouped into common ideas to create themes. The NVivo software helped to capture the relevant quotes associated with the various codes, making it easier for me to correlate quotes under each identified theme.

Saldaña (2012) suggested that member checking increases the credibility of the study. To establish this credibility, I performed member checking to ensure study participants approved of my interpretations of their interview responses. I emailed a summary of their interview to each participant and requested that they review and verify the validity of the content as well as the results of the coding process.

Demographics

The social work case managers selected for the study were currently working with or had formerly worked with foster youth in diverse settings. Each participant was asked about their history working in foster care, including how long they had worked with foster youth in this profession, their job title, length of time in their position, a brief description of their role, why they selected a career in foster care, and the number of youth on their caseload between the ages of 16–18 and 18–21. I intentionally included several participants with teenage children because they understood the challenges youth of that age are facing.

In total, 35 social workers responded to my recruitment efforts and were considered for inclusion in the study. I accepted participants on a first-come, first-serve basis, considering inclusion criteria and scheduling availability. All selected respondents met the inclusion criteria. The final study sample included eight social work professionals who had experience working with youth aging out of foster care. There were five female and three male participants. Four of the participants had a doctorate in social work, three had attained a master's degree in social work, and two possessed a bachelor's degree in social work. All participants were licensed in a social work practice. Participants' years

of experience working with youth in the foster care system ranged from 3–35 years. The selected social workers worked at a variety of agencies, including child welfare foster care agencies, the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS), group homes, homeless shelters, and specialized foster care centers for older youth. A detailed description of each participant’s characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics and Demography

	Gender	Education	License	Time working in foster care	Type of Agency
P1	Female	DSW	LBSW	21 years	Specialized foster care agency
P2	Female	DSW	LCSW	35 years	Agency for youth group home
P3	Male	DSW	LMSW	15 years	DFCS
P4	Female	BSW	LMSW	5 years	Private foster care agency
P5	Male	BSW	LCSW	8 years	Agency for homeless youth
P6	Male	MSW	LMSW	17 years	Specialized foster care agency
P7	Female	DSW	LCSW	19 years	Private foster care agency
P8	Female	BSW	LMSW	4 years	DFCS

Note. The following abbreviations are used in Table 1: DSW - Doctor of Social Work; LBSW - Licensed Baccalaureate Social Worker; LCSW – Licensed Clinical Social Worker; LMSW – Licensed Master Social Workers; DFCS – Department of Family and Children Services; BSW – Bachelor of Social Work; MSW – Master of Social Work

Results

Seven themes emerged from the data: role, career in foster care field and accomplishment plan; importance of services; early enrollment in emancipation programs; aging out and housing concerns; empowerment and self-advocacy skills; ILP skills, social support and outside resources; perception of the foster care system, and need for permanent connections. Each of these themes helped to answer a specific research question posed in this study.

Theme 1: Role, Career in Foster Care Field, and Accomplishment Plan

Participants provided details that shed light on their roles and responsibilities as foster care social workers. The primary role was centered on advocating for the safety and well-being of children via actions, such as monitoring of physical and emotional needs, providing social support, and helping youth navigate the permanency and adoption process.

My role involves my ongoing and thorough assessment of safety...this includes being an advocate for children...monitoring their health needs, educational needs, behavioral needs, nutritional needs, sleep needs, monitoring their placement needs, and any other need or circumstance related to the child.

In addition to safety and well-being, I am also assessing permanency on an ongoing basis, which relates to my thorough and quality assessment of the parents with whom the child plans to reunify, assessing their stability and providing quality services to the parents so that they can address the reason for the children being removed (i.e., substance abuse, mental health, etc.). I also complete any

necessary tasks as related to other permanency options (i.e., adoption, guardianship, etc.) if reunification is not feasible. As being in foster care relates to the Juvenile Court, my role also includes testifying and supporting my clients via legal means.

