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Perceptions of Adulthood Preparation Among Individuals Who Aged Out of the Foster Care System

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
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Walden University
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Abstract

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Abstract

This generic qualitative study was focused on the lived experiences of former foster care youth and their ability to acquire and retain self-sufficiency skills during their transition to adulthood. Using Bandura's social learning theory as a framework, the research was focused on how interpersonal relationships with caregivers, mentors, and professionals influenced the development of these skills. Semistructured interviews were used to collect data from 10 former foster care youth. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, and three key themes and 13 subthemes emerged highlighting both support and barriers that youth encountered. The analysis of the data revealed that stable, supportive adult relationships were crucial in helping participants build self-sufficiency. Caregivers who modeled responsible behavior and provided consistent guidance played a significant role in skill development. In contrast, youth without these supports often felt isolated and unprepared for adult life. Other barriers included inconsistent life skills training, cultural mismatches in placements, and insufficient transitional planning. The study contributes to the limited literature on foster youth by centering their perspectives and experiences. The findings offer potential implications for positive social change in child welfare policy and practice, emphasizing the need for early, trauma-informed, and relationship-based support systems. Recommendations that may help promote social change include enhancing caregiver training, improving transition planning, and prioritizing relational continuity throughout care.

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Dedication

This dedication is first and foremost to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Without Christ, I am nothing. My mission in life has been to serve others and to seek solutions that improve the lives of vulnerable populations. Through my work, I have had the honor of walking alongside resilient children, youth, and families who have experienced deep traumas, many of whom found themselves in the foster care system.

When I began this journey, I did not realize how central my faith would become. It has been my guiding force, even through trials and errors, as I have worked to change the life trajectories of the children and youth I have encountered.

I want to thank my loving and caring mother, Patricia Ward; my grandmothers, Louise Dawson and Hattie Mae Davis; and my great-grandmothers, Helen Mickens, Arlise Walker, and Rosetta Dawson. Their encouragement and belief in me from a young age inspired me to pursue excellence in all I do.

To my wife, Deborah Dawson, and our children, Annabella and Jackson—thank you for your unwavering love and support throughout this journey.

Lastly, to the countless others who have encouraged me, prayed for me, and wished me success along the way—your kindness has not gone unnoticed.

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In addition to my immediate family mentioned in the dedication, I would also like to thank my siblings (Korte Sr., Darrea, Jabrae, Vynesha, Vincent, Karlan, Kamilla, Kalayna, Valaria, Vontrea, and Kaheem), my aunts and uncles, and my in-laws, John and Jackie Clarke, for your love, prayers, and unwavering support.

If I have inadvertently missed anyone, please know that no slight is intended. I am thankful to each and every one of you who played a part in this journey.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

In human development, supportive environments are crucial to children's well-being (Gladstone et al., 2021; Stapley et al., 2021). These environments foster a sense of security, facilitate development, promote flourishing, and offer opportunities to pursue aspirations (Bunting et al., 2017; Neag & Halmaghi, 2019; Reupert et al., 2022). In the United States, social scientists and policymakers have developed and cultivated quality social norms with the aim of contributing to the health and well-being of children and youth (Chapman et al., 2023; Thakrar et al., 2018). For children and youth within the foster care/child welfare system, empirical research findings have upheld this pattern to support health and well-being (Collins & Thomas, 2018; Forenza & Havlicek, 2021; Greeno et al., 2019). Moreover, I conducted this research study to investigate the contribution of interpersonal relationships between caregivers and foster care youth to health and well-being. This research study focused on how these relationships may facilitate the retention of longer-term self-sufficiency skills as youth age out of the foster care system and transition into adulthood. The following section explores information on the background of the research study.

Background

Thousands of foster care youths transition out of the foster care system and into adulthood each year (Fisher et al., 2023; Nuñez et al., 2022; Shpiegel et al., 2022). Many foster care youths are often ill-prepared for this transition into adulthood for various reasons (Brisson et al., 2022; Courtney et al., 2019). The ill-preparedness of foster care

youth transitioning into adulthood involves poor or missing transitional support, such as the ability to build healthy interpersonal relationships that praise or encourage transitions into adulthood (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). Transitional support programs and professionals involved in supporting foster care youth in transitioning into adulthood use a variety of approaches and interventions to address the challenges and reduce the significant amount of foster care youth who experience higher rates of homelessness, incarceration, food insecurities, financial instability, substance abuse, and lack of access to quality mental and physical health services (Ahmann & Dokken, 2017; Verulava et al., 2020).

The literature review for this study examined five key areas related to foster care youth preparing for adulthood; social problems (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Stott & Gustavsson, 2010), transitional periods (Mech, 1994; Park et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2018; Saprio & Ward, 2020), independence versus interdependent permanency planning (Augsberger, 2014; Propp et al., 2003; Salazar et al., 2018; Spencer et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration of Children & Families, and Children's Bureau (n.d.), standard placements for youth in foster care (Nelson & Thomas, 2022; Rauktis, 2016; Tullberg et al., 2019), and transitional supports for emerging adulthood (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021; Maseko, 2023; Wilson, 2020). These areas offered qualitative insights into the foster care system by highlighting the experiences of foster care youth and the perspectives of supportive professionals within the system. Findings from the reviewed literature describe challenges encountered during both the pre- and post-transition phases. Additionally, the literature identifies potential strategies

for sustaining, enhancing, or establishing practical resources for decision-makers and other professionals working to improve the quality of life for foster care youth transitioning into adulthood (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Greeson et al., 2020; Woodgate et al., 2017). The situation that prompted me to explore the literature was the concerning number of foster care youth aging out of the foster care system annually in the United States, often facing challenges in transitioning into adulthood compared to non-foster care counterparts (Barnett, 2020; Verulava & Dangadze, 2021).

