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Aged-Out Foster Youths' Exposure to Spiritual Foster Homes and Transition Into Adulthood

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Valerie E. D. Sims

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

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by

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MPhil, Walden University, 2020

MA, Holy Names University, 2006

DDiv, Trinity University, 2000

MDiv, Trinity University, 1998

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

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Abstract

There are 438,000 children and youth in foster care in the United States; almost 46,000 are aged 16 or older, and over 20,000 “age out” of many child welfare services between ages 18 and 20 every year. This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experience of foster youth growing up in a spiritual foster home (incorporating religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) and aging out of the system through the lens of faith-based theory. This study had a sample size of eight participants, ages 18 to 25, who transitioned out of the foster care system as adults. All data collected were analyzed using Neubauer et al.'s steps and coded to identify categories and themes. Results indicated that foster parents gave participants the opportunity to experience a spiritual place in life. Participants had a positive approach to life, and after aging out, they focused on good work ethics and determination for higher educational goals. Further, participants were able to experience their own spiritual practices, and they began to experience positive outcomes. Each participant learned to establish their personal attributes through prayer, their belief in God, inner strength, and mentorship support. These findings will bring awareness to what youth experience during the aging process, which will foster positive social change affecting the processes of transitioning into adulthood.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my dear husband, Elder Billy D. Sims, who has supported me through this long journey. Thank you for your inspiration, faith in me, encouragement, and love. To the memory of my loving parents, who believed that I could do anything and would not give up until the task was finished, Elder Willie Lee and Elnora Easter, I miss you both very much. To my daughter, Roitasha, and granddaughter, Madison, who put up with me when I was so busy writing and could not talk on the phone. To my goddaughter, Ashley Myrick, thank you for the countless hours you have spent supporting me with research and editing my work.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Research (Makanui et al., 2019) has revealed that many foster youths have aged out of the foster care system with very little exposure to spiritual foster homes before transitioning into adulthood. The current study was conducted to understand the lived experience of former foster youth who aged out of care, focusing on spirituality in foster homes and outcomes experienced as they transition to adulthood. Research indicates that most adolescents engage in spiritual exploration and have spiritual-like experiences. Most spiritual commitments to beliefs and practices made during adolescence tend to persist throughout adulthood (Kor et al., 2019). Previous research indicated that spirituality is an essential character strength and a correlate of both subjective wellbeing and prosociality (Kor et al., 2019).

Chapter 1 contains a brief overview of the current literature on spiritual foster homes and aged-out foster youth to provide background information and justify why this study is needed. A description of the problem statement is presented, including supporting research regarding the purpose of the study. The theoretical framework is explored, and research questions are included. The nature of the study, along with key terms, is defined. Assumptions critical in this current research are outlined in detail, including any limitations. The chapter closes with the significance of the study and any contributions.

Background

Previous research (Jackson et al., 2010) has provided general information concerning aged-out foster youth's exposure to spiritual foster homes and transition into adulthood. However, there needs to be more information concerning the transitional process and outcomes of the aged-out youth. For instance, Ahmann (2017) suggested that a significant portion of youth exiting foster care face serious difficulty transitioning to life on their own. The goal of this study was to bring an understanding of what these youths experienced during the aging out process. Information was examined that may inform more sensitive practices and give foster parents, educators, social workers, and other professionals in the system insight into improving the transitional process that may lead to social change.

This study is needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the extent to which specific exposure to spirituality during foster care is necessary, including church attendance, youth groups, placement with religious or spiritual foster parents, and biological family beliefs. After foster children leave foster care, many factors can impact their outcomes in adulthood, such as healthy relationships with others and the amount of social support they receive.

Problem Statement

The research problem addressed through this study was whether exposure to spirituality in foster homes was related to daily functioning outcomes (socioeconomic status, family connections, life satisfaction, and low retention rate of familial retraumatization) in former foster youth as they transitioned to adulthood. In 2021,

49,118 youth were in foster care in California (Youth in Care 2011–2021). Although studies have examined spirituality and foster youth, previous studies lacked specific outcomes of foster youth as they progressed into adulthood (Andrade, 2014). Further, the articles noted in this paper review what is known about foster care and spirituality regarding behaviors and life outcomes. For example, Edelstein and Lowenstein (2014) stated that youth who age out of foster care are found to have less stable employment and lower earnings than youth in the general population. Further, former foster youth are at a higher risk of experiencing homelessness, drug abuse, generational government assistance, sexual exploitation, child welfare involvement, incarcerations, poverty, lack of health insurance, early pregnancies, unstable employment, and a lack of education than adolescents of the general population (Graham et al., 2015). Forty percent of foster youth will experience homelessness by age 19, 25% will be involved with the criminal justice system within two years of aging out, and 49% will have at least one child before the age of 21 (ThruProject, 2022). However, what is lacking in these studies is consistency and level of spirituality about goal setting and outcomes after foster care.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study aimed to explore the lived experience of foster youth growing up in a spiritual home (incorporating religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) after aging out of the system. The Canadian Child Care Federation (CCCF, n.d.) suggested that spirituality may empower strong connections/relationships between children and their environment. They develop their identity through these relationships and make sense of their cultural values, beliefs, and

norms. Further, the current research study can provide a platform for retaining and training caregivers to care for foster youth while meeting cultural or spiritual needs through building relationships that incorporate spirituality. Therefore, properly training caregivers to include spirituality may be beneficial to maximizing concurrent placements (permanent homes) and minimizing frequent placement changes in foster homes within the child welfare system (Price et al., 2008).

Because foster youth may have been exposed to trauma as they age out of the child welfare system, they need effective coping strategies and skills to survive adulthood and transition. For many, if not most, when disaster or trauma strikes, religion, ritual, and faith/spirituality are embraced as a central means of coping (Meichenbaum, 2006). Further, Meichenbaum (2006) specified the following spiritual coping activities to help individuals cope with trauma: engaging in spiritually based activities such as prayer or religious workshops, feeling strengthened (having trust and hope in a higher power), calling upon forgiveness (using acceptance strategies), performing spiritual acts (doing good deeds to help others, volunteering), seeking religious support (religious music, religious TV, or services), and constructing meaning (out of suffering, seeking significance in the event). Therefore, foster youth can develop and utilize spirituality as a coping skill in adulthood because spirituality is linked to mindfulness, and mindfulness creates attunement to emotions, which creates a greater capacity for self-regulation and a higher sense of wellbeing (Meichenbaum, 2006). Research has suggested that youth in foster care who have natural mentors (nonparental adults) during adolescence have improved young adult outcomes (i.e., youth connections to nonparental adults through

informal mentoring are reported to enhance the outcomes of foster care youth in education/employment, psychological wellbeing, and physical health; Ahrens et al., 2008). Schwartz et al. (2006) stated that a mentoring bond fostered positive development, particularly spiritual growth, in foster youth. In addition, when youth "age out" of the child welfare system with limited connections or without the support of positive, caring adults, they may have an increased risk of facing the following challenges: unstable housing and homelessness, lack of employment and job training; inadequate education; problems with physical health, behavioral health, and general health; lack of access to health care; justice system involvement; and lack of social connections (Youth.gov, n.d.).

Schwartz et al. (2006) indicated that mentoring has demonstrated multiple benefits to adolescent development, including decreased risk factors and increased protective factors. Further, a mentoring bond helps to reinforce social and religious norms, clarify values, and establish expectations for behavior, which creates better outcomes (Schwartz et al., 2006). Because spirituality supports children's sense of belonging through establishing solid connections with people, such as foster parents/mentors, and places that may help children develop an awareness of their influences, possibly allowing for an environment of empowerment, acceptance, and harmony, it can influence their learning and growth (CCCCF, n.d.). Further, an examination of spirituality and outcomes of foster youth can lead to recommendations for policy and practice focusing on integrating spirituality into practice and caregiving for youth in foster care (Jackson, 2010). Jackson et al. (2010) interviewed adolescents in foster care about their spiritual beliefs. They found that 86% stated that they felt they

gained strength through their faith in God, and 84% of adolescents reported feeling that spirituality helped them find meaning in times of adversity. In previous research, former foster youth incorporated spirituality into their daily lives but felt their spiritual journey needed support while in care (Huitrado-Manio, 2012). The current study examined the following research question: What is the relationship between aged-out foster youth who grew up in a spiritual foster home (incorporating religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) and their adulthood outcomes? The following were sub questions:

- Research Question 1: Describe how growing up in a spiritual foster home influences foster youth's spirituality after they have aged out of foster care.
- Research Question 2: What are the spiritual beliefs and practices aged-out foster youth continue to use?
- Research Question 3: What spiritual practices or functions do foster youth find most beneficial?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theories and concepts that grounded this study included Fowler's (1981) faith development theory and Kohlberg's (1968) moral development theory. According to research (Waterloo Catholic Faith Formation [WCFF], n.d.), Fowler suggested that faith occurs in stages as children develop (Crain, 2014). Fowler's theory consists of six stages: Stage 0 (birth to 2), which consists of trust versus mistrust; Stage 1 (ages 3 to 7), which is experimental and develops through encounters with stories and the influence of others; Stage 2 (ages 7 to 12), which suggests that doing good will result in a good result and

doing wrong will cause a bad thing to happen; Stage 3 (ages 12 to adult), which is characterized by the identification of the adolescent or adult with a religious institution; Stage 4 (mid-20s to late 30s), which involves the struggle the individual undergoes as they take responsibility for their beliefs and feelings; Stage 5 (midlife crisis), which focuses on acknowledging paradoxes involving transcendent values; and lastly, Stage 6 (later adulthood), which is rarely achieved by individuals and focuses less on religion and spiritual beliefs and more on compassion and deep understanding (Armstrong, 2020).

Fowler (1981) explained that individuals can remain in Stage 3 or move on to individuated-reflective faith, the fourth stage of faith development, in which people can adopt new value systems due to exposure to different ways of life. Therefore, this state typically occurs in the early 20s, which is around the same time foster youth "age out" of the system. Kohlberg's (1968) theory of moral development was an extension of Piaget's (1936) theory, which held that moral reasoning was the basis for ethical behavior (Ollhoff, 1996). The theory consisted of six stages or three levels. Kohlberg's theory focused on how individuals justify their actions if placed in moral dilemmas (Woolfolk, 2012). About the purpose of this study, this theory can be used to assess the level and type of exposure to spirituality comparable to outcomes of continuity in adulthood and daily life decisions. The first level, pre-conventional, deals with obedience and punishment; youth focus on avoiding punishment and what they receive out of things. In other words, if foster youth are involved in spirituality, whether they participate to avoid punishment or not, it may become a benefit and spark self-interest. The second level, conventional, focuses on social norms and having a good attitude. Suppose foster youth

are involved in spiritual activities during this stage. In that case, they may have a positive outlook on faith, contributing to positive decisions and outcomes in their adult lives. Youth in this stage want to satisfy others, especially society; therefore, if foster youth live in a spiritual community, their morals and decisions may reflect their spiritual environments. The third level, postconventional, incorporates universal ethical principles and allows youth to realize that they have their perspectives and do not need to mimic societal perspectives (Woolfolk, 2012). About the research questions, exposure to spirituality at different stages/levels may affect or foster how or when foster youth formulate their perspectives of spirituality and outcomes in their daily adult lives. If foster youth's outcomes correlate to spirituality, then Piaget's and Kohlberg's cognitive and moral development stages would have to be considered when exposing children to spirituality at different ages and stages (Ollhoff, 1996).

The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of the study include incorporating both theories mentioned above, which contributes to the faith development theory. Spirituality should affect the daily lives of youth if exposed to spirituality at the right age or during the most beneficial stage of development. Therefore, examining existing studies in conjunction with the faith-based theory provided support and theoretical propositions to support the research questions and framework.

Nature of the Study

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore the relationship between aged-out foster youth who grew up in a spiritual foster home (incorporating

religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) and their adulthood outcomes. This study examined the following research sub questions:

- Research Question 1: Describe how growing up in a spiritual foster home influences foster youth's spirituality after they have aged out of foster care.
- Research Question 2: What are the spiritual beliefs and practices aged-out foster youth continue to use?
- Research Question 3: What spiritual practices or functions do foster youth find most beneficial?

This phenomenological study had a sample size of eight participants, where saturation was reached, and involved participants who had transitioned out of the foster care system. In this study, a purposeful sampling strategy was used to gather data related to the lived experience of foster youth who aged out of the foster care system with spiritual exposure while in care. Each participant's lived experience provided significant insight into their perceptions and factors relating to adulthood. The sample size of participants was appropriate for a complete description of the lived experience, which provided a basis for analysis (Bliss, 2016).

All participants for this study were recruited from counties in Northern California. Participants were recruited by distributing flyers near community colleges, counseling centers, shelters, youth services centers, churches, libraries, coffee shops, and independent living programs. The flyer listed the information for participation and requirements and indicated the reason for the study. All participants interested in the research were contacted by email or phone and encouraged to ask questions about the

survey. The data were transcribed, organized, and analyzed from interviewing the participants. All the information concerning what happened to participants in the study, the sampling process, the data collection method, data analysis, the data storing method, the interviewing process, and research findings is discussed in Chapter 3.

Definitions of Terms

The following are functional terms used in this study.

Aging out: "Aging out" generally refers to an individual in foster care who has reached the age of 18 but has not achieved some permanence, whether that be reunification with a parent, adoption by another caregiver, or permanent legal custody with another caregiver. However, the age at which an individual exits foster care varies, as many states provide extensions of foster care services until an individual turns 21 (Great Valley Publishing Company, Inc., n.d.).

Autonomy: Can broadly be defined as "any processes that in living organisms lead to permanent capacity change and which is not solely due to biological maturation or aging" (Illeris, 2018, p. 3).

Decision making: Interest in decision-making dates back to antiquity, with Plato discussing his belief in the capacity of the human mind to uncover truths and use them to implement positive societal changes. More recently, researchers have studied human decision-making in various situations, with researchers from multiple disciplines (e.g., management, psychology, and social psychology) focusing on specific aspects and scenarios of decision-making as they relate to beliefs, cognition, emotions, and behavior (Adam & Dempsey, 2020).

Foster care: A temporary, safe, and stable living environment arrangement for youth who have been abused, have been neglected, or cannot be adequately cared for by their parents (Child et al., 2018).

Independent living: Transition programs aim to increase independent living and self-sufficiency skills and develop formal or informal social connections that can guide and support youth beyond their time in foster care or receiving services. These skills could include employment (including readiness and retention), financial management, healthy meal planning and preparation, securing and maintaining stable housing, and other life skills (McMillen, 2022).

Quality of life: Defined as "how well a person functions in their life and their perceived wellbeing in physical, mental, and social health domains". Quality of life is an all-inclusive concept incorporating all factors that impact an individual's life (Cai et al., 2021, p.2).