“As a case manager, my role entails overseeing the foster home to ensure that the children’s safety, permanency, and well-being needs are met.”

“My current role entails...working with school officials, testifying in court, making monthly routine visits, being on-call after hours, etc. Ensuring children have permanent homes by starting and finalizing the adoption process.”

Additionally, participants described their motivation and desire to work with foster youth and goals for future accomplishments. DePanfilis (2018) emphasized that when selecting staff to work in Child Protective Services, child welfare agencies should select staff who embrace philosophical tenets that are based on values underlying sound child protection and community responses to child maltreatment. Child welfare professionals should also recognize that human behavior and social functioning take place within an environmental context; personal, family, and environmental factors all interact to influence individual behaviors. The following direct quotes exemplify how study participants embodied these very characteristics.

I chose to be a social worker in order to serve others, meet them where they are, and empower others to make necessary changes in their lives to be sustainable long term... I hope to be a stable and consistent force in someone’s life who has grown to know instability and dysfunction. I hope my actions are remembered as

genuine and kind as I know the importance of how making someone feels impacts the outcome of our journey together, even long after our journey has ended.

My biggest goal I hope to accomplish is to use my gentle spirit to give youth the tools they need in life to be successful. It would give me joy to see the success stories, knowing that my presence and encouragement made the difference.

“I selected this role as a foster care and adoption case manager because I wanted to see a difference with the children in need of help.”

Theme 2: Importance of Services

Interviewees explained that their agencies provide a variety of supportive services to youth before they age out of the foster care system. These provided resources played a critical role for youth aging out of foster care. Participants shared insights on how these programs are effective in meeting youth’s specific needs. For example, some agencies ensure that youth complete a written transitional living plan and offer collaborative support and wraparound services to youth who are aging out. Collaborative support and wraparound services are important elements that may contribute to positive outcomes among for foster care youth (Courtney et al., 2016).

“These services include ongoing meetings and assessment to prepare the youth for life beyond foster care, assessing the child’s strengths and needs, and connecting the child to supportive community resources to aid in long-term success.”

“Services ranging from financial education, enrollment into GED program, job hunting assistance, higher education preparation, and tutoring programs.”

My agency provides wraparound services for foster youth dealing with childhood trauma and mental health issues...provide program or activities designed to prevent obstacles to getting jobs. Youth are engaged in trainings pertaining to financial literacy, skills acquisition and many others.

“Before a youth is transitioned out of foster care, they are offered to take part in ILP services so they can know basic life skills.”

Regarding services my agency provides to foster youth who are aging out...[we] will meet with...the youth to have an exit meeting. The meeting helps the youth to identify services and supports that they may need once they age out. The topics generally discussed are housing options, health insurance, education, physical, mental, and dental health, and employment services.

These services may come from a variety of sources, including foster parents, caregivers, social workers, school liaisons, and agency advocates. When these groups combine their resources and expertise to improve educational and housing programs for youth, major strides can be accomplished. In some instances, however, services are limited:

“There are fewer resources now than in the past. There really isn't adequate resources offered to get work experience, which is extremely important, and they [the youth] often end up with inadequate skills.”

In addition to the tangible services provided, interviewees reported that relationships with social workers are a critical service for youth. Often, social workers serve as adults that foster youth have developed a strong relationship with prior to aging

out of care (Curry et al., 2015). Participants noted that while this kind of connection is crucial for foster youth, it remains equally important that youth have the opportunity to forge other permanent relationships in their lives. Though a close connection with caseworkers enables youth to have the presence of a trusted adult in their lives, social workers should remain professional, always doing what is in their clients' best interest (Brady, 2016).

Theme 3: Early Enrollment in Emancipation Programs

Participants emphasized the importance of enrolling foster youth in services as early as possible to increase the chances of a prosperous future after transitioning from foster care (Fryar et al., 2017). Participants indicated that harm reduction approaches may be useful to improve transitional programs (Brandon et al., 2017) and underscored the importance of meeting youth where they are.

“I believe that starting early in connecting the child to local resources and having open discussions early with the youth in regards to adulthood can definitely make a difference in the outcome of the child.”

In my opinion, the best way to serve youth transitioning out of foster care is to engage the child in their needs and ensure the child takes an active role in their own growth and independent needs. Youth don't do so well when they feel things are being forced upon them, especially since foster care has already been forced upon them and beyond their control, so [this leads to] actually helping the youth work towards these goals proves to have more successful outcomes as the youth leaves foster care.

Theme 4: Aging Out Obstacles, Successes, and Housing Concerns

Studies have shown that foster youth continue to experience challenges in their transition to adulthood in several domains, particularly housing (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Curtis & Collins, 2011; Dworsky et al., 2013). Participants emphasized that housing issues experienced by foster youth are traumatizing and that many become homeless shortly after emancipation. Participants described the available housing programs in their areas, which included low-income housing not specific to foster youth, transitional homes, and housing programs dedicated to serving foster youth specifically. Youth making the transition from foster care benefit from stable housing because it allows them to focus on their educational and employment opportunities while mastering self-sufficiency skills (Berzin et. al, 2011). Without stable housing, foster youth run the risks of having incomplete educational goals, becoming dependent on welfare, facing employment challenges, and experiencing financial dependency. Quotes from participants describing their local housing programs, or the lack thereof, are below.

There are not any housing programs in my area specifically designed for youth after foster care. There are various low-income housing facilities, income-based housing units, landlords who are more budget friendly, etc. There is a program designed to assist homeless individuals with gaining stability. There are also various community agencies who have funds designed to help individuals maintain their housing via assistance with rent, deposit, utilities, etc. We are able to connect the youth to these services prior to transitioning out of foster care and

help them understand the process and any necessary prerequisites needed to gain housing stability.

The housing programs are transition homes and they have roommates and if they have children, their children are allowed to stay in the homes. The program helps youth with getting them a car and help with budgeting and household duties. In my opinion, the more challenging needs relate to youth who have high specialized needs that cannot all be met within the local community or via local resources. It is also a challenge in trying to serve youth who are more focused on “leaving” but not focused on the actual responsibilities of adulthood and refuse to take advantage of necessary opportunities available to them.

The state does allow youth to remain in care until they are 21, but once they have aged out, the housing programs are very scarce if they have not saved and planned properly. In the event of the youth becoming homeless, the youth can obtain temporary housing at shelters.

“We do not have our own housing program and housing is a huge barrier to success for our young people.”

Scholars are also interested in the role social support services play in preparing youth as they age out of the foster care system. Prior research has found that the receipt of social services promotes positive connections that build lasting relationships (Curry & Abrams, 2015). However, participants shared that some youth have grown tired of the foster care system and do not take advantage of the opportunities available to them while they are available. This may lead to regret once they no longer qualify for services.

Additionally, some youth face challenges that currently available services are unable to adequately address. For example, mental health needs were mentioned by participants as a crucial area in which foster youth may require longer term supports.

Many of the youth are tired of DFCS, don't want to be in foster care, and aren't interested in taking advantage of the services offered to them prior to transition out of foster care. Once they are no longer in care, reality sinks in of the difficulties in managing life's responsibilities and they often appear to regret not being more involved in services and opportunities available to them while in foster care.

Other struggles relate to children who have high critical needs, whether this is medical, developmental, or mental health. Although the youth can be connected to resources, these youth are often still not able to truly manage their needs without consistent long-term support.

“Some other major struggles are Depression, Homelessness, substance abuse and other mental health issues.”

Finally, participants described their definitions of a successful transition for youth that have aged out of foster care. Overall, a successful transition was defined as a situation in which youth have achieved independence, are financially and emotionally stable, and have overcome personal barriers and obstacles.

“Success is defined as someone breaking bad generational cycles and creating their version of success.”