Spirituality: The current study involved the assumption that human beings possess an inherent capacity for spirituality regardless of the presence or absence of religious faith. Spirituality is a multidimensional construct and is defined as "a way of being and experiencing that comes about through an awareness of a transcendent dimension of life, and that is characterized by certain identifiable values regarding self, others, nature, life, and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate" (Elkins et al., 1988, p. 10).

Transition: A passage or movement from one state, condition, or place to another. It has universal properties and conditions that help to explain the personal environment in

terms of development, situation, health, illness, organizational processes, and outcomes (Halpin & Hodge, 2019).

Assumptions

Certain aspects of this study were assumed to be accurate but were not validated. I assumed that all participants were in foster care, and at the time of the interview, they were no longer in the foster care system. Further, I assumed that participants were forthcoming and honest with their responses to the interview questions. Furthermore, I assumed that my responses provided a welcoming and safe environment for participants to be comfortable and honest. Also, it was assumed that the survey questions promoted validity for this study and captured the objectives of this research study.

Scope and Delimitations

This study explored the relationship between aged-out foster youth who grew up in a spiritual foster home (incorporating religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) and their adulthood outcomes (socioeconomic status, family connections, life satisfaction, low retention rate of familial retraumatization). This study was necessary to acquire more knowledge of the specific spiritual experiences of aged-out foster youth in foster care to strengthen positive outcomes. According to Badeau (2013), spirituality cultivates resilience—having a sense of purpose, hope, and future orientation—all of which are essential building blocks to nurture and strengthen a youth's capacity for resilience in the face of overwhelming life circumstances. I defined all specific aspects of the research problems addressed in the study as needed. This particular

focus was chosen to examine the type of spiritual exposure they gained in foster care and the effects this exposure had on their adulthood outcomes.

Each participant identified themselves as (a) aged-out foster youth who spent at least 6 months or more in a foster home while they were between the ages of 5 to 17 before their 18th birthday, (b) currently between 18 and 25 years of age, and (c) having aged out of the foster care system at the age of 18 or older. The participants came from Northern California cities, were aged 18 to 25, and had aged out of the foster care system. Conducting this study using a different location or older population might or might not render different results.

Regarding delimitations, this study did not include foster youth who did not experience placement in a foster home for at least 6 months. However, youth in placement for less than 6 months could be included in future research. An additional delimitation was that participants were only selected from counties within Northern California. Future research should focus on another area of the United States.

Limitations

This study included a sample size of eight participants, with participants added until saturation was reached. The participants might not have responded honestly to surveys or interviews due to shame or awkwardness. If any biases arose, I addressed them right away. I used Husserl's concept of epoche, or "bracketing out," and set aside any personal bias. In addition, I used semistructured interviews, audiotapes, and note-taking to ensure accurate transcribing.

Significance of the Study

This research is vital because it adds to the literature to help other researchers have current data on this topic and to explore the lived experiences and viewpoints of youth who aged out of the foster care system. The literature provided information on past studies that reflect the economic and social climate of change that emerged in foster care from 2017 to 2022. In 2021, 49,118 youths were in foster care in California (Youth in Care, 2021). With this large number of youths placed in the system, studies have examined spirituality and foster youth, but lack more specific outcomes of foster youth as they progress into adulthood (Andrade, 2014). Social workers should be provided with additional factors that contribute to fostering youth outcomes so that they can incorporate different practices and considerations when working with these youth. Educating social workers who work directly with foster youth will guide programs that support these youth. This literature also provides information on limited studies on this topic, foster youth, spirituality, general funds, specific policies, laws, and directives for implementation of programs for this population. This research will make a difference with professionals, educators, social workers, counselors, therapists, and practitioners to be aware of additional needs of youth while in foster care that may contribute to outcomes of aging out foster youth to create a more positive societal change in their adulthood. Additional theory and research should be provided to support grants and programs to ensure that foster youth's needs are being met, including spirituality. This process will be less stressful for foster youth and more streamlined for social workers and all professionals who work with this group. Since 1920, the Child Welfare League of

America (CWLA, 2020) has been the nation's preeminent organization dedicated to ensuring that its most vulnerable children are protected from harm and have the tools and resources they need to grow into healthy and happy adults (CWLA, n.d.). The scope of this study will bring positive social change to researchers and help them develop new practices when working with foster youth. Further, it will increase consistent awareness and a better understanding of foster youth's transitional outcomes into adulthood and what goals and objectives should be included in the foster youths' case plan.

Summary

Chapter 1 presented brief insight concerning the foster care system in California and provided information relevant to aged-out foster youth's exposure to spiritual foster homes and transition into adulthood. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the relationship between aged-out foster youth who grew up in a spiritual foster home (incorporating religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) and their adulthood outcomes (socioeconomic status, family connections, life satisfaction, low retention rate of familial retraumatization). Of the nearly 438,000 children and youth in foster care in the United States, almost 46,000 are aged 16 or older, and over 20,000 "age out" of many child-welfare services between ages 18 and 20 every year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). The specific research problem that was addressed through this study was whether exposure to spirituality in foster homes that engage in spiritual practices was related to daily functioning outcomes (socioeconomic status, family connections, life satisfaction, and low retention rate of familial retraumatization) in former foster youth as they have transitioned to adulthood.

Current research has expounded on spirituality and outcomes of youth 18 to 25 who were involved in the foster care system; for example, Makanui et al. (2019) found consistency in the relationships between spirituality and functioning for youth in foster care.

In this chapter, the following research question was explored: What is the lived experience of growing up in a spiritual/religious home for foster youth who aged out of the system? The following subquestion about their lived experiences after transitioning out of the system is about the type of spiritual practices aged-out foster youth engage in and the level of commitment they have to their preferred practices.

This qualitative phenomenological study included eight participants when saturation was reached (a) who were aged-out foster youth, defined as participants who spent at least 6 months or more in a foster home while they were between the ages of 5 and 17 before their 18th birthday, (b) who were currently between 18 and 25 years of age, and (c) who had aged out of the foster care system at the age of 18 or older.

In Chapter 2, a review of the literature is presented. The chapter includes a brief history of the foster care system in the United States. The chapter continues establishing the theoretical and conceptual framework to articulate previous and current research concerning this study. A review of the literature in Chapter 2 is divided into six sections. The first section provides the theoretical framework. The second section explores the history of the foster care system. The third section discusses the foster parent's role. The fourth section examines the quality of life and behavior of foster youth. The fifth section explores youth aging out of the foster care system. Finally, the sixth section explores spirituality and relations with others.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Of the nearly 438,000 children and youth in foster care in the United States, almost 46,000 are aged 16 or older, and over 20,000 "age out" of many child welfare services between ages 18 and 20 every year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017, p. 1). The participants came from Northern California cities and were aged 18 to 25. Further, the study examined how spirituality in foster homes affected youths' transitions to adulthood. Current research examines the relationship of spirituality and outcomes of youth in foster care. For example, Makanui et al. (2019) found consistency in the relationships between spirituality and functioning for youth in foster care. Therefore, further research can gain insight into the level of spirituality in relationship to functioning outcomes in adulthood to better serve foster youth in the foster care system.

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the relationship between aged-out foster youth who grew up in a spiritual foster home (incorporating religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) and their adulthood outcomes. Further, the study gained a clearer understanding of how exposures to spirituality while in the foster home, such as attending church, youth groups, placement with religious or spiritual foster parents, and biological family beliefs, identify foster youth's outcomes in adulthood, such as having healthy relationships with others and social support after aging out of foster care. Makanui et al.'s (2019) preliminary analyses indicated a significant relationship between youth spirituality and adaptive outcomes; this study further linked

lower levels of internalizing behavior with a strong endorsement of spiritual beliefs. Further research is needed to determine the type of exposure to spirituality and whether it affects foster youth's daily living and functionality as they transition into adulthood.

The review of the literature is divided into six sections. The first section provides the theoretical framework. The second section explores the history of the foster care system. In the third section, I discuss the foster parent's role. In the fourth section, I explore the quality of life and behavior of foster youth. The fifth section addresses youth aging out of the foster care system. Finally, in the sixth section, I explore spirituality and relations with others.

Literature Search Strategy

Studies were searched on the internet and Walden library using keywords such as *foster youth, aged out, outcomes, adulthood, spiritual exposure, quality of life, spirituality, decision making, God, religion, faith, foster care, homelessness, adolescence, policy, family, community, autonomy, parenting, community, identity style, young adulthood, independent living, transition, and phenomenological study*. The research was also conducted by combining the detailed search items stated above. A review of terms for the literature search was conducted over 4 years. Due to the lack of current interest in this dissertation topic, minimal dissertations were found as a resource for this current study. The research was also limited in this study area; therefore, older literature was included to support the needed research. The literature comprises many researchers, including dissertation students, published articles, seminal literature, and college-level reviews.

To gather literature, I used Walden library databases, Google Scholar, EBSCO eBooks, peer-reviewed journals, Microsoft Academic, Research Gate, the invisible web, Walden's Academic Search Complete, Annie Casey Foundation, APA PsycINFO, APA PsycExtra, Eric, Eric and Education, source combined search, Google Books, Dissertations and Theses @ Walden University, Walden Library Books, Social Work Abstracts, Scholar Works, Sage Stats, Sage Knowledge, Sage Journals, Simply Psychology, and *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*.

Theoretical Foundation

Kohlberg's (1968) theory was an extension of Piaget's (1932) theory of moral development. Kohlberg's theory was selected for this study to attribute to the culturally diverse population of aged-out foster youth. Kohlberg's theory was based on cultural and moral universal stages, bridging the gap between naturalistic and nonmaterialistic theories. In the current study, selecting a theory reflecting the subject population being surveyed was essential, reducing skepticism of results from those tested as moral judgment correlates to spiritual tenets. Further, Kohlberg's theory outlines stages of moral judgment as children develop throughout their lives. His theory in stages focuses on morality, the ability to know good from evil, and right from wrong. Kohlberg's approach was focused on those who were being mistreated. In a review of theories, Barnes et al. (2000) incorporated Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which suggests that children's faith also occurs in stages related to a combination of Piaget's and Kohlberg's theories. Because children's faith occurs in stages, they should have the right to have their spiritual exposure examined.

Kohlberg's (1968) theory of moral development consists of six stages, separated into three levels:

- Level 1: Preconventional morality, Stage 1: avoiding punishment, and self-interest
- Level 2: Conventional, Stage 2: good boy attitude, law and order morality
- Level 3: Postconventional, consists of Stages 5 and 6: social contracts and universal principles

The preconventional level consists of two stages: obedience and punishment orientation and individualism and exchange. The preconventional level is standard in children, and direct consequences judge the morality of an action. In other words, children focus on avoiding punishment concerning obedience and self-interest orientation. This first stage is similar to Piaget's final stage, in which children assume that authority figures have rules and must obey them without question.

Further, a child with preconventional morality has yet to adopt or internalize society's conventions regarding right or wrong but instead focuses mainly on external consequences that specific actions may bring (Kohlberg, 1958). Kohlberg (1958) suggested an example of obedience and punishment-driven morality as a child refusing to do something because it is wrong and willing to subject themselves to the consequences or punishment. The spirituality of foster parents may contradict a foster child's personal beliefs; therefore, the child may be willing to accept punishment for refusing to participate in church or another faith-based activity. On the other hand, a child may choose to participate even though their beliefs contradict the foster parents to achieve a

benefit they feel outweighs their concern. At this level, children may sacrifice and participate in faith-based activities to receive an award; for example, a child may be asked to complete a chore and complete it to receive an allowance. In addition to this stage, the individualism and exchange stage recognizes that children understand that there is not just one right view and that different individuals have different viewpoints.

The second level, conventional, consists of two stages, interpersonal accord and authority, and focuses on adolescents' typical process of moral reasoning. The conventional level examines the child's desire to accept societal conventions concerning right and wrong and their willingness to obey rules and norms. The critical concept is their willingness to follow societal norms with or without consequences, therefore truly identifying their interests and desires. Therefore, children participate or fail to participate in a spiritual activity due to their communities, foster parents, and societal standards concerning them wanting to fit in rather than stand out. In other words, adolescents tend to try to be the "good child" and live up to the expectations that have been instilled in them, believing the expectations will be good benefits to the self (Kohlberg, 1958, p. 3). There are different levels of spirituality, and foster families exhibit different involvement in spiritual activities. Therefore, if foster parents uphold God as the law and children are taught in school and the community to obey it, they may feel obligated to uphold the foster family's religious beliefs.

Further, the third level, postconventional, incorporates universal ethical principles, allowing youth to realize that they have their own perspectives and do not need to mimic societal perspectives (Woolfolk, 2012). Concerning the research questions,

exposure to spirituality at different stages/levels may affect or foster how or when foster youth formulate their perspectives on spirituality and outcomes in their daily adult lives. If foster youth's exposure to spirituality generates positive adulthood outcomes, then Kohlberg's cognitive and moral development stages would have to be considered when exposing children to spirituality at different ages and stages. In addition, Stage 4 emphasizes obeying laws, respecting authority, and performing one's duties to maintain social order (Pearson, 2014). Therefore, incorporating what the foster youth has learned in a spiritual home and the influences that has on their decisions and paths as they transition into society.

The final level, post-conventional, consists of two stages: social-contract-driven and universal-ethical-principles-driven. This level focuses on the fact that individuals are separate from society and that individual perspectives may take precedence over societal norms. In other words, individuals will begin to evaluate situations using their moral knowledge rather than social conventions. Further, this level focuses on the ability of individuals to engage in acts that are acceptable to avoid consequences of unacceptable decisions because it is in their best interest and expected by parents and society.

It is proposed in this current research study that the participants who possess positive views regarding unexpected situations will ultimately have better decision-making skills, leading to better outcomes, which could build upon Kohlberg's study if proven. Further, Dilorenzo and Nix-Early (2021) stated that spirituality provides a young person with a genuine sense of hope, promise, and belief in a future that can be better than the difficulties of the present. Level 2 of Kohlberg's theory is especially intriguing as

it analyses social norms, such as foster families' influence on children concerning negative or positive attitudes.

Kohlberg's (1958) theory is related to the current study because it constitutes a basis for moral reasoning and ethical behavior, such as reason or sound judgment and making good decisions or enacting ethical behavior, which, in turn, contributes to the quality of life. Further understanding the relationship of how individuals learn throughout his six stages can clarify how exposure to spirituality during different stages/ages may affect youth's decision-making skills as they transition to adulthood. Kohlberg's theory assumes that humans are naturally communicative and capable of reason and want to understand each other. Religious practices such as prayer have been used in the United States as an alternative therapy.

In the current study, examining both spiritual and religious worldviews may shape parents' perspectives and how they raise their children. If spiritual and religious views shape parenting, incorporating these practices should alter children's choices in life, such as education, relationships, and occupation. Incorporating spiritual and religious resources guides parents when making life decisions and engaging with their children. Kohlberg suggested that there may be a seventh stage of transcendental morality, which links religion with moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1971). Further, he stated that knowledge and learning contribute to moral development. *Spirituality* is a practice learned through teaching, which changes one's thinking pattern and contributes to development.

Moral Development

Kohlberg (1973) thoroughly examined former research regarding culturally universal stages of moral development. Kohlberg applied the extension of Piaget's (1986) theory by telling people stories using moral dilemmas. Kohlberg's theory of moral development was used in this study to account for the teachings foster children are exposed to while in the system and how these teachings affect their moral development. Foster children are also exposed to spirituality during these transitional stages of moral development.

Schatz and Horejisi (1996) suggested that Christian-based solid foster homes include activities that complement the process of moral development, which children and adults continue to use in the decision-making process. In addition to Kohlberg's theory of moral development, Schatz and Horejisi (1996) suggested that children and youth in religious foster homes are provided models of moral growth and development through their life cycle with religious events. These religious events are the foundation of sound moral judgment and teaching to foster social community and involvement (Schatz & Horejisi, 1996). Positive outcomes may follow when youth follow positive role models on their journey through life. Spirituality and attending church activities provide children in foster care with persons who will tell them what is good and bad and hopefully instill values that will determine their future decisions and quality of life.

Using the Kohlberg theory approach with aged-out foster youth demonstrated the effectiveness of moral development throughout childhood systems and the effects of making real-life decisions that affect the quality of life. It incorporates the system of

youth lives, including cultural diversity, environment, and adult influences. The strength of Kohlberg's theory is the cultural awareness within the stages of moral development that considers children of different ethnic backgrounds. Schatz and Horejisi (1996) identified a robust Christian-based affiliation for foster homes. These foster homes use activities to develop morality in children through religious involvement. Schatz and Horejisi stated that when youth are taught about spirituality, they may gain an increased sense of self and receive models for growth and development. A factor of this growth and development is involvement in religious schools, youth groups, camps, Bible studies, and social gatherings to foster healthy moral development in a social community (Schatz & Horejisi, 1996). Badeau (2013) stated that spirituality in foster youth cultivates resilience (i.e., having a sense of purpose, hope, and future orientation, all of which spiritual development contributes to and are essential building blocks to nurture and strengthen a youth's capacity for resilience in the face of sometimes overwhelming life circumstances). Foster youth often are disconnected from their environments, friends, family, and extracurricular activities when they enter foster care, so they need something to connect with to provide security and support. Badeau (2013) stated that youth in foster care often feel isolated and disengaged from people and relationships that have been important in their lives. Participation in spiritually oriented communities can be an anchor that provides a sense of belonging and connection amid much instability in the young person's life. The core feature of Kohlberg's (1958) theory is that people justify behaviors that are not ranked according to the stages. Kohlberg's (1958) theory created a completely new field of psychology. Therefore, using Kohlberg's theory of moral

development in the current study allowed an examination of a person's developmental timeline throughout childhood and into adulthood (Kohlberg, 1958). It is essential to include all interacting factors and influences when examining foster youth to understand what directly or indirectly influences their adult spirituality decisions and behaviors. This model examines how youth are led to success through the process of moral judgment and external adult figures who model spirituality or nonspirituality (Kohlberg, 1958).

Fowler's Stages of Faith

In the stages of faith theory, Fowler (2014) explained his understanding of faith and laid out the tenets of his faith development theory. He stated that faith and religion are not synonymous and should not be considered as such, as *faith* is defined as "a generic feature of the human struggle to find and maintain meaning" (Andrade, 2014, p. 2).

Spirituality includes several shared dimensions: the existence of a transcendent dimension, the relation or connection to that dimension, and the search for answers to ultimate questions concerning the nature, purpose, and meaning of life. Each of these dimensions may encompass practices such as prayers, meditation, or rituals; beliefs and attitudes concerning transcendence, deity, and mortality; beliefs concerning a person's connection to the transcendent; and experiences and experiences such as mystical/unitive or numinous experiences (Mayselless & Netzer, 2017). However, these dimensions can be manifested differently for each individual due to cultural, environmental, and individual influences and can be individually and institutionally oriented. Environmental influences

may include effects of distinct social contexts, intentional activities such as spiritual practices, and engagement with spiritual teachers, peers, or groups (Netzer, 2017).

Research indicates that most adolescents engage in spiritual exploration and have spiritual-like experiences. Most spiritual commitments to beliefs and practices made during adolescence tend to persist throughout adulthood (Kor et al., 2019). The current research indicated that spirituality is essential for character strength and a correlate of both subjective well-being and prosociality (Kor et al., 2019).

The literature indicated that Fowler maintained that faith allows human beings to conceptualize what he called the "ultimate environment" (Andrade, 2014, p. 2), the version of the world that individuals create in the minds that shape how they understand and live in the real world. He also explained that the differences among belief, faith, and religion are associated with the ultimate environment in that individuals' beliefs allow them to convey their ideas about this environment (Andrade, 2014). According to Neuman (2011), knowledge of child development, including faith development, is essential in providing holistic care to the child. Further, combining knowledge of child development and Fowler's theory of faith development to address the child and adolescent's spiritual needs to meet their developmental needs (Neuman, 2011).

Fowler (1981) was influenced by the work of Kohlberg (1958). According to the pre stage aspect of Fowler's theory, undifferentiated faith occurs during infancy. It is characterized by babies' realization that they are separate from their parents and rely on them completely to meet their needs. Therefore, according to this, pre stage infants are directly subjected to their parents and their parent's directives and choices. During this

stage, infants could be introduced to spirituality through the parent's decisions and choices made regarding the infant's upbringing. Kohlberg's pre conventional morality stage is shaped by the expectations of adults and the consequences for the child breaking the rules. According to Scannapieco (2007), when aging-out youth participated in Adult Living programs, services had better outcomes than those who did not. Also, spirituality was not mentioned; however, young adults with permanent connections and supportive environments became good decision-makers, self-sufficient adults, and productive members of society.

In stage one, intuitive-projective faith, which spans ages two through six or seven, individuals have developed language. They can draw on stories that have been told to them and images they have seen to form conceptions of God, although the ways they describe Him are vague and somewhat "magical" (Fowler, 1981, p. 148). In stage two, mythic-literal faith, individuals from approximately seven through ten can narrate stories they understand in literal terms. Stage three, synthetic-conventional faith, is influenced by puberty and adolescents' development of self-images that are formed based on how they think others see them. Fowler (1981) stated that during this stage, a person has an "ideology" and a consistent clustering of values and has not come to the knowledge of what these conceptions mean (Fowler, 1981, p. 148). During this stage, individuals can remain in this stage or move on to stage four, which is individuative-reflective faith. This is the fourth stage of faith development, in which people can adopt new value systems due to exposure to different ways of life. During stage five, conjunctive faith, Fowler (1981) stated that individuals could explore other religions and belief systems so that

their views can be either reinforced or amended (Fowler, 1981). Lastly, stage six, universalizing faith, is distinguished from stage five in that individuals at this stage are willing to "sacrifice the self and to risk the partial justice of the present order for the sake of a more inclusive justice and the realization of love" (Fowler, 1981, p. 200).

Meanwhile, individuals in stage five merely recognize justice without committing themselves to challenge the existing order to ensure it is a reality for all (Fowler, 1981).

Review of Current Literature

In this section, the history of the foster care system was explored in the United States of America but focused on the State of California and the Department of Social Services and Community Care Licensing Department. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the relationship between aged-out foster youth who grew up in a spiritual foster home (incorporating religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) and their adulthood outcomes (socioeconomic status, family connections, life satisfaction, low retention rate of familial retraumatization). Each section will cover a different aspect of what foster youth experienced during the aging-out process, including any spirituality exposure in a foster home.

Foster care (or out-of-home care) is a temporary service the state provides for children who cannot live with their families. Children in foster care may live with relatives or unrelated foster parents (*Home—Child Welfare Information Gateway*, n.d.). The foster care parent's role is to guide and make sure that the child is safe and receives the best education that can be provided for the child. In addition, the foster parent should provide a safe and healthy environment for the child to live in. The foster youth's quality

of life and well-being are also crucial for the reader to understand, as each has a reason to ensure their needs are met. In the foster care system, foster youth rights and foster parent rights are vital components of the placement and should be respected to prevent any placement disruptions.

The study reviewed the spiritual component in foster care by exploring the aged-out foster youth's exposure to spiritual foster homes and transition into adulthood. I started this discussion by explaining how foster care started in the United States as a result of the work of Charles Brace in the mid-19th century.

History of the Foster Care System

Foster care started in the United States as a result of the work of Charles Brace in the mid-19th century. Brace took approximately 30,000 homeless, neglected children who were living in the streets and slums of New York City and placed them with various Christian families in states around the country (Anderberg, 2011). Some of these children became part of the family and were adopted. Other children were used as servants to do domestic work in their homes in exchange for room and board and not to live on the streets. The Brace is known for the "placing-out system" or foster care in which orphans and abandoned children in New York were sent to families who resided on farms in Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana, known as "The Orphan Train Movement" (Staller, 2020).

In 1854, one of Brace's most successful projects was the "newsboys' lodging houses," which provided room and board at low prices to homeless children who hawked newspapers on the streets of American cities. Brace believed that poor Catholic

immigrants were genetically inferior, deeming them a "stupid, foreign criminal class" and the "scum and refuse of ill-formed civilization" (Staller, 2020, para. 11).

Orphan asylums and almshouses were the only "social services" available for poor and homeless children. Brace did not believe that these were worthwhile institutions because they merely served the purpose of feeding people experiencing poverty and providing handouts. (Staller, 2020). An Institution was not a place for children to grow up. Brace felt that such institutions only deepened the dependence of low-income people on charity. He began to focus on finding jobs and training for poor and destitute children so they could help themselves. His initial efforts for all children in social reform included free kindergartens, free dental clinics, job placement, training programs, reading rooms, and lodging houses for boys (Staller, 2020).

Because of Brace's work, programs throughout the United States of America are specifically designed to help families and children who are in need. Brace believed that removing homeless children from their street environment and overcrowded city institutions and placing them with "morally upright" farm families was beneficial to providing the children with good lives (Staller, 2020).

Children could be placed with couples, families, or single adults; adoption was necessary for placement. Rather than adoption, many placements, especially older placements of teens, instead signed a contract of indenture for the children selected, which outlined certain obligations, such as providing clothes, room, board, four months of education per year, and other terms in exchange for the child's indentured labor until the age of 21 (Staller, 2020).

The Children's Aid Society, founded by Charles Brace, was the best-known organization finding homes for children and made efforts to screen the host families and follow up on the welfare of placed children (Staller, 2020). The foster care approach, after some time, met with much adversity. Those operating orphanages were somewhat critical of the foster home approach. They believed that custodial institutions were better equipped to provide professional care and attention to the needs of children, whereas foster care families lacked the proper training to meet the needs of various youth (Karell, 2018; Trammell, 2009). Foster families must receive proper training to meet the needs of foster care youth in placement. Unannounced and scheduled visitations by the social worker must occur to protect the youth in their environment. The children in homes across the country had no reporting methods, and it was not easy to adequately supervise and safeguard the families (Staller, 2020). In response to this negative criticism, Brace put procedures in place to help improve the placement of children in foster care homes. However, it was not until an extended length of time after the death of Charles Brace that the Children's Aid Society applied those procedures (Wendinger, 2022).

Purpose of the Foster Care System

Foster care is a family protective service in which every reasonable effort must be made to expeditiously reunite children and biological parents, according to a casework plan (AdoptUSkids, 2021). *Foster parenting* is a professional activity that requires ongoing training and support. It is a program designed to place children who have become wards of the court into homes where they can be cared for until they age out of the foster care system. It is not the same as adoption; however, every year, a quarter of a

million children come into foster care in this country. Many of them will be placed in (AdoptUSkids, 2021). When a child's biological family is not able or willing to care for the child, then foster family care should be provided as a service both to the child and the child's biological family (California Department of Social Services [CDSS], 2021).

Foster care is a system devised to be a temporary safe environment for youth who cannot stay with their parent's family members or live on their own. The child welfare system steps in takes responsibility, makes decisions, offers protection, and provides care for nonminor dependents (Denby,2009). These youth are removed from their homes because of physical abuse, sexual abuse, trauma, death of one or both parents, truancy, neglect, deviant behavior, or other family crises (AECF, 2021).

Foster care does not give children the continuity, commitment, and legal and social status necessary for natural, healthy growth and development. Foster care is only a process or service used to facilitate family reunification, prepare children for adoptive placement, or prepare youth for self-sufficient, independent living (CDSS, 2021).

Foster care services call all members of the Interdisciplinary Treatment Team (IDTT) into a partnership to achieve a common goal: permanence for children and stability for families (*Kidsdata: Data and Resources About the Health of Children*, n.d.). The IDTT includes the biological parents, the foster parents, agency staff, placing agency staff, and other professionals who are involved in the child's case (CDSS).

Legislators in every state have a concern with children who are placed in the foster care system. Children often enter the foster care system due to a form of abuse and exposure to trauma, such as neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse.

The number of California children and teens placed ages 0-21 living in foster care on July 1, 2018, was 59,172, a rate of 5.3 per 1,000. Of care, 19,111 were placed in kinship care, 13,229 with foster family agencies, 7,452 in foster homes, and 6,147 were placed with guardianship families (*Kidsdata: Data and Resources About the Health of Children*, n.d.).

In the United States, more than 428,000 children were in foster care in 2017, the most recent year of data on record (Ahmann, 2017). The total number of kids in care has increased annually since 2011. Foster care is a temporary living situation for children whose parents cannot take care of them. While in care, children may live with relatives, with foster families, or in residential facilities. There are four ways children can leave foster care for permanent homes: reunification with birth parents, adoptions, guardianship, and placement with relatives. Among children exiting foster care each year, about half of nearly 122,000 kids in 2017 were reunited with a parent or primary caretaker (AECF, 2021). See the Bill of Rights for foster children and parents in Appendix F.

Children placed in the foster care system have often experienced some loss or trauma-related concerns, such as abuse, neglect, or abandonment by their parents or caretakers. These children are no different from those not placed in the system. They are learning, growing, playing with each other, and reaching out for love. Children in foster homes may have emotional problems as a result of child abuse or neglect. When they can no longer live with their biological or birth families, they are made dependents through a court process until the reunification process is put into place (AECF 2021).

In 2016, half of the teens aged 16 and older who exited foster care were emancipated, which means they left care without being successfully reunified with their family or connected to another family through adoption or legal guardianship. The rate of young people emancipating from foster care was 10% higher for Black youths and 11% higher for Hispanic youths than the rate of their white peers. Experiencing stable living arrangements while in foster care increases the likelihood that young people will exit foster care for the family. However, half of them will experience three or more placements, compromising their ability to form trusting and lasting relationships (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021).