This entails the youth being able to achieve and accomplish various milestones to support them after foster care... This also includes the youth being aware of his or her own needs (i.e. mental health, medical, etc.) and knowing how to manage this successfully as an adult.

“When a youth against all odds was able to become self-reliant, resilient and determined to utilize most of the opportunities presented to him to become successful.”

“Social workers define success for youth who age out of foster care, seeing the youth going to college, working, and developing independence.”

Theme 5: Empowerment and Self-Advocacy Skills

To ensure a successful transition to independent living, foster youth must develop self-advocacy skills to help them combat future challenges. While youth living in a supportive, intact family learn self-advocacy skills from their parents (Jones & Gragg, 2012), children living in foster care typically lack self-advocacy skills as some foster parents do not promote these behaviors (Jones & Gragg, 2012). Krebs et al. (2013) stated that self-advocacy is the process of looking at a problem critically, setting one's goal, mapping out a strategy to address the needs of every party involved, and taking action to achieve one's goals.

Participants described their methods for empowering and encouraging self-advocacy among youth. These included encouraging youth to make their own decisions while remaining available to provide support; providing real life examples of obstacles youth may face; advocating for hands-on training and experiences for youth; and encouraging practice with life skills such as household chores, opening a bank account,

and managing important documentation. The quote below provides a common example of how case managers approach their work with youth as it relates to empowerment.

I am open and honest with youth about the challenges of adulthood post foster care and encourage youth to be involved by getting them to identify their own goals, needs, wants, desires and then helping them identify things that are a priority versus items that can be achieved over time. I help them with managing important documents, learning how to be responsible and accountable, but still allowing them to take the lead in expressing their own thoughts while I stand alongside them supporting them, encouraging them, and of course redirecting them as needed.

Theme 6: ILP Skills and Outside Resources

With regards to resources, participants described their responsibilities for referring foster youth to financial services trainings, academic resources, and personal resources via ILPs. To access these services, youth are required to remain enrolled in school with passing grades. Participants narrated in detail how they educated youth and ensured access to essential resources.

Starting at age 14, we have youth involved in consistent and ongoing independent living skills activities to prepare them for transition out of foster care. The youth are assigned an Independent Living Program (ILP) Coordinator who serves to ensure that they receive consistent and ongoing classes and services based on real needs—i.e. budgeting/money management, managing a checking account, filing income taxes, obtaining a license, managing peer issues (i.e. self-esteem, bullying,

dating, social interactions, etc.), interview skills, resume building skills, housing search, managing a home (laundry, cooking, making bed, bill payment,) etc. As a case manager, we are to assess this ongoing basis [as well as] directly asking the child what they are learning and also monitoring the placement to ensure that they are also consistently putting forth effort to engage the youth in independent living skills on a daily basis, even outside of the monthly workshops.

ILP coordinators also help youth as they transition out of care with housing, education, and employment opportunities. IL coordinators often stay connected to youth even after they age out and stop receiving services, allowing for youth who are no longer connected to formal services to be reached.

While some participants felt that currently available ILP services and outside resources were adequate, others disagreed and provided examples of potential improvements, as detailed below.

I do not believe the current social support services are sufficient to support the youth who signs out of care without transitioning into an Independent Living Program. For example, if a youth signs out of foster care, they only leave with a copy of their birth certificate, social security card, Medicaid card, court order showing foster care entry, and a letter from DFCS. I understand the importance of these documents, but how are they going to sustain. My suggestion would be to give the youth \$500 as a startup or provide them with housing for three months. I believe it will give the youth the opportunity to get adjusted to being alone without the guidance from case managers.

“ILP services could be sufficient if they enrolled in ILP services or have identified a strong support system outside of the caretaker from which they were removed from.”

... what works best in working with foster youth who are transitioning out of foster care would be continued ILP programs and services as well as support and counseling [as well as] peer support from other children who were successfully in the ILP program.