Every day across the U.S., foster kids age out of the foster care system. Foster youth are exposed to different experiences, environments, and people throughout their placement in the foster care system (AdoptUSkids, 2021). The Foster Family Agency Interim Licensing Standards (ILS) builds on the current California Code of Regulations Title 22, Division 6, Chapter 1 General Licensing Requirements, and Chapter 8.8 Foster Family Agencies (Home - Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). The interim licensing regulations for California will be used for this study due to participants aging out in the California foster care system. The ILS begins with Article 9, which incorporates the new Continuum of Care Reform changes applicable to Foster Family Agencies. The ILS also includes Subchapter 1: Resource Family Approval, which governs the implementation of the Resource Family Approval (RFA) Program by Foster Family Agencies.

In California, the Department of Community Care Licensing under the Department of Social Services oversees licensed Resource Agencies. Each agency has a philosophy and statement of purpose that reflects the values that determine objectives and techniques for service. Regardless of ethnicity, race, age, sex, physical health, emotional health, or intellectual ability, every child is entitled to a continuous, stable family relationship. The traditional family unit of one man and one woman is an ordained survival; therefore, for most children, the birth family provides the best environment. Nontraditional families are also critical to the happiness and survival of a child's life and can bring the best environment for their livelihood. The structure of adolescents' families and parental forms in the United States has become more heterogeneous and fluid over the past several decades. These changes are due to increases in never-married, single parents, divorce, cohabitation, same-sex parenting, multi-partnered fertility, and co-residence with grandparents (Pearce et al., 2018).

Foster Parent Role

In the past, the foster parent's role was often seen as a temporary role. Today, it remains true that about half of children who enter foster care are reunified with their birth parents. Foster parents are frequently asked to support these efforts, including facilitating visitations and attending court appearances. They must always be prepared to accept the loss of a child who returns to birth parents or is placed with another relative when that is found to be in his or her best interest (Adoptuskids, 2021). Today, the child welfare community is increasingly viewing foster parenting as an essential step toward adoption.

Many of these children who are not reunified with their birth families are adopted by their foster parents (Adoptuskids, 2021).

Being a successful parent requires flexibility and a willingness to learn and develop new skills along the way. Like any parents, foster parents will undoubtedly encounter situations and challenges that they do not feel equipped to handle. Unlike birth parents, foster parents must follow guidelines and training before children can be placed in their homes. They will receive ongoing training from social workers and trained staff to help guide them throughout the process. Foster parents often have access to respite care programs and find support within the resource community, such as local organizations, churches, support groups, referrals, resource agencies, and social media support groups (Adoptuskids, 2021).

With over 50,000 children and youth in the foster care system in California, they need more people to become foster parents (Adoptuskids, 2021). There are many types of foster parenting, and in many cases, foster parents are the primary caretakers. Becoming foster parents helps children thrive throughout the system. Foster parents or resource parents will receive up to 20 hours of training, and it will vary according to the type of care they are providing for the children. In California, state licensing requires resource parents to have 12 hours of initial training and a minimum of 8 hours per year. However, working with Intensive foster youth, resource parents are required to take a total of 40 hours of intense training (CDSS, 2021).

Another type of foster parenting is respite care. Every parent needs a break from time to time, and that is a way for them to receive self-care. Respite care providers step in

to give foster parents needed time off from a few hours to a weekend or more, usually on a regularly scheduled basis. In emergency or urgent care, foster parents agree to be on call and to accept short-term placements as the need arises, including at night and on the weekends, Kinship care, Grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other family members who agree to care for children are called "kinship" caregivers. Kinship care can be an informal or legal arrangement. In therapeutic or treatment foster care, children and youth who have a higher degree of social, behavioral, and mental health needs and receive more intensive services are cared for by therapeutic foster parents. These parents receive additional specialized training and support to be part of the care team responding to the needs of children in their homes. Foster-to-adopt care involves more expectations for a lifetime commitment. Many families foster this practice, and an increasing number of states are encouraging it. Fostering to adopt has many benefits, including reducing the number of placements a child experiences and allowing a family to bond, known as "dual licensing." The main goal in foster care is reunification with the birth parent and the child, and if that is not possible, then one of these types of parenting will be ideal for fostering. However, each state program is different, and to find more information, families should contact foster care providers in their state or visit the child welfare information Gateway (Adoptuskids, 2021).

Resource parenting involves two overlapping roles: parenting and substitute parenting. The parenting tasks require general childcare, which any birth parent should provide. The substitute parenting tasks require a commitment to permanency planning as outlined in the child's casework plan. Resource parents should strive to develop a close

bond with their foster child/children while simultaneously facilitating reunification of the child with the biological family to provide permanency for the child (CDSS, 2021).

Another resource that can benefit the resource parents during this process is the National Foster Parent Association, a nonprofit, volunteer organization established in 1972 as a result of the concerns of several independent groups that felt the country needed a national organization to meet the needs of foster families in the United States (The National Foster Parent Association 2021).

The philosophy regarding the care of a foster child is therapeutic, like the services. Therapeutic Resource Agency provides an out-of-home placement option for children who, for one reason or another, are unable to live at home with their biological parents and whose special needs hinder their success due to trauma-related concerns (CDSS, 2021). Resource Parents receive the training and support services necessary to provide a healing and nurturing home environment for these children, helping them overcome their problems and live every day, productive lives. Resource parents are trained in treatment technology and are the primary treatment agents. They receive weekly consultation and supervision from professionals on staff and an on-call emergency backup. Each child will have a treatment plan focusing on specific youth and child behaviors. Each resource parent will provide an environment encouraging the child's spiritual development (CDSS, 2021).

Resource parents are responsible as team members for following state licensing requirements to maintain certification by the licensed agency. Each parent receives ongoing training, a minimum of 8 hours per year of training and 12 hours initially, and is

required to attend all mandatory training (CDSS, 2021). The resource homes focus on three essential goals, which are the foundation of healing and hope: building relationships, teaching skills, and empowering children through self-control. Resource agencies should aim to provide the best quality care for the children entrusted to them (CDSS, 2021).

Quality of Life and Behaviors of Foster Youth

Children placed in a resource agency will live in family homes in the community that serve as the treatment setting for those children. In recent years, research has highlighted and affirmed that all children need safe, stable, and healing families within each aspect of their development, and well-being, including spiritual development, is nurtured and honored (Badeau, 2013). The child is viewed as an active participant in the teaching and learning. The child is not merely told how to behave; he or she learns positive behaviors and how to choose to use them in many different situations. This empowerment, or self-help approach, combines the child's active participation with the parent's active teaching. The strength of this approach is that it teaches children positive social skills and helps them build healthy relationships with others. Children can change their behaviors and attitudes by learning self-help skills, e.g., by attending bible study groups, youth groups, and youth camps. *Self-help skills* are a learning process that utilizes behavioral principles while allowing children to integrate their thoughts and feelings into this learning process (CDSS, 2021). A lack of specific social skills can contribute to and often exacerbate an existing mental health disorder. For this reason, social skill instruction, i.e., teaching alternative positive behaviors that can replace current

inappropriate behaviors, must be a vital ingredient of any child's treatment plan. The social worker's goal is to guide the resource parents with the treatment they provide (CDSS, 2021).

The social skill instruction approach to treatment focuses on teaching the essential life skills young people need to transition into young adulthood successfully. Through proactive teaching, social, academic, and vocational skills, and spiritual values are taught in a family-style therapeutic setting. This involves reinforcing positive behavior as it occurs, practicing and rehearsing, and correcting inappropriate behavior in a positive style. It also involves helping a young person learn to use alternative appropriate behaviors when faced with a crisis (CDSS, 2021). A *social skill* is the ability to interact with others in a given social context in specific ways that are socially acceptable or valued and simultaneously personally beneficial, mutually beneficial, or beneficial primarily to others. When addressing concerns to help guide the children, using appropriate social skills involves an immensely complex chain of rapidly occurring interpersonal events. For children, especially those suffering from mental health disorders that dramatically limit their emotional and cognitive functioning, correctly performing these skills at the right time can be an overwhelming task. They often experience considerable difficulty organizing and blending their behaviors into smooth-flowing interactions with others, particularly under stressful conditions. Therefore, resource parents must be able and willing to adjust their teaching techniques, vocabulary, and interpersonal behaviors to best meet the learning style of each child in their care (CDSS, 2021).

The philosophy concerning social skill instruction is that problem behaviors demonstrated by a child are viewed as deficits in the child's repertoire of these skills and that active, direct teaching is a key to remediation and growth. Positive, pro-social behaviors can be modeled, taught, and rewarded, becoming viable alternatives for the child when confronted with situations that previously resulted in trouble (CDSS, 2021).

Treatment planning is essential in the child's life because it allows the child to grow and develop new skills to better his or her life (Adoptuskids, 2021). Treatment planning should be integral to the care system in any setting where troubled children receive care. All members of a treatment team should work together to design treatment plans that most effectively meet each child's individual needs. When treatment plans are well-thought-out and comprehensive, it is more likely that the child will experience success during treatment, overcome their problems, and lead happier, more fulfilling lives (Adoptuskids, 2021).

In California, the Department of Community Care Licensing License resource agencies train and approve resource parents to care for children in their homes. Community Care Licensing Division serves the most vulnerable people of California, and its mission is to promote the health, safety, and quality of life of each person in community care by administering an effective and collaborative regulatory enforcement system (Department of Social Services). Therefore, when an agency accepts a child for placement, the agency assumes specific responsibilities for that child's care (CDSS, 2021), e.g., deciding where the child will be placed, making any changes in the child's overall living arrangement, and determining when the child will leave the certified

home. In making these decisions, both before and after placement, the individual needs of the child must be considered, along with the needs and circumstances of the biological parents and the resource parents. The resource parents delegate the responsibility for the actual day-to-day care of the child. When a child is placed in an agency resource home, the agency agrees to work with the child or children (CDSS, 2021). Before placement, the agency will provide the foster parents with 12 hours of initial orientation and training before they are licensed. As well as provide the resource parent with knowledge of the child's background, including any known dangerous propensities of the child known by the resource agency, as well as special needs of the child, which must be addressed for effective care or a treatment plan and to share pertinent aspects with the foster parents. This information should include the following. All state guidelines require 14 calendar days' notice if the child is to be removed from the resource home (CDSS, 2021).

The first 30 days in a foster home are critical to maintain and support the placement. If the resource parent is new, he/she must be supported every week during that month to ascertain the ongoing progress of the placement and to be an immediate resource for defusing any potential or realized problems that might arise during the initial month of placement, while assessing the needs of the child. Within 30 days of placement, the case management team will develop a needs and service plan tailored specifically to the child and the interdisciplinary team, including the foster parents, the child welfare worker, and anyone involved in the child's life. The interdisciplinary team is held approximately every three months to ensure the client's rights and supportive services are being met (CDSS, 2021).

This study focused on understanding the factors contributing to their adulthood outcomes, such as failure or success after aging out. Rebbe et al. (2017) indicated that there is a need to understand the perceptions of foster care youth who are failing to transition successfully since former foster youth particularly struggle with homelessness and housing stability. These youth are frequently exposed to significant early adversity experiences and, perhaps due to these experiences, struggle in several domains during the transition to adulthood (Rebbe et al., 2017).

Youth Aging Out of the Foster Care System

Of the nearly 438,000 children and youth in foster care in the United States, almost 46,000 are aged 16 or older, and over 20,000 "age out" of many child welfare services between ages 18-20 every year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). These young people became wards of the state due to maltreatment at some point and are expected to transition directly from foster placement (including foster homes, group homes, and congregate care) and into adulthood, having not been legally reunified with their family of origin, adopted, or placed under permanent guardianship, before reaching the age of majority (Blakeslee & Best, 2019).

Foster care experiences can impact support network functionality as young people exit the foster care system. This experience can be conceptualized as a function of network member capacity to provide adequate support to address young adult needs and network stability, reflecting cohesion within and across relationships to facilitate consistent support over time (Blakeslee & Best, (2019). Youth aging out of foster care upon reaching the age of 20 encounter complex challenges. They encounter such

challenges as increased mental health issues, sickness, homelessness, unemployment, and more. Aging out youth are at higher risk for these adverse outcomes than their peers in the general population (McGuire et al., 2018; Pecora et al., 2010). According to Danielson and Lee (2010), a wealth of evidence indicates that young adults who age out of foster care are at significant risk of poor outcomes in education, employment health, homelessness, and crime. Every year in California, more than 4,000 youth age out of foster care. The youth who age out of foster care are more likely to experience difficulty managing the transition from dependent adolescence to independent adulthood. Foster youth face unique challenges for successfully transitioning into adulthood in employment, higher education, marriage, and parenthood. A large number of these youth have special needs, including mental health issues and disabilities, both learning and physical. Former foster youth face the added burden of a disrupted childhood and a possible lack of family support. The transition period from adolescence to adulthood is more extended and complex for today's young adults (The California Evidence-based Clearinghouse, 2022).

As they transition into adulthood, they will need mentors and advocates to support them and assist them to have a successful life after foster care. As foster youth prepare to leave care, they need many tools in place, such as counseling, specific skills, and essential services to help them successfully make the transition. Most of all, they require housing, funds, medical insurance, and training to help prepare them for employment and the natural world ahead. Studies of youth who leave foster care without a safe, sound,

permanent family and positive relationships consistently reveal adverse life outcomes (Wehmann et al., 2011).

The literature indicated that former foster youth who spend their teenage years in foster care and those who age out of care face challenges as they move to early adulthood. According to Schelbe (2016), many challenges were encountered by youths who aged out as adults with limited resources and parenting skills.

While in care, they may miss opportunities to develop strong support networks and independent living skills that their counterparts in the general population might more naturally acquire. Even older foster youth who return to their parents or guardians can still face obstacles, such as low-income family dynamics or a lack of emotional and financial support, that hinder their ability to achieve their goals as young adults (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019)

States have reported to Health and Human Services (HHS) since fiscal year 2010 on the characteristics and experiences of current and former foster youth through the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD). Among other data, states must report on a cohort of foster youth beginning when they are 17 and later at ages 19 and 21. About 43% of these foster youth reported experiencing homelessness, and over 25% had been referred for substance abuse assessments or counseling at some point during their lifetime, which are adverse outcomes (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019).

Spirituality and Relations With Others

Spirituality means different things to different people. For some, it is primarily about a belief in God and active participation in organized religion. For others, it is about

nonreligious experiences that help them connect with their spiritual selves through quiet reflection, time in nature, private prayer, yoga, or meditation. According to Daughtery (2011), spirituality is broken down into three components: belief in God, using the language of spirituality, and participation in religious activity. Further, Lee (2020) breaks down the meaning of spirituality concerning spiritual literature, including differing societies. Many people identify as spiritual but not religious. With a few exceptions, the percentage of adults identifying as religious in many industrialized countries is declining while remaining generally high in less developed nations. Shek (2012) defines religion as "adherence to a belief system and practices associated with a tradition in which there is agreement about what is believed and practiced." In contrast, spirituality is "a more general feeling of closeness and connectedness to the sacred."