Theme 7: Perception of the Foster Care System

Participants provided detailed information about their perceptions of the foster care system. Overall, participants' views were similar in that they felt the foster care system needed to place more focus on transitional services for foster care youth.

I believe the current support services are very helpful to the youth, especially in connecting them with ongoing supportive resources. I do feel that based upon the individualized needs of the youth, all services available are not always sufficient to support every child after foster care---this is due to there sometimes being several hurdles and waiting lists and barriers to gain necessary services for the child, which can be quite stressful to a young adult.

“Getting foster youth to enroll in Independent Living Program services is very crucial and can help alleviate their programs when they eventually age out.”

Participants expressed concern around the fact that foster parents are paid to provide permanent connections to the youth. They believed that this should not be the

case because the exchange of payment may negatively impact foster youths' connection with their foster parents.

I felt as a younger woman I observed a lot of foster care youth being treated like property or a source of income for a lot of families. I chose this role [of social worker] because I wanted to ensure that all the children whom I got an opportunity to work with were placed into homes with families who truly loved and cared for them versus families who needed additional income.

Data on foster care programs suggest that there are many structured programs during active enrollment in foster care; however, the lack of structured transitional programs to help foster youth move from foster care to independent living promotes failure (Krebs et al., 2013). Jones (2013) posited that youth in foster care have little knowledge of career goals, educational opportunities, housing, and budgeting. A successful transitional program would help foster youth develop skills to reach their full potential through programs such as career training, mentorship, life skills, and internships (Krebs et al., 2013). Interviewees in this study noted that while laws and regulations related to foster care services are created with good intentions, they are not always executed appropriately. They stressed that when lawmakers are passing laws that impact foster youth, they should better consider the realities that foster youth face.

On a personal level, participants shared that while working with foster youth is challenging, it is also very rewarding, especially when social workers see youth who have completed successful transitions out of foster care.

The most challenging thing I have experienced working with youth in foster care is trying to explain to them why they're facing certain challenges with their families and why they're going through certain things. That's a difficult question to answer because there is no correct way to answer that. It is a very difficult job at times, very long days and nights, but the look you see on a child's face when they get reunited with their biological family, or their new adoptive family is priceless.

“As a case manager you are able to see the growths of the youth and provide skills in which they lack. It's amazing when you see youth who have excelled when there were many people who counted them out.”

“There are a lot of challenges that we face working with this population due to peer pressure and lack of community and state funded programs for teens aging out of foster care.”

Working with youth in this population is hard but you have to listen to their concerns and issues and their plans for their future and stay firm with them. Also support their passion and goals from sports, beauty and medical. You can encourage them to research their careers and create a vision for their future.

Strengths and Limitations

This study has several strengths as well as limitations. First, participants provided sufficient information to answer Research Question 2, which aimed to understand the definition of success for youth aging out of foster care. Respondents defined youth as having a successful transition when they acquired independent living skills, obtained at

least a high-school education, found employment after aging out of foster care, and received the support and services they needed. Second, this research study is of high quality and was conducted with rigor. As a researcher, my ability to select the appropriate analysis methods and tools, including field notes and an audit trail ensured a strong research inquiry (Fowler et al., 2019).

In terms of limitations, the findings of this research were limited due to the sample size, regional focus, and target population instability. The sample size was less than ideal and limited to practitioners located solely in the southeastern United States, hence, findings are limited in their generalizability. The criteria I established for participant selection were stringent to ensure I spoke with professionals experienced with foster youth; however, these strict criteria were a barrier to participant recruitment. Communication was also a challenge. Follow-up efforts for checking transcripts' accuracy proved difficult, some participants could not be reached via phone, while others did not speak English fluently and clearly. Finally, though it allowed for deep exploration and understanding of participant experiences, qualitative data are time-consuming to both collect and analyze.

Summary

This qualitative study engaged professional social workers with over 3 years of experience working with youth aging out of foster care. Participants reported that youths' success is a complicated matter with multiple contributing factors. Harm reduction services, permanent connections, relationships with social workers, and supportive laws and regulations are all key factors to a successful transition out of the foster care setting.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss the application of this research to professional practice and implications for social change.

Chapter 5: Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand social workers': (a) strategies to ensure successful transitions to adulthood for youth aging out of foster care, (b) definitions of success for youth aging out of foster care, and (c) perspectives of currently available strategies to support emancipated foster youth. In this study, I found that social work case managers employ multiple strategies to support foster youth aging out of care, including advocating on behalf of youth, linking youth to critical services, providing social support, and encouraging independence. Achievement of independence, including financial and emotional stability, and having overcome personal barriers signified success for youth aging out of foster care for many case managers. While social work case managers' perspectives differed on service effectiveness, overall themes included differences in service availability based on geographic area, a need for more transitional services for youth, and concerns around relationships between foster parents and foster youth.

These findings contribute to prior research by providing additional information on the effectiveness of supportive services for youth aging out of foster care. By interviewing case managers directly, the findings of this study contribute a unique perspective from experienced professionals working directly within the foster care system. Study results also shed light on the types of strategies that were most effective and those that were lacking. In the remainder of this chapter, I describe the applications of this research to social work ethics and practice as well as provide recommended solutions to some of the issues highlighted previously in the study.

Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

Social workers are required to adhere to the NASW (2017) Code of Ethics when working with underserved populations, such as youth aging out of foster care. When practical problems contribute to failed family reunification for foster youth, social workers must follow ethical principles in providing support to this group (NASW, 2017). To better understand and describe the application of my research to professional ethics in social work practice, I reviewed the NASW Code of Ethics for principles that related to engaging in competent practice. Competence guides the field of social work by directing social work professionals to complete their work diligently, maintain proficiency in professional performance, and develop new knowledge and skills relevant to social work practice (NASW, 2017). Some of the values and principles of the NASW that are applicable for social workers in this research include service, importance of human relationships, social justice, and integrity (see Connelly, 2016).

Ethical Principle I: A Social Worker's Goal is to Provide Services to the People in Need and to Solve Social Issues

Social workers uplift service to others above their own self-interest. For example, social workers have the responsibility to use their knowledge and skills to connect youth aging out of foster care with potential parental figures or mentors. They are also responsible for teaching and providing youth with self-sufficiency skills that will enable them to live a successful, independent life when they age out of foster care (NASW, 2017). Social workers can volunteer their professional skills, without financial

compensation, to educate foster youth on how to survive on their own without engaging in drug abuse and other criminal activities.

Ethical Principle II: A Social Worker Recognizes the Importance of Human Relationships in Bringing Change

According to the NASW (2017), social workers can connect youth aging out of care with supportive adults and help them build relationships and create a healthy social life. NASW also underscored the importance of social workers understanding that relationships among individuals are an important means to facilitate change.

Strengthening relationships creates an open environment where youth can openly share their problems with foster care caseworkers and other supportive adults to find better solutions (Lee et al., 2018). Social workers are challenged to continually strategize ways to fortify relationships among different groups to promote well-being among communities, organizations, social groups, families, and individuals.

Ethical Principle III: Social Workers Have a Role to Challenge Social Injustice

To challenge social injustice, social workers can help youth aging out of foster care to find permanent connections, access essential resources, find employment, and obtain education equal to their counterparts who live with their biological parents (NASW, 2017).

Ethical Principle IV: Integrity

All research materials for this study, including transcriptions, recordings, and consent documents, will be stored in a secure location for up to 5 years. After that time, they will be destroyed to protect the participants' privacy. I informed participants that

they could decline to respond to any question they wanted or terminate their participation at any time (see NASW, 2017). The findings of this study can assist families by targeting critical challenges, such as housing issues, by drawing on social workers' knowledge of dealing with structural issues in society (see NASW, 2017).