Spirituality involves the recognition of a feeling or sense or belief that there is something greater than oneself, something more to being human than sensory experience, and that the greater whole of which we are part is cosmic or divine (Spencer, 2012). Spirituality means knowing that lives have significance in a context beyond a mundane everyday existence at the level of biological needs that drive selfishness and aggression. It means knowing that people are a significant part of a purposeful unfolding of life in our universe (Spencer, 2012). In addition, (Mayselless & Russo-Netzer, 2017) indicates spirituality encompasses practices of prayers, meditation, or rituals and beliefs such as attitudes concerning transcendence, deity, mortality, and beliefs concerning a person's connection to the transcendent and experiences such as mystical, unitive or numinous experiences. (Mayselless & Russo-Netzer, 2017) Furthermore, these specific contents can

occur differently across spiritual traditions due to cultural, environmental, and individual influences. Coholic (2011) explores how to discuss spirituality with foster youth and how foster youth make sense of spirituality. Some foster youth who have aged out of the system are searching for a better way of life, something bigger than their selves, and it typically involves a search for meaning in life or their well-being. De Souza (2009) focuses on the role of spirituality and the well-being of youth in providing feedback to social workers and the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things. Religious practices such as prayer have been used in the United States as an alternative means to decrease stress and increase well-being (Barnes, 2000). Examining both spiritual and religious worldviews may shape how they raise their children. Incorporating spiritual and religious resources will help parents make life decisions and engage with their children (CDSS, 2021).

Schatz and Horejisi (1996) examined religious practices in a foster home across five states. Although foster children should be allowed to choose their religious involvement, this study found that some children felt obligated to participate with the foster family and either enjoyed the experience or were left confused and rejected. Regardless of why the child participated in religious activities, the study found a solid Christian-based affiliation in foster homes. The religious activities included praying during mealtime and bedtime prayers and attending religious social groups, whether daily, weekly, or monthly. Seventy percent of participants stated they were expected to participate in religious activities while in foster care, and 26% stated they participated in youth programs (Schatz & Horejisi, 1996). Further, the study examined moral

development concerning religious involvement, and conclusions were drawn that religious education teaches children about what is sacred and teaches them specific rules, roles, and responsibilities to provide self-expression. Overall, involving foster children in religious activities helps foster effective moral development and teaches them how to belong socially.

In the United States, it is the right of families to choose their religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. A family's religious choice is often rooted in their cultural heritage, community, education, and upbringing. Even when children and youth are placed in foster care, it is recognized that one of the residual rights of the parents or guardian(s) is their right to the choice of the child's religious affiliation. On the other hand, there appears to be a significant number of children and youth who enter a group or foster situations with no family or religious affiliation (Schatz & Horejisi, 2006). Religious practices likely pervade the foster family's environment when foster children enter a new foster home. Further, most children entering these homes without a religious practice or affiliation may experience a cross-shock. (Schatz & Horejisi, 2006). According to research (Childrensministry, 2022), a spiritual home produces a spiritual child who matures into a spiritual adult.

A child placed in foster care, unfortunately, does not always maintain their relationships with social networks such as religious affiliations. There are times when the foster parents may have different religious values or affiliations than the child. For this reason, social workers need to be in tune with not only the physical needs of children in their caseload but emotional and social needs. It is essential to recognize that social

support within church groups can be productive and a powerful tool that increases success for this population. Practitioners must recognize that religious affiliation may provide children and youth in foster care social networks with peers and coping strategies. It may be the link that bridges their life before and after foster care, which may bring stability to them as adults (Davidson, 2017). Positive and negative influences are potential turning points in an individual's spiritual life (Mayseless & Russo-Netzer, 2017).

Summary

Although studies have examined spirituality and foster youth, previous studies lack specific outcomes of foster youth as they progress into adulthood (Andrade, 2014). The proposed research study can provide a platform for retaining and training caregivers to care for foster youth while meeting more of their cultural or spiritual needs. This can also be beneficial to maximizing concurrent placements and minimizing frequent placement changes in the child welfare system.

The literature review contained previous research and studies on foster care, spirituality, and outcomes after aging out. Most studies support the purpose that spirituality contributes to foster youth's outcomes in adulthood. Although other factors may contribute to the outcomes of aged-out foster youth, spirituality may be a contributing factor to the success rate of aged-out foster youth. *Spirituality* is a feeling or belief that there is something greater than oneself, a concern with the human spirit or soul rather than material or physical things. Although there are numerous ways to define spirituality, most youth embrace spirituality with reverence to God (Graybeal et al.,

2007). The articles in this section reviewed what is known about foster care and spirituality regarding behaviors and life outcomes. However, what needs to be added in these studies is the consistency and level of spirituality concerning goal setting and outcomes after foster care. What age of onset were children exposed to spirituality? Did they have spirituality before entering foster care? What level do they practice spirituality after aging out? How does one define success and outcomes in adulthood? These questions need to be revised in the above research and account for the necessity of this current study. Not only do foster care and spirituality need further research, but the frequency of exposure before and during foster care are significant factors that must be examined to determine how success is evaluated in the lives of aged-out foster youth. Therefore, asking questions that pertain to the frequency of attending religious activities before entering foster care, during foster care, and after exiting foster care can provide researchers with a clearer understanding of how spirituality truly factors into outcomes of aged-out foster youth. Research on spirituality is often connected to children in general. This study presented a substantial gap related to spirituality and foster youth, as spirituality in the general population would differ completely. In Chapter 3, the methodology, instruments, and sample size used to collect and analyze data from the study were described.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the relationship between aged-out foster youth who grew up in a spiritual foster home (incorporating religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) and their adulthood outcomes (socioeconomic status, family connections, life satisfaction, low retention rate of familial retraumatization). This study was necessary to acquire more knowledge of the specific spiritual experiences of aged-out foster youth to improve their adulthood outcomes. The specific research problem that was addressed through this study was the need to explore the relationship between exposure to spirituality (e.g., spiritual practices) in foster homes and daily functioning outcomes (e.g., socioeconomic status, family connections, life satisfaction, the low retention rate of their family entering the foster care system) in former foster youth as they transitioned to adulthood. According to Fowler (2017), youth have enormous difficulty transitioning to adulthood.

In this study, I focused on gaining a meaningful understanding of the factors that contributed to the failure or success of adulthood outcomes after aging out. Rebbe et al. (2017) indicated that there is a need to understand the perceptions of foster care youth who are failing to transition successfully because former foster youth particularly struggle with homelessness and housing instability. These youth are frequently exposed to significant early adversity experiences and, perhaps because of these experiences, struggle in several domains during the transition to adulthood (Rebbe et al., 2017). Further, many foster youths who emancipate or age out of foster care do not receive the

social support that is typical of their general population peers (Courtney, 2017). In this chapter, I highlight the research design and rationale, the research questions addressed, and how the participants were identified and recruited. I also provide information on the methodology for this study as well as examine the methods used to organize and analyze data. Presented also in this chapter are issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

In this study, I examined the following research question: What is the lived experience of foster youth growing up in a spiritual foster home (incorporating religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) and aging out of the system?

The following were sub questions (see Appendix D):

- Research Question 1: How does growing up in a spiritual foster home influence foster youth's spirituality after they have aged out of foster care?
- Research Question 2: What are the spiritual beliefs and practices aged-out foster youth continue to use?
- Research Question 3: What type of spiritual practices or functions do foster youth find most beneficial in their lives?

To address the research questions in this qualitative study, the specific research design included adults from 18–25 who had emancipated or aged out of the foster care system. Participants answered questions about their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. This study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach with eight participants until saturation was reached. Requirements were as follows: To participate in this study, each participant must have had some knowledge of religious education or regularly

participated in church or a youth group while placed in a foster home. Qualitative research focuses on understanding a research query and people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions (Pathak et al., 2013). Participants were recruited by posting flyers at community businesses (churches, barbershops, beauty salons, coffee shops, libraries, etc.). Although studies have been conducted on spirituality and foster youth, they are limited and generalized. Cunningham and Diveri (2012) explored how youth transition into adulthood and face significant barriers in life. Further, this study defines the difficulties that former foster youth experience: unemployment, homelessness, early parenthood, criminal justice concerns, economic challenges, and the loss of their support system. Cunningham and Diveri (2012). This study aligns with the qualitative approach, given that little is currently known within the existing literature about spiritual beliefs affecting aged-out foster youths' outcomes. Examining spiritual traits and outcomes of foster youth who have aged out of foster care and are living as adults in society can promote change in the social welfare system to provide higher-functioning adults who positively contribute to the communities in which they reside. Further, this study's findings can allow youth to experience spiritual activities positively, and spirituality can be integrated into their case plan goals and foster home placement options.

Spirituality was examined as participating in religious functions or events, seeking spiritual guidance, having a prayer life, and/or believing in a higher power or entity. Therefore, spirituality was examined through beliefs, values, practices, life decisions, outlook on life, and/or personal relationship with a God. Outcomes affecting

aged-out foster youth were examined by exploring higher education after high school graduation, employment stability, familial connections, and incidences of retraumatization.

Role of the Researcher

Phenomenologists are interested in all types of human experiences of the everyday world, which is a valid way to interpret the world. Therefore, they reject the notion that the detached empirical tradition is the superior research method. The phenomenon being studied is not measured or defined through the lens of its accepted reality; instead, an understanding is sought of how the participants make sense of their everyday lives (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Phenomenology experiences help individuals understand the meaning of the participant's lived experiences and explore what they experienced.

Phenomenological research requires the researcher to engage in specific steps to explain the basics of the phenomenological approach. The research always begins with describing an experience to be understood psychologically. The description is often obtained through interviews. The purpose of the interview is to have the participant describe in a faithful and detailed manner an experience of a situation the investigator is seeking (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Phenomenological research differs from other modes of qualitative inquiry in that it involves an attempt to understand the essence of a phenomenon from the perspective of participants who have experienced it (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015).

Social work can be categorized into four different types, and the relationship between the social worker and the child's parents differs.

1. The social worker mediates support and has positive contact with the child's parents.
2. The social worker is exercising control and authority and has negative contact with the child's parents.
3. The social worker is doing treatment-oriented work and has a personal involvement about the parents, which is important for the family and not exchangeable.
4. The social worker is solely engaged in investigatory work and is not related to the child's parents but rather a neutral contact (Anderson, 1992).

Child welfare work emphasizes the relationship between the social worker and the children's parents. Cooperation is essential for support and treatment work, whereas lack of consent can be a legal ground for compulsory intervention (Anderson, 1992).

Working in the social service field has allowed me to work with foster youth and interact with their foster parents' social workers, teachers, and other professionals. While in care, a needs and service plan is developed to address each need emotionally, psychologically, academically, socially, physically, and spiritually. However, during this process, I needed to research the child's spiritual needs because their needs were not being met. I have learned that some foster youth, while in the system, have experienced negative spiritual outcomes because they were told to go to church against their will, whereas others went against their own free will and had a positive outcome. Therefore, I

became interested in learning more about this phenomenon and why some individuals did not have positive spiritual outcomes while aging out of foster care.

Only participants who have lived through an experience can tell the story effectively. In a phenomenological study, the phenomenologist is a participant who engages in self-reflection, which is an integral part of the research process. The researcher must show empathy, engage the participants in conversation, and explore with them the meaning of the experiences of the identified phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019).

The ultimate outcome of a phenomenological analysis is to determine the meaning(s) of experience. Therefore, most descriptions within a research context are too long to be capably handled in their entirety; parts have to be established to achieve a more thorough analysis (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The researcher goes back and begins to reread the description from within the perspective of the phenomenological reduction and with a psychological attitude, mindful of the phenomenon being researched, and every time the researcher experiences a shift of meaning in the reading of the description, a mark is made in the appropriate place (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

The third step, which is at the heart of the method and where it bottoms out, so to speak, expresses the psychological meaning of the participants' everyday language more directly with the help of free imaginative variation. The whole purpose of the method is to discover and articulate the psychological meanings being lived by the participant that reveal the nature of the phenomenon being researched (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

In articulating these psychological meanings, one must avoid two errors. Clinicians tend to pursue the meanings with respect to the personal lives of the participants to the extent that they are available. That would be pursuing the personal interest of the participant too far. On the other hand, to the extent that contextualized personal meanings reveal something psychologically significant about the phenomenon, they have to be pursued for their relevance to the phenomenon in addition to the use of psychological jargon as it exists in the literature (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

The interview guide questions (Appendix D) were designed to gain a vivid description of the phenomenon. My goal was to give each participant my full attention by having empathy and being open to their experience in life.

Methodology

Participant Selection

This research focused on aged-out foster youth's exposure to spiritual foster homes and transition into adulthood. I also focused on factors related to their successful or unsuccessful spiritual transition into adulthood. I used Giorgi and Giorgi's (2003) phenomenological approach to examine the experiences of aged-out foster youth's exposure to spiritual foster homes and transition into adulthood. In selecting participants for this research study, I used a purposeful sampling strategy.

I selected the participants based on specific criteria presented in the flyer/survey and the participant's willingness to engage in a semistructured interview using survey questions as a screening process. Each participant identified themselves as (a) being aged-out foster youth who spent at least 6 months or more in a foster home while they

were between the ages of 5 to 17 before their 18th birthday, (b) being currently between 18 and 25 years of age, and (c) having aged out of the foster care system at the age of 18 or older. Before the semistructured interview, I presented the above material to the potential participants on a separate form and discussed it with each participant. I determined each participant's eligibility for participation based on the positive responses to the verbal and written questions on the eligibility form indicating consent. The eligibility questions included: (a) Were you in foster care? (b) How long? (c) How old were you when you entered? (d) How old were you when you exited? (e) Were you in one foster home for at least 6 months? (f) What was your longest stay? (g) How old are you today?

I planned for this phenomenological study to consist of a sample size of 10–12 participants or until saturation and participants who had transitioned out of the foster care system. This study used purposeful, snowball, and criterion sampling strategies to gather data related to the lived experience of foster youth who have aged out of the foster care system with spiritual exposure while in care. The lived experience of each participant gave important insight into their perceptions and factors relating to adulthood. This was an appropriate sample size for a full description of the lived experience, which provided a basis for analysis. This was an appropriate sample size for this study to collect data as it followed the guidelines provided for a qualitative phenomenological research study because there is no required sample size (Bliss, 2016).

All potential participants for this study were recruited from counties in Northern California. Participants were recruited through the distribution of flyers (see Appendix A)

near such places as community colleges, counseling centers, shelters, youth services centers, churches, libraries, coffee shops, and independent living programs. On the flyer, I listed the information for participation and requirements and indicated the reason for the study. All participants who showed an interest in the research were contacted by email or phone and encouraged to ask questions about the study.

Instrumentation

The instruments that I used in this study were a combination of face-to-face interviews, open-ended generated questions, as well as semistructured in-depth interviews conducted by me. I used a prescreening survey and the demographic screening information form (Appendix C). I used open-ended questions during interviews, which allowed research participants space to share precisely what happened in their lives. A skillful interviewer is knowledgeable, understanding, open, gentle, and respectful; has a good memory; and is able to interpret gathered information (McGrath et al. 2018). These instruments were used in this research study to gain knowledge and understanding about each participant's lived experience relating directly to the research question concerning aged-out foster youth's exposure to spiritual foster homes and transition into adulthood.

According to Bliss (2016), although human experiences can be investigated through observations, shared interactions, and literature and the arts, they are more typically investigated in phenomenological research by speaking directly with people in conversational, in-depth interviews. In simple terms, phenomenology can be defined as an approach to research in which the researcher seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it. The

goal of phenomenology is to describe the meaning of this experience in terms of what was experienced and how it was experienced (Neubauer et al., 2019). Therefore, during the semistructured interviews, I used the phenomenological approach to each participant's lived experience. The phenomenological approach consisted of open-ended questions that helped participants keep focused on the story of their experience. In addition to open-ended questions, a description from the participant was superseded by phenomenological reduction (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The interview guide (Appendix D) allowed me latitude and flexibility while using the semistructured process for each participant's lived experience. During this process, the interview guide was very helpful because it allowed each participant to navigate throughout the interview and to share their thoughts freely. Content validity was established by the outcome of each question answered from the interview form. Creswell (2018) indicated that it is important that the findings accurately represent and are true to the intended phenomenon. The content validity was measured by relying on the knowledge of each participant's feedback on how well the questions measured the content in question. In addition, I used interpretive validity to ensure that the participants' viewpoints, thoughts, intentions, and experiences were accurately understood and reported (Johnson, 2019). For this study, strategies such as bracketing, interpreting, and participant reviews were used for accuracy (Creswell et al., 2018).

Data Collection

All data were collected on zoom at a location that was safe and selected by each participant. The interview process started after the screening survey form had been

collected and eligibility had been established. Each session started with a set of open-ended questions using the phenomenological approach, as a way of documenting the lived experience of each participant (Neubauer, 2019). Data were collected and all interviews were on zoom. All the data were collected by me, and the frequency of data collected was no more than 45 to 60 minutes long. There was one interview per participant and during that time I sought any additional questions or ensure the validity of the research. The data were recorded by audio.

I recruited participants in California, and all interviews were conducted on zoom, no additional participants were needed, to expand my search. Once the interview was finished, I verbally thanked each participant and told them that the interview has been completed and if they had any further questions, I contacted them by phone or email. If additional information was needed after I had reviewed the audio recording, I contacted the participant for a follow-up interview.

Data Analysis Plan

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the relationship between aged-out foster youth who grew up in a spiritual foster home (incorporating religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) and their adulthood outcomes (socioeconomic status, family connections, life satisfaction, low retention rate of familial retraumatization). This study used Giorgi and Giorgi's (2003) six steps for data analysis. This study was necessary to acquire more knowledge of the specific spiritual experiences of aged-out foster youth to improve their adulthood outcomes.

This study examined the research question: What is the relationship between aged-out foster youth who grew up in a spiritual foster home (incorporating religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) and their adulthood outcomes? The following are sub questions: Research Question 1 How does growing up in a spiritual foster home influence foster youth's spirituality after they have aged out of foster care? Research Question 2 What are the spiritual beliefs and practices aged-out foster youth continue to use? Research Question 3 What type of spiritual practices or functions do foster youth find most beneficial in their lives?

Emergent coding was used for my data analysis, viewed each participant's interview data and looked for any identified statement that was relevant to each participant's lived experience. I looked for key terms from all participants during the interview process, which turned into themes, as well as questionnaires, open responses, in-depth interviews, noted conversations, and observations. All the research data were hand-coded using the thematic analysis, which is commonly used in the phenomenological approach (Bliss, 2016).

I used Microsoft Word for my software data, and Excel spreadsheets will be used to compare the in-depth interviews. All data were read and reread until saturation or no new patterns or themes occurred during the interview recordings.

Discrepant cases may transpire; it is very common to have people who are different from everyone else (Bliss, 2016). Therefore, I looked at how people are different from everyone else by coding their information in another spreadsheet.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the systematic rigor of the research design, the credibility of the researcher, the believability of the findings, and the applicability of the research methods (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Appropriate strategies to establish credibility were used in the current study. As the researcher, I looked at ways to achieve triangulation, prolonged contact, member checks, saturation, reflexivity, peer review, and confirmability by showing that the data will be as accurate as possible. Confirmability is the last criterion of trustworthiness that a qualitative researcher must establish. This criterion has to do with the level of confidence that the research study's findings are based on the participants' narratives and words rather than potential researcher biases. Confirmability verifies that the findings are shaped by participants more so than a qualitative researcher shapes them. While reflexivity has long been established as a key component in qualitative research (since the researcher is the research instrument), the validity of the overall study can be strengthened with thoughtful, insightful articulation of the ways in which researchers' subjective positionalities influence all aspects of the research process, from subject matter to methods to analysis to representation of the findings (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Qualitative codes, themes, and overall analyses can be more coherently justified based on a converging coherence from multiple sources, increasing the validity of the study (Rose & Johnson, 2020). The second issue I reviewed is transferability which is similar to external validity. External validity is important when generalizing from a set of research findings to other people, settings, and times (Johnson, 2019). However, as the researcher,

I understand that some of the results may not be transferred because the results may not relate to the participant's experience. I documented my step-by-step data collection procedures. I also had a classmate review my data to preserve its dependability. I had the classmate audit the data collection to prevent researcher biases through an audit trail.

Ethical Procedures

The participants signed a consent form that outlined the procedures. I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before preliminary data collection. The consent form included confidentiality and informed consent to maintain the ethical standards of the study. Participants signed a written document, and I verbally reviewed the informed consent document for their understanding and clarity. All documents about participants will be maintained in locked files and names were identified by initials only to secure participants' privacy and confidentially. All data was secured on password-protected flash drives and spreadsheets. All data collected will be archived using participants' initials only, no full names will be listed, and will remain confidential in a secured and locked location accessed only by the researcher. Data will be destroyed after seven years. All participant interaction occurred on zoom and the researcher limited conflict of interest and maintained the confidentiality of participants.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the exposure between the type of spiritual exposure gained in foster care and the effect this exposure may have on adulthood outcomes. This phenomenological study was selected to explore the lived experiences of this population related to their aging out process and to

gain a better understanding of this phenomenon. This chapter provided information on the research design and rationale of the study, the role of the researcher, the methodology, and ethical considerations for the study.

Chapter 4 provides information concerning the participant's demographics, data collection procedures, and data analysis, including categories, themes, and codes. As well as evidence of trustworthiness from the participants, and results to support the data from each participant interview.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experience of foster youth growing up in a spiritual home involving religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups. Ahmann (2017) suggested that a significant portion of youth exiting foster care face serious difficulty transitioning to life on their own. CCCF (n.d.) suggested that spirituality may empower strong connections /relationships between children and their environment. Youth develop their identity through these relationships and make sense of their cultural values, beliefs, and norms. Further, the current research study can provide a platform for retaining and training caregivers to care for foster youth while meeting cultural or spiritual needs through building relationships that incorporate spirituality. The literature indicated that Fowler (1981) maintained that faith allowed human beings to conceptualize what he called the "ultimate environment" (Andrade, 2014, p. 2), the version of the world that individuals create in their minds that shapes how they understand and live in the real world.

Schatz and Horejsi (1996) suggested that Christian-based solid foster homes include activities that complement the process of moral development, which children and adults continue to use in the decision-making process. Schatz and Horejsi suggested that children and youth in religious foster homes are provided moral growth and development models through their life cycle with religious events. These religious events are the foundation of sound moral judgment and teaching to foster social community and involvement (Schatz & Horejsi, 1996). Positive outcomes may follow when youth follow positive role models on their journey through life. The current study used a

phenomenological approach to gather detailed participant responses. The research was conducted using the following research questions: What is the relationship of aged-out foster youth who grew up in a spiritual foster home (incorporating religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) and their adulthood outcomes? The following were sub questions:

- Research Question 1: Describe how growing up in a spiritual foster home influences foster youth's spirituality after they have aged out of foster care.
- Research Question 2: What are the spiritual beliefs and practices that aged-out foster youth continue to use?
- Research Question 3: What spiritual practices or functions do foster youth find most beneficial?

Chapter 4 will include the following: setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and a summary.

Settings

The interviews took place on Zoom in a private setting selected by each participant to ensure their privacy and confidentiality. They were 45 minutes long. Each session was recorded using a Zoom recorder and transcribed using Walden's 365 program. No personal or organizational conditions influenced participants, their experience, or the interpretation of this study.

Demographics

The participants for this present qualitative study consisted of eight aged out foster youth. The participants were asked to complete a demographic form (Appendix C).

Table 1 presents a summary of the characteristics listed on the demographic form. The participants were from the Northern California area; six were female, and two were male. Five participants identified themselves as Black/African American, one identified herself as Caucasian, and two identified themselves as Hispanic. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 25 years. Six of the participants were 18 to 20 years of age, and two of the participants were 23 to 25. All individuals participating in this study aged out of the foster care system between 3 and 7 years before the study began. Participants were part of the study because they volunteered and met participant inclusion considerations.

Table 1*Participant Demographics and Characteristics*

Characteristics		Number of participants (<i>N</i> = 8)
Gender	Female	6
	Male	2
Race	Black/African American	5
	Hispanic	1
	Caucasian	2
Age	18–21	6
	22–25	2
Highest level of education	High school/GED	3
	Some college	5
Employment	Employed full time	0
	Employed part time	5
	Unemployed	3
Current living conditions	Living with friends	5
	Living alone	1
	Living with prior foster parents	2

Data Collection

The data collection process for this study began after receiving Walden University IRB approval on June 7, 2023, # 05-30-23-0120019. The recruitment process concurred with the information provided in Chapter 3. I recruited eight participants, and all eight participants met the prescreening criteria. The sample size of this study was eight participants, six females and two males, who had aged out of the foster care system and were exposed to spirituality in their foster home(s) before aging out. Saturation was reached with this sample of eight. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 25 years of age. After the participants had completed the prescreening demographic form and had provided the consent form, the interview processing started. During the interview, each participant attended a 45- to 60-minute scheduled virtual Zoom conference. During the virtual Zoom conference, I asked open-ended questions about the subject matter. In addition, interpretive validity was used to ensure that I accurately understood and reported the participants' viewpoints, thoughts, intentions, and experiences (Johnson, 2019). To further ensure the validity of the data collection, validity strategies such as bracketing and interpreting were used for accuracy. The locations of data collection varied by participants' choice of location. The interviews took place either at a public library or in private rooms. The semistructured interviews I conducted were recorded during each session and transcribed verbatim using the Microsoft Transcribe application. No unusual circumstances were encountered during the data collection process.

Data Analysis

Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) recommended a descriptive phenomenological analysis method for analyzing phenomenological data. Several steps were used to analyze this study, which included coding, themes, phenomenology reduction, semistructured interviews, clustering, and interpretive validity. To begin the research process for data analysis, the eight transcribed interviews, which were typed into a Microsoft Word table, were used. During the interview process, there were 15 questions asked of each participant. This process helped to make the participant feel comfortable to talk about their lived experience.

In order to analyze the data, I mapped out codes and emerging themes (Rose & Johnson, 2020). The codes were formulated by removing comments from the eight participants' responses that were not irrelevant to the 15 interview questions. Field notes from each participant's response were placed on the Microsoft Word table to sort the data. Statements from the interview questions that were recorded were highlighted in yellow. Each response was placed on the table listing major categories, themes, and participants in each column. From the words derived from the interviews, eight emergent themes were captured by reading and rereading the identified codes from the eight interview questions.

The phenomenological reduction was approached with a nonjudgmental mindset. In addition to open-ended questions, the phenomenological reduction superseded a description from the participant (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). I kept all the words to describe the phenomenon and understand the participants' experiences. It was important to stay

open-minded for clarity, and participants were constantly asked for clarity when necessary.

All the data were merged to analyze information during the participants' clustering of meaningful statements phase. All noteworthy statements were identified in transcribing the data, coding the data, organizing the data, and clustering all the data into themes. Fowler (1981) stated that during this stage, a person has an "ideology" and a consistent clustering of values and has not come to the knowledge of what these conceptions mean (Fowler, 1981).

I used imaginative variation for data analysis, which expresses the psychological meaning of the participants' lived experiences and provides examples of each participant's aging out of foster care and into adulthood. All of this was exhibited by taking the participants' exact words and using them to illustrate their lived experiences in a spiritual foster home. The whole purpose of the method is to discover and articulate the psychological meanings the participant is living that reveal the nature of the phenomenon being researched (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Appendix E's table consists of participants' quotes that formulated themes. Discrepant cases were not present in the data. Therefore, coding their information on a spreadsheet was not necessary.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the systematic rigor of the research design, the researcher's credibility, the believability of the findings, and the applicability of the research methods (Rose & Johnson, 2020, p. 434). The qualitative criteria used to determine the trustworthiness of the research results in the present study

were credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Johnson, 2019). Credibility was established in the current study by keeping field notes and asking participants questions to gain understanding during the interview. The second trustworthiness issue I reviewed was transferability, similar to external validity in quantitative research. External validity is important when generalizing research findings to other people, settings, and times (Johnson, 2019).

I understood that some results may not transfer because they may not relate to the participant's lived experience. This study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach with eight participants until saturation was met. This study demonstrated dependability and confirmability by providing an audit trail on how field notes were established by providing enough data for the research. This criterion concerns the confidence level that the research study's findings are based on the participants' narratives and words rather than potential researcher biases. Discrepant cases were not factored into the analysis because no one disagreed or was inconsistent with their statements from everyone.

Results

In reply to the question, the first research question was: What is the lived experience of aged-out foster youth who grew up in a spiritual foster home and their adulthood outcomes? The lived experience in foster care was discussed as positive and challenging, but they had supportive mentors or foster parents to talk to when they were presented with hard times. The following themes were selected from the data analysis to answer the research questions.

Theme 1: Positive and Helpful After Aging Out

Theme 1 revealed that participants had a positive journey after aging out of foster care. The eight participants had similarities in their aging-out experiences relating to spirituality as they transitioned into adulthood. The participants felt that living in a spiritual home prepared them for adulthood by providing a positive outlook and mind frame.

Living in a foster home where the parents were not spiritual, and then the last foster home I was in, the foster mother was spiritual. Because of this perspective on life, this was a considerable change when things got tough because aging out was challenging. The challenge was not to stress out but to pray about it. So, it helps with day-to-day stress. (Participant 8)

Other participants presented the following statements: “Developing a relationship with God was severe; it helped me do things right and not want to do bad things” (Participant 4); “I was more positive when I read scriptures, which helps me feel better when I feel down or angry or has specific thoughts” (Participant 4); “I learned a lot about the word of God in my foster home, and it helped me to do the right things and stay focused. It has been a good experience, especially when I did not feel good” (Participant 3); “I read scriptures, and it encouraged me.” (Participant 1) Overall, participants viewed their experiences growing up in a spiritual foster home as positive and influential.