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

Based on the findings of this study, I developed several recommendations for social work practice. The first recommendation is to provide support to professionals in practice to identify adequate resources for youth aging out of foster care. This could include focusing on educating mentors who work with foster youth to learn about and communicate additional sources of needed support for youth aging out of foster care (see Collins et al., 2018). One area of focus may be improving practice related to providing housing resources to prevent youth homelessness after aging out of the foster care system. Foster youth who experience an abrupt transition are at higher risk of negative outcomes like homelessness and drug abuse (Dworsky et. al, 2013). The provision of housing resources can help to reduce an abrupt transition and promote a smooth transition for youth aging out of care. Another area of focus may be the practice of strengthening supportive adult relationships for youth aging out of foster care. The presence of caring adults in addition to the ability to maintain relationships can be of great benefit to youths aging out of foster care. Providing youth aging out of care with a list of supportive adults to help, such as former foster parents, caseworkers, teachers, and mentors, is recommended (see Miller et al., 2018).

I also recommend unpaid support for foster youth, extended time periods for youth to spend with supportive services before transitioning out of foster care, and individualized treatment plans. Currently, those supporting youth aging out of foster care are typically always paid. This is a troubling trend because youth need to continue receiving support after they leave foster care. Foster care caseworkers may be able to help connect these vulnerable youth with unpaid foster adults willing to support them. Foster care social workers should also be more vigilant when working with youth in services and attempt to decrease the frequency of moves they encounter to enable them to remain in services. Having youth stay in the services for a longer term would allow them to learn the necessary skills to have a successful transition to adulthood. In terms of treatment plans, social work practice should allow for youth to have more of a say in their treatment so that they can obtain what they need from foster care before aging out. According to Fowler et al. (2019), social workers have a responsibility to work with foster youth to develop useful treatment plans and offer services that would be the most helpful for specific youth. The Preventing Sex Trafficking & Strengthening Family Act (2014) states that when a child is age 14 or above, the case plan needs be created in consultation with that youth. Doing so would also enable foster social workers to develop stronger relationships with foster youth.

Finally, there is a need to make provisions that will enable social workers to engage in program evaluation. This engagement will help to identify and strengthen useful policies to promote assessment and treatment tactics that, in the long run, will promote the most effective resources and referrals for housing assistance.

Implications for Social Change

Support and education may facilitate social change and a smooth transition for youth aging out of foster care by increasing knowledge among foster caseworkers, youth, and foster parents. When caseworkers have awareness of their clients' needs, including supportive adults whom transitioning youth could depend on for assistance, they are better equipped to help identify foster adults who may increase chances of success for these youth (Hedenstrom, 2014). Strategies to improve transitions among foster youth should encompass working closely with foster parents and caseworkers, including ensuring that youth aging out of care understand how to transition to self-sufficiency and how to seek help from trusted adults (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Furthermore, the implication for social change at the microlevel of practice includes increasing social work case managers' understanding of the importance of maintaining stable housing and its impact on increasing protective factors and decreasing risk factors in foster youth aging out. At the meso level, social change can occur through understanding the risks foster youth face because of homelessness. Social worker case managers should collaborate with schools, agencies, and communities to address the needs and challenges of youth aging out of foster care. Following these steps will result in positive outcomes for foster youth and a positive transition into adulthood. At the macrolevel, social change can result from social worker case managers and youth engaging with larger societal systems. Social change can happen at the policy, research, and practice levels in advocating for affordable housing, specialized mental health resources, and increased health care; increasing the recruitment of foster homes;

certifying more relative placements; and advocating for resources that will address and focus on resiliency for foster youth aging out. Over time, federal policies and guidelines may begin to change and expand to increase services and requirements for older youth in care, bringing increased focus on having youth become active participants in their case planning and involving more supportive adults to help youth during their transition out of care

The implementation of laws and regulations is crucial to address the needs of foster youth as early as possible upon entry into foster care programs. Child welfare policies are covered under the Social Security Act as well as other federal legislation (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). This type of legislation is often created when policy makers identify policies that they believe will be supportive and that will make financial resources available to train aging out youth in various trades for future employment and establish procedures that promote appropriate referrals for services. These laws and regulations are made with good intentions, although at times they are not executed appropriately. When lawmakers pass laws that may impact foster youth, they should consider the realities of life that the foster youth face. Legislation that provides support for a variety of services, such as independent living skills, transitional programs, support groups, and therapy, are critical (Fryar et al., 2017). To best support youth's transition to adulthood, federal policies must focus on programs that provide training and independent living skills (Dworsky et al., 2013).