Theme 2: Connected With Spiritual Advisor/Mentor After Aging Out

Theme 2 revealed that most participants maintained healthy, positive relationships with their spiritual advisor/mentor. By staying connected, each participant was

encouraged more after aging out by having someone reach out to receive positive feedback and guidance regarding daily living. One participant indicated they still had a good relationship with their foster mother after aging out and could talk to her about anything. Shared responses from participants included the following: "My mentor is, and our relationship has been perfect. He is helping me a lot with things I have been going through" (Participant 6). "We both encouraged each other to keep our connection with God and to believe that he will do the right thing for us and that he will not lead us down the wrong path" (Participant 7).

Participant 3 contacted her spiritual advisor, mentor, and foster parent. Her foster parent helped her a lot and continued to give her excellent guidance and emotional support as she learned about life independently. She explained, "My mom is what I call her, and we are still very close. I love how she handles situations, which helps me handle the same situations; she is very cool."

Theme 3: Enrollment in City College or Career Program After Aging Out

Theme 3 indicated that most participants continued their education after aging out of foster care through city college or trade school enrollment. The participants were encouraged to be independent and desire self-sustainability, which motivated them to get a higher education or enter a trade school program to improve their adulthood outcomes.

Some of the participant's responses were as follows: "I enrolled in Chabot City College and have been attending for the last two years. I want to be a social worker because my social workers encouraged me when in foster care" (Participant 1) "I enrolled after High school graduation and attended Delta City College 3 days a week" (Participant

2. "Becoming a nurse and working with children" (Participant 5. "I am currently a senior at a community college, and I am looking into colleges to continue to get my BA degree in business" (Participant 4). "I enrolled in the AmeriCorps program. It is like a trade school; it prepares me for the job that I want for my career" (Participant 7). "Yes, I enrolled In Delta College. I am just taking two classes, but I cannot take as many classes as I want to because I work full time" (Participant 8).

Theme 4: Connected to God/Spirituality

Theme 4 indicated that most participants maintained connections with God or spirituality as they aged out of foster care, contributing to positive outcomes in adulthood. One participant indicated, "It just gave me a different perspective on life, helping me when things get tough or difficult because aging out was challenging" (Participant 8). Some of the participant's responses were as follows: "I am more positive when I read scriptures to help me feel better when I get down or angry or have certain thoughts" (Participant 2). "I take my relationship with God seriously, and it helps me do things right and not want to do bad but be a better person" (Participant 1). "My spirituality has helped me to change and be dedicated to my education, and at the end of the day, I will always get God's work done" (Participant 1).

Summary

Through this research study, I aimed to examine the relationship between aged-out foster youth who grew up in a spiritual foster home (incorporating religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) and their adulthood outcomes. I presented the data in Chapter 4 and explained how the data were reviewed and analyzed.

Each of the eight participants shared their concerns and feelings after aging out of foster care and transitioning into adulthood.

A descriptive phenomenological method was used. The purpose of the method was to discover and articulate the psychological meanings being lived by the participants that reveal the nature of the phenomenon being researched (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). In reply to the research question, most participants connected spiritually with God or a higher power through bible study and other groups as they transitioned into adulthood. In response to RQ1, participants indicated that growing up in a spiritual home taught each participant to be positive and open-minded about life, allowing them to experience their spiritual place. Response to RQ2 gave each participant a positive approach to life after aging out, allowing them to stay focused on good work ethics and determination for higher educational goals. RQ3 participants were able to experience their spiritual practices by surviving through tough times, and participants began to experience positive outcomes. Each participant learned to establish personal attributes through prayer, belief in God, inner strength, and mentorship support. From the eight participants, all themes presented in Chapter 4 emerged from data gathered, transcribed, analyzed, and interpreted for this research study. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the interpretation of the findings, limitations, recommendations, and implications for social change, ending with a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This qualitative study explored the lived experience of foster youth growing up in a spiritual home (religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) and aging out of the foster care system. A descriptive phenomenological method was used; the purpose was to discover and articulate the psychological meanings being lived by the participant that reveal the nature of the phenomenon being researched (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The current study was conducted to understand better the lived experience of former foster youth who have aged out of care, focusing on spirituality in foster homes and outcomes experienced as each participant transitioned to adulthood.

RSQ1: Describe how growing up in a spiritual foster home influences foster youth's spirituality after each participant aged out of foster care.

RSQ2: What are the spiritual beliefs and practices aged-out foster youth continue to use?

RSQ3: What spiritual practices or functions do foster youth find most beneficial?

The findings indicated that most participants connected spiritually with God or a higher power through Bible study and other groups as they transitioned into adulthood. The main finding for RQ1 was that most participants could relieve the anxiety and stress of aging out. Further, each participant's spiritual background gave each person a different perspective on life and helped each participant cope when things got tough because aging out was challenging. The critical findings for RSQ2 were as follows: Participants believed education was necessary for stability and a good life while transitioning into

adulthood. The main findings for RSQ3 were that participants used lived experiences learned while in foster care and found that staying connected with God contributed to positive relationships in life.

Previous research indicated that spirituality is an essential character strength and a correlate of both subjective well-being and prosociality (Kor et al., 2019). This study was conducted because of the limited information concerning the transitional process and outcomes of aged-out foster youth. However, previous research (Jackson et al., 2010) has provided general information concerning aged-out foster youth's exposure to spiritual foster homes and transition into adulthood. This research was conducted to bring awareness to what these youth experienced during the aging-out process. The findings that emerged from the development of this research revealed that the lived experience of the eight participants was needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the extent to which specific exposure to foster care is necessary. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the impact of each participant's outcome in adulthood, such as healthy relationships with others and the support system participants needed after aging out of the foster system.

Interpretations of the Findings

Eight participants shared their lived experiences and perceptions of this phenomenological study. All eight participants shared positive and similar experiences and challenges while aging out of foster care into adulthood. I transcribed, interpreted, and analyzed the data from each participant interviewed to explore the lived experience

of each aged-out youth who transitioned into adulthood. The information gathered for this study indicates the research's knowledge base specified in Chapter 2.

I formulated one research question and three sub questions to address the study's concerns. The research question was: What is the relationship between aged-out foster youth who grew up in a spiritual foster home (incorporating religious belief, practice, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups) and their adulthood outcomes? The sub questions were as follows:

RSQ1: Describe how growing up in a spiritual foster home influences foster youth's spirituality after they age out of foster care.

RSQ2: What are the spiritual beliefs and practices aged-out foster youth continue to use?

RSQ3: What spiritual practices or functions do foster youth find most beneficial?

The main finding for RSQ1 was that most participants could relieve the anxiety and stress of aging out. Further, their spiritual background gave them a different perspective on life and helped them to cope when things got tough because aging out was complex and challenging. The critical findings for RSQ2 were as follows: Participants believed education was crucial for stability and a good life while transitioning into adulthood. The main findings for RSQ3 were that participants used the lived experiences they had learned while in foster care and found that staying connected with God contributed to more positive relationships.

I used emergent coding to relate how aged-out foster youth perceived, viewed, and attributed cause and meaning to their aging-out process. Four themes were

formulated out of these data. The four themes that emerged from this study were the following: (a) spiritual journey after aging out, (b) connection with a spiritual advisor, (c) education, and (d) connection to God/spirituality; there were no discrepant cases to be factored into the analysis.

Theme: 1: Spiritual Journey After Aging Out

Theme 1 revealed that the spiritual journey was cheerful and helpful after aging out. Each participant explained their foster care journey into adulthood. During the aging-out process into adulthood, six out of eight participants experienced homelessness, unemployment, and other challenges. The experience shared while living in a spiritual home was cheerful and helpful. However, after experiencing these unmet needs and receiving strong support and encouragement, they were able to find shelter and employment. All eight participants expressed that aging out from the foster care system was not a process but a lived experience. All participants felt ready to take on adulthood responsibilities and live without assistance as emerging adults. Schatz and Horejisi (1996) recommended a strong Christian-based affiliation for foster homes. This study also found that foster homes use activities as a process of moral development in children through religious involvement. Schatz and Horejisi stated that when youth are taught about spirituality, they may gain an increased sense of self and receive models for growth and development. In my current study, it was seen in all eight participants that religious involvement helped them experience a positive outlook on life. Jackson et al. (2010) interviewed adolescents in foster care about their spiritual beliefs. In the current study, participants felt that living in a spiritual home helped them through the aging-out process

when things got tough; all the participants' experiences were positive. It taught them to pray about their problems and not experience stress over them.

Schatz and Horejisi (1996) stated that their participants felt obligated to participate in religious involvement. In this current study, most participants willingly participated in spiritual functions. The current results differed from Schatz and Horejisi's study because the participants did not report feeling obligated to participate in religious involvement; they willingly participated, and the study did not support Schatz and Horejisi.

Fowler (2014) explained that the differences between belief, faith, and religion are associated with the ultimate environment because individuals' beliefs allow them to convey their ideas about this environment (Andrade, 2014). Consistent with the current study, participants created a positive outlook and used their previous spiritual interactions to motivate and encourage themselves during difficult times. Similarly, Varghese (2024) indicated that young people are being pushed to the limits of their morals and resilience by existential crises and moral quandaries in today's culture. Spirituality, frequently disregarded in empirical study, is crucial in forming people's resilience, capacity to overcome hardships, and moral compass, which helps them navigate difficult moral situations. The present study aimed to clarify the complex interplay of young people's spirituality, resilience, and morality, a topic that has not gotten much attention from psychological and sociological research. For many, spirituality offers a fundamental framework that guides their perception of the world, their role, and their relationship with others. Varghese's (2024) study investigated the relationships between spirituality and

resilience among young adults, specifically examining how resilience and morality predict spirituality. Utilizing a sample of 207 young adults aged 18–25 years residing in India, the study employed a quantitative approach to analyze data collected through three scales (Varghese, 2024). The analysis, conducted via multiple linear regression, revealed that resilience and morality significantly predicted spirituality, accounting for approximately 30.5% of its variance. This indicates a substantial relationship between these constructs, suggesting that individuals with higher levels of resilience and moral reasoning are likely to exhibit higher levels of spirituality (Varghese, 2024). Therefore, the findings confirmed that my study is consistent because spirituality is more than just believing in a god; it also considers several other aspects.

Previous research (Bartelink et al., 2024) indicated ethical issues arising in transreligious foster care placements about foster children's needs regarding religious socialization and identification. Applying Urban Walker's (Bartelink et al., 2024) expressive-collaborative framework to 30 qualitative interviews with foster parents, foster children, parents, and professionals, the researchers elaborated and applied a three-level reflection on Christian foster parents' ethics of care in the everyday practice of foster care. Some of their practices in the home included giving the children age-appropriate Bibles and Bible study books from their foster parents. In contrast, bedtime rituals included singing and praying with a foster parent. Religious norms and values were important for fostering children's stability (Bartelink et al., 2024). Nine participants in Bartelink et al.'s (2024) study concluded that foster children raised in Christian foster families need loose and hybrid moral frames to explore and alter their multiple

identifications and partialities as they develop. A growing ethical awareness of children's religious development should be encouraged in foster care and cultivated among foster parents (Bartelink et al., 2024).

The findings from the current study indicated that each research question addressed the lived experiences of foster youth growing up in a spiritual foster home incorporating religious beliefs, practices, higher power, Bible study, or youth groups once they were aged out of the system through the lens of faith-based theory. Kohlberg's (1971) theory indicated similar results. Using his approach, Kohlberg suggested that there may be a seventh stage of transcendental morality, which links religion with moral reasoning. Further, he stated that knowledge and learning contribute to moral development. *Spirituality* is a practice learned through teaching, which changes one's thinking pattern and contributes to development. In the current study, this was seen by seven out of eight participants. They indicated that it gave them a different perspective on life, helping them when things got tough because aging out was complex and challenging.

Theme: 2 Connection With Spiritual Advisor

Theme 2 revealed that challenges, hope, and fear existed throughout the participant's lived experience, but the connection of their spiritual advisors got each participant through their transitioning period. The participants depended on their spiritual advisors, foster parents, and mentors to guide them through this challenging process after aging out. Based on previous research, it was stated that former foster youth incorporated spirituality into their daily lives but felt their spiritual journey was not supported while in

care (Huitrado-Manio, 2012). This research differs from the previous research because all participants experienced encouragement and a positive outlook on life and were supported while in care. Their support system and spiritual advisor helped them overcome their challenges and fears, which the study did not support (Huirado-Manio, 2012). In addition, Weiler et al. (2022) indicated that mentoring-based interventions showed promise among children in foster care, but previous research suggested that some benefit more children than others. Because children in foster care experience relationship disruptions that could affect mentoring effectiveness, they examined whether children's relational histories at baseline (i.e., relationship quality with birth parents, relationship quality with foster parents, caregiver instability, and previous mentoring experience) moderated the impact of a mentoring intervention on children's mental health, trauma symptoms, and quality of life; Weiler et al., 2022). Children's interpersonal histories are complex. For children in foster care, their relational histories may simultaneously offer opportunity and challenge as they enter into a new mentoring relationship. In an effort to further delineate the factors that impact mentoring effectiveness, the current study examined whether children's relational histories (i.e., birth parent relationship quality, foster parent relationship quality, caregiver instability, and previous mentoring experience, all measured prior to the start of the intervention) moderated the impact of Fostering Healthy Futures (FHF) on children's mental health, trauma symptoms, and quality of life (Weiler et al., 2022).

The expectation of the foster care system was for these youth to age out of the system with the ability to go to college or a trade school and be prepared for the real

world. Previous research by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2021) stated that half of the participants experience three or more placements, compromising their ability to form trusting and lasting relationships. The current study differed from the previous study because each participant learned to accept responsibility for their life and stay focused during aging. All eight participants were encouraged to become better people and independent from their support groups. The participants shared feelings of being prepared to leave care and felt confident that they could seek the skills to help them become influential adults. The results differed from those of The Annie Casey Foundation (2021), perhaps because all participants were recruited from areas different from the previous research.

Theme 3: Education

Theme 3 indicated that five participants enrolled in a city college and three trade schools after aging out of foster care. All participants appeared to be career-minded and striving to enter adulthood. Further, former foster youth are at a higher risk of experiencing homelessness, drug abuse, generational government assistance, sexual exploitation, child welfare involvement, incarcerations, poverty, lack of health, early pregnancies, unstable employment, and a lack of education than adolescents in the general population (Graham et al., 2015). Additionally, Burns et al.'s (2022) study indicated that students in foster care graduated at lower rates than youth not in foster care (56% vs. 85%) and were less likely than their peers to attend college (48% vs. 64%). The results from the current study differed from those of Graham et al. (2015) and Burns et al. (2022). In my current study, the participants were different from the previous studies in

theory because of the spiritual element, and each participant chose to go to college and seek employment and did not experience the higher risk challenges such as homelessness, drug abuse, sexual exploitation, child welfare involvement, incarceration, lack of health, or early pregnancies mentioned by Graham et al. (2015).