Implications for Future Research

Little existing research has concentrated on youth who have aged out of foster care successfully. As a result of conducting this study, I recommend more comprehensive research on the strategies and factors that can help youth transit to independent adulthood successfully after aging out (see Peters et al., 2016). In addition, there is a need to engage social workers in useful training to equip them with knowledge of services that can help with foster youth's mental health, housing, and reunification with family members, if possible. This study revealed the significance of unpaid support for youth during their transition but was unable to provide information on how these supports could be found. Further research is needed to discover how youth can become connected to these unpaid supports, such as housing, financial education, job training, and medical insurance, prior to their transition out of foster care (Collins et al., 2018). Future research should also sample successful youth to continue developing the scientific evidence base among youth aging out of foster care. Additionally, this research could help to better understand the value of service to others as a possible factor that could influence the ability of youth to age out of foster care successfully. Further research would similarly help innovate and test potential interventions that decrease the abrupt transition observed in youth aging out of care (see Evans et al., 2013).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to understand and describe the strategies utilized by social workers in northeastern Georgia as they support youth to age out of foster care successfully. I also sought to explore caseworkers' perspectives of these

strategies, including the effectiveness of existing strategies for improving transitions into adulthood among youth emancipated from foster care.

Findings from this study revealed that youth aging out of foster care need additional support to help them transition effectively from foster care to independent adulthood. Lack of support and social services for youth was found to be a major challenge for the successful transition from foster care to adulthood. Proposed strategies to improve social work practice include improving service delivery, harm reduction services, permanent connections, and relationships with social workers as well as implementing new laws and regulations to support youth. In this study, I identified the need for these vulnerable youths to be connected to mentors, linked to ILPs at an early stage, and provided with more individual services and housing resources. Ultimately, foster care social workers can provide critical services for youth by linking them with appropriate permanent connections to supportive adult parental figures and aid the youth in developing the skills needed to successfully transition to adulthood.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

From a social worker case manager's perspective:

1. How long have you worked in this profession with foster youth?
 - (a) What is your job title?
 - (b) How long have you been in your position?
 - (c) Please provide a brief description of what your role entails.
2.
 - (a) Why did you select a career in your field?
 - (b) What do you hope to accomplish in your role?
3. How many youth on your caseload are/were between the ages of 16 and 18?
18 and 21?
4. What services do your agency provide to foster youth who are aging out?
5. How do social work case managers define success for youth who age out of foster care?
6. What services outside of your agency are you familiar with and utilize for youth aging out of care?
7.
 - (a) How do you ensure the youth on your caseload are receiving independent living skills?
 - (b) What resources are used to advance these skills?
8. What do you see as some of the major struggles youth face in transition?
9. If youth terminate from the system at 18, what services are available to them?
 - (a) How is this information conveyed to the youth?

10. Do you believe the current social support services available are sufficient to support the youth as they transition? Please explain your response.
11. Describe housing programs available for foster youth after they age out of foster care.
12. What steps do you take to empower youth to take an active role in their own planning to transition?
13. Do you have any ideas that would contribute to improving transition to adulthood for youth?
14. (a) What, in your opinion, works best in working with foster youth who are transitioning out of foster care?

(b) What, in your opinion, is more of a challenge in your work with foster youth?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about working with youth who are transitioning out of foster care?

Appendix B: Collaborative Institute Training Initiative Program Completion Certificate