Theme 4: Connected to God/Spirituality

Theme 4 indicated that all eight participants had a solid spiritual connection during their aging-out process. All participants in the current study used prayer, family, and religious beliefs to maintain their connection to God. The present study's findings revealed that one of the eight participants responded to Interview Question 1, which addressed her spiritual journey after aging out of foster care. Participant 3 felt that having a relationship with family and God was good and helped them on their journey. Although there are numerous ways to define spirituality, most youths embrace it with reverence for God (Graybeal et al., 2007). Children in foster care are wards of the state and, consequently, the degree to which youth can participate in spiritual and religious endeavors is a complex issue. The preferences of youth must be balanced with the interests of the biological parents and the foster parents (Hodge 2022). In the present study, participants connected to God and their spirituality toward aging into adulthood. In the current study, participants felt they had a connection with God. Therefore, the findings confirm that the study is similar to Graybeal et al. (2007).

Limitations of the Study

The current study consisted of a sample size of eight participants who aged out of the foster care system. All participants were exposed to Christian-based spirituality in

their foster home(s) before aging out. This qualitative phenomenological study reached saturation with aged-out foster youth as participants who spent at least six months or more in a foster home while they were between the ages of 5 to 17 and were between 18-25 years of age and had aged out of the foster care system. The concerns of the participant's age could have presented different results if there had been more diversification. In the present study, people who were more interested in the topic may have been more likely to volunteer.

Recommendations

The study results show that participants' exposure to spirituality had positive outcomes in adulthood. Therefore, a recommendation is to do more research incorporating spirituality as a core component for foster care placements. For example, a longitudinal study could be done that would follow the children throughout their time in foster care, which could stabilize placements, therefore eliminating consistent placement moves. A study could also be done on the foster parents and their feelings about spirituality for the children in their care. Also, a study that explored foster homes that are not Christian based but develop positive values for the youth to transition into adulthood would be interesting.

Implications

The findings of this study embraced implications for the foster care system and the development of future research. The ideas that emerged from this study uncovered that an understanding of spiritual strength is necessary for healing and improvement regardless of challenges in life. Findings illustrated that further study is needed to

discover ways to improve the transitional process of the lived experiences of foster youth raised in spiritual homes through adulthood. Understanding the transitional process will develop healing for the aged-out foster youth and provide clinical professionals with the necessary information to best serve and improve outcomes of aged-out foster youth.

Implications for positive social change include bringing awareness about foster youth's lived experience in spiritual homes before aging out of the system into adulthood. Furthermore, this vulnerable population struggles with many challenges and needs; therefore, bringing awareness is vital during aging. Additionally, the findings of this study also suggest the need for training for foster parents, improved professional practices, and policies for future research to help improve the foster care system.

This phenomenological study reached saturation with a sample size of 8 participants. One of the major challenges in this study was recruiting participants. This suggests that future research should focus on a larger recruitment sample size to consider findings and improve processes in the foster care system.

Conclusion

This phenomenological qualitative study focused on the phenomenon of foster youth who aged out of the foster care system growing up in a spiritual foster home and its effect on spirituality after they aged out of foster care into adulthood. The current study focused on gaining a meaningful understanding of the success of their transitional outcomes. The research study provided some implications for further understanding the preparation process and the foster parent's role in preparing the foster youth for this transitional experience. While this study viewed and researched the literature and the

ongoing problems of aged-out foster youth who have made this transition to adulthood, it is limited and indicates a need for additional research.

This present study focused on the lived experience of former foster youth who have aged out of care, focusing on spirituality in foster homes and outcomes experienced as they transition to adulthood. There is limited research on aged-out foster youth's exposure to spiritual foster homes as they transition into adulthood. However, there is a tremendous need for an intense study of the transitional outcomes of youth growing up in a spiritual foster home than transitioning into adulthood. In conclusion, foster youth appeared to be grateful for the lived experience and how their experiences were available to meet their needs as adults and to become change agents in their community.

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Appendix A: Flyer

Looking for Former Foster Youth who have aged out of the Foster Care System to Participate in a Research Study. Focusing on spirituality in foster homes and outcomes as former foster youth transition into adulthood.

Participation will include: One 45–60-minute interview sessions that will be audio recorded. Participants must be between 18 to 25 years old, having spent at least 6 months or more in the system prior to the 18th birthday.

WALDEN UNIVERSITY STUDENT DISSERTATION**VOLUNTEER RESEARCH STUDY PARTICIPANTS****SEEKING AGED OUT
FOSTER YOUTH**

Ages 18-25 years old

\$25
Incentive**Purpose:**

This study will focus on spirituality in foster homes and outcomes as they transition into adulthood.

Participation will include:

One 45-60 minute interview session recorded using zoom.

Requirements:

Participants must be between 18-25 years old. They must have spent at least 6 months or more in the foster care system prior to their 18th birthday.

To participate or more information contact:

Valerie Sims

***Participation in this study is confidential***

Appendix B: Qualifying Screening Survey

- How would you classify yourself? (Circle one of the following).
African American Black Hispanic Black White Asian
Native American Other
- How old are you? _____
- What is your gender? (Circle one of the following).
Female Male or Other
- Were you in the foster care system 6 months or more prior to your 18th?
(Circle one of the following) Yes No
- How old were you when you aged out of the foster care system? _____

Appendix C: Demographic Information

1. What is your age _____
2. What is your gender? (Circle one please).
Male Female
3. How would you classify yourself? (Circle one please).
Native American Asian White African American Black Other
4. What age did you enter the foster care system? _____
5. What age did you exit the foster care system? _____
6. How many placements did you experience while in the foster care? ____
7. How many spiritual foster homes did you live in? _____
8. How often did you change schools while in the system? _____
9. Did you maintain contact with your foster sister's or brother's after you aged out? _____
10. After aging out did you remain in the same city you lived in while in foster care? _____
11. Did you have supportive adults in your life during and after aging out to foster care? _____
12. What is the highest level of education that you completed? (Circle one).
High School General Equivalency Diploma (GED) Vocational School
Some College Graduated College None of the above
13. Marital Status: (Circle one)
Single Married Divorce Separated

14. Are you a parent? (Circle one) Yes No
15. How many children do you have? _____
16. Does your child or children live with you? (Circle one)
17. Are you employed? (Circle one) Yes
18. Are you homeless or about to become homeless? (Circle one) Yes No
19. Have you been convicted of a crime resulting in time spent in prison? (Circle one) Yes No

Appendix D: Interview Guide Questions

Interview Questions

- Describe your spiritual journey after aging out of foster care?
- How frequently did you attend church, while you were in foster care?
- Describe your personal relationship with your mentor or spiritual advisor after aging out of care?
- Describe your living arrangements when you first aged out of foster care system?
- How do you see yourself as different than kids who weren't in foster care?
- How are you different from kids who had (or didn't have) spiritual learning chances?
- Describe the community you lived in after transitioning out of foster care system?
- Where did you go after you transition from foster care?
- Did you depend on family and friends for financial support?
- When you aged out of the foster care system did you get on public assistance?
- When you aged out of the system did you seek employment?
- Describe your first job interview after you aged out of the system?
- Did you quit your first job or were you terminated from work?
- When you aged out did you enroll in 3- or 4-year college or trade school?
- Did you work and go to college or trade school?

Closing Questions:

- Is there anything else that you would like to discuss concerning your lived experience in a spiritual foster home after you aged out of the system.?

- Are there any questions that have not been addressed or unaddressed topics that will help me further understand your aging out process?

Appendix E: Results

Major Categories	Themes	Participants Endorsing	Quote
The spiritual journey after aging out	(1) Positive and helpful after aging out	7	“I've been in foster homes where parents Weren't spiritual. And then my last foster home, I was in my foster mother was spiritual. It just gave me a different perspective on life, helping me when things get tough or difficult because aging out was difficult and challenging. To not really stress it out, but to Pray about it. So, it helps with day-to-day stress.”
Connection with Spiritual advisor	(2) Encouraged to be better people, be more independent	7	“We both kind of encourage each other to keep our connection with God and to believe that he'll do the right thing for us and that he won't lead us down the wrong path”
Education	(3) Enrolled in City College as transitioned into adulthood	5	I am currently in a Junior college
Connected to God/spirituality	(4) It just gave me a different perspective on life, helping me when things get tough or difficult because aging out was difficult and challenging.	6	“I'm more positive when I read scriptures to help me feel better when I get down or angry or have certain thoughts.” “I take my relationship with God seriously, and it helps me do things right and not want to do bad”.

Appendix F: Bill of Rights

In the foster care system, the rights of the foster child and parents must be respected to prevent placement disruption. The Foster Children's Bill of Rights and Foster Parent Bill of Rights are designed to inform foster children and foster parents of their rights (The National Foster Parent Association—Home, 2020).

Many children's bill of rights provided that they must be posted in a place where children will see them and include provisions requiring foster children to be informed about why they are in foster care and how the process will proceed (The National Foster Parent Association – Home, 2020). In addition, participation in extracurricular or community activities, efforts to maintain educational stability, access to mental, behavioral, and physical health care, and access to or communication with siblings and family members are significant features of the Foster Children's Bill of Rights. Included in the statute in 14 states is the requirement that foster parents use a reasonable and prudent parenting standard, particularly when making decisions regarding foster children's participation in extracurricular or other activities (The National Foster Parent Association – Home, 2020).

The Foster Children's Bill of Rights has been enacted in 15 states, and the Puerto Rico and Foster Parent Bill of Rights has been enacted in 17 states. Also, during the 2014 legislative session, ten states introduced fifteen bills (six enacted) either seeking to enact a bill of rights or otherwise extending or defining the rights of foster children and parents, including independent living service for older youth, educational consistency,

and enrollment, foster child input into evaluations of out-of-home care placements, and extracurricular activities (The National Foster Parent Association – Home, 2020).

Reasonable and prudent means careful and sensible parental decisions that maintain the child’s health, safety, and best interests (CDSS, 2021). The goal of the reasonable and prudent parent standard is to provide the youth with a “normal” life experience in out-of-home care and empower the out-of-home caregiver to encourage the youth to engage in extracurricular activities that promote a child’s well-being. As well as respect the rights of youth in out-of-home care (CDSS, 2021). Also, a foster parent is a person who acts as parent and guardian for a child in place of the child’s natural parents but without legally adopting the child (Thinkmap, 2019).

When a child is placed in a licensed resource home, the agency shall ensure placement of the child in a home that, to the fullest extent possible, best meets the child's day-to-day needs (NCSL, n.d.). Every child in foster care should have a compatibility assessment to see if the youth is a match to prevent placement disruption. Most times, this could be a meet and greet if the child is old enough to understand what the foster placement would look like. The meet and greet improves the efficacy of the agency's children, increasing the placement percentage.

The first step in placing a child in a foster home is to meet the needs of the foster youth to improve their outcomes. This would determine the compatibility of access and increase the efficacy of the placement, which could positively affect or expose them to spirituality.

Concerning the biological parent role, they have the right to visit their children during placement unless the court has terminated these rights. For children who are dependents of the court, as is the case with most of the children in placement. Foster parents, in particular, play a critical role in cultivating relationships with birth parents to support the child and parent visitation and contact and increase the likelihood of successful reunification (Home – Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.).

Family approval for accessing current and most recent education records is approved under Senate Bill (SB) 233 (Chapter 829, Statutes of 2017). Senate Bill 233 authorizes access to education records for caregivers for youth in foster care, including resource parents, relatives caring for the child, tribally approved homes, foster family agencies (FFAs and Short-Term Residential Treatment Program (STRTP) staff, even if they are not the child’s educational rights holder. Education records can include records of attendance, discipline, and online communication on platforms established by schools for pupils and parents, as well as any plan adopted under specified federal law. This bill also updates Resource Family (Department of Social Services, 2021).

Statewide and national data show that the academic performance of youth in foster care is less successful than other disadvantaged groups and that youth in foster care continually have the lowest graduation rates, as well as the highest dropout rates, compared to the general student population. Ensuring access to current and most recent education records of youth in foster care is critical to obtaining services to address these barriers (Department of Social Services, 2021).

In 2014, the California Department of Education (CDE) and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) issued an Education Records of Youth in Foster Care letter detailing the importance of efficient information sharing by county offices of education, local school districts, and child welfare agencies. In 2016, the CDE and the CDSS jointly released “*Dear Colleague: Joint Guidance Foster Youth Information Sharing*” with the Bureau of Children’s Justice at the California Department of Justice, attempting to clarify the sharing of information related to youth in foster care. However, the letter did not clarify what information could and could not be shared with caregivers, not the youth’s educational rights holders (Home, 2022).

Educational rights holders have full access to a student’s record and are permitted to make all education decisions for a child. Education rights holders may include caregivers who are sometimes assigned education rights by the courts, a child’s biological parent who may retain education rights after their child is placed in foster care, or a person other than the child’s caregiver of youth in foster care is not always their educational rights holder; they play a significant role in supporting the child’s education. Senate Bill 233 was enacted to improve coordination and empower caregivers to access records to support the youth in their care and to collaborate with the education rights holder. Caregivers who are regularly informed of a student’s progress in school can better support the child’s day-to-day educational needs and increase their educational success (Home, 2022).

To ensure that both the caregiver and educational rights holder are apprised of the child’s educational needs, SB 233 requires a caregiver who is not the student’s

educational rights holder to notify the student's educational rights holder, if direct communication between a caregiver and the education rights holder is appropriate of any educational needs of the student that require the educational rights holder's consent or participation, including but limited to school placement decisions, decisions on whether to invoke or waive school of origin rights, consent for special education assessments and individualized education programs (IEPs) meetings or hearings regarding attendance or discipline, and decisions regarding graduation (Home, 2022).

For each of these decisions (e.g., school enrollment, special education assessments or IEPs, etc.), it is the caregiver's responsibility to notify the education rights holder of the pending need or issue and for the education rights holder to make determinations in the youth's best interest. Caregivers are to support the children's educational case planning and educational goals, including case plans, Needs and Service Plans, and Transitional Independent Living Plans (Home, 2022).

In instances involving significant discipline or incidents that potentially impact a student's continued enrollment and progress in school, SB 233 requires the caregiver to provide the same information to the student's social worker or probation officer as is provided to the educational rights holder (Home, 2022).

Senate Bill 233 also requires a student's social worker or probation officer to direct the caregiver, who is not the student's educational rights holder, to communicate the information described above with the student's social worker, probation officer, or attorney instead of the education rights holder, if direct communication between a caregiver and the education rights holder is inappropriate (Home, 2022).

Incorporating this educational concept (SB 233) helps build rapport and trust in relationships with each parent. When a foster parent becomes an educational rights holder for youth in their home, a trusting relationship is developed between the child and the foster parent.