The purpose of this research study was to investigate how interpersonal relationships between caregivers and foster youth contribute to health and well-being by fostering the retention of longer-term self-sufficiency skills as youth age out of the foster care system and transition into adulthood (Mihalec-Adkins et al.,2022; Ungar, 2004). The following section explores the problem statement of the research study.

Problem Statement

In this research study, the social problem or issue that prompted further investigation was the alarming number of foster care youths aging out of the foster care system annually in the United States and being ill-prepared for the transition into adulthood (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). An estimated 23,000 youths age out of the foster care system yearly (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021; Child Welfare League of America, 2005). Consequently, these ill-prepared foster care youths lack the readiness to face challenging issues in the transition to adulthood, such as unstable housing, financial instability, food insecurity, substance abuse, repeated criminal contact with the law enforcement/criminal justice system, and a lack of consistent

familial supports or social networks (Antle et al., 2009; Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021; Merrin et al., 2020).

In this research study, the problem was the ill-preparedness of foster care youth transitioning into adulthood and experiencing incarceration, death, and homelessness in disturbing numbers due to the lack of retention in longer-term skills-building (Agnihotri et al., 2022; Chun, 2020; Doucet et al., 2022). Additionally, numerous programs within the foster care system aim to increase the longer-term skills-building for these youth emerging into adulthood (Furlong et al., 2021; Job et al., 2022; Vallejo-Slocker et al., 2024). One such program is an independent living program (ILP), which produces promising positive outcomes related to youths' educational attainment, employment, and housing (Doucet et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2022; Greif-Hackett & Gallagher, 2018). The following section explores the purpose of the research study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research study was to discover how youth who have aged out of the foster care system perceive experiences with interpersonal relationships with caregivers and retention of longer-term skill-building to advance self-sufficiency (Mihalec-Adkins et al.,2022; Ungar, 2004). A generic qualitative approach was intrinsically aligned with this research study, exploring the fundamental nature of how former foster care youths perceive self-sufficiency after aging out of the foster care system and transitioning to adulthood (Ellis & Hart, 2023; Kahlke, 2014; Oterholm & Höjer, 2024). The research approach included pinpointing the precise needs of former foster care youths through lived experiences as a palpable way to endorse

transformational changes to programs and policies affecting foster care youths while still in care (Ahn et al., 2021; Jones, 2019; Salazar et al., 2018).

Various research studies support the concept that effective strategies and interventions are imperative to reduce the high degree of incarceration, homelessness, substance abuse, and early death experienced by former foster care youth (Best & Blakeslee, 2020; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). The literature gap persists due to the lack of qualitative research examining the experiences of former foster care youth and the role that interpersonal relationships with caregivers play in the building and retention of necessary skills to sustain self-sufficiency in transition into emerging adulthood (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021; Blakeslee & Keller, 2018; Leathers et al., 2019). The qualitative data from this research study is focused on former foster care youths' perspectives on acquiring the essential skills learned through interpersonal relationships with caregivers, critical to a positive transition into emerging adulthood. The following section explores the research question of the research study.

Research Questions

The research questions in any study are vital for guiding the investigation, whether to determine causal relationships in quantitative research or to explore perceptions and experiences in qualitative research (Andrews, 2003; Kothari, 2004; Kuada, 2012). According to Andrews (2003), Kothari (2004), and Kuada (2012), research questions may be framed to investigate influence, affect, or effect, depending on the study's scope and purpose. These authors further distinguished the terms by suggesting that influence refers to a broader, more general impact; affect represents a more focused

or limited change; and effect refers to the most specific or narrow outcome among the three. This research study explored the influence of an approach with a broader aperture on the following research question: How do former foster care youths perceive self-sufficiency after aging out of the foster care system? The following section will explore the theoretical foundation of the research study.

Theoretical Foundation

In this research study, I employed qualitative methods to interpret findings from the study's raw data and transform the data into a conceptual understanding (East & Peters, 2019; Garvey & Jones, 2021; Moernaut, 2021). The theoretical framework for this research study was social learning theory (SLT). The pioneer of SLT, Bandura, challenged traditional behaviorist theories by asserting that an individual's behaviors derive from observable behaviors influenced by fundamental impulses (Ozer, 2022; Stewart & Krivan, 2021). Bandura (1977) posited that observation, imitation, and modeling are methods of learned human behavior. In this research study, Bandura's research illustrates how foster care youths in care perceive the positive or negative influence of interpersonal relationships with caregivers on self-sufficiency in emerging adulthood. Bandura suggested that consistent or repetitive modeling, observation, or imitation of positive behavior can reverse learned undesirable behaviors that hinder foster care youths from making successful transitions. Other research studies support Bandura's theory, emphasizing that human behavior is complex but changeable through simple observations of others rewarded for desirable behaviors and others receiving punitive

measures for undesirable behaviors (see McCullough, 2011; Rayes & Albelaihi, 2023; Salkind, 2008).

In this research study, SLT was a crucial theoretical approach for facilitating the acquisition and retention of skills building toward self-sufficiency for foster care youths transitioning from the foster care system into adulthood. SLT was used to determine how interpersonal relationships with caregivers influence how former foster care youths perceive self-sufficiency after aging out of the foster care system. The development and application of the semiformal interview questions were based on SLT. Additionally, the process for reviewing and analyzing the research study's data was based on SLT. The following section explores the nature of the research study.

Nature of the Study

The research study's primary consideration was selecting an appropriate research design and methods to address the investigated concept and phenomenon (see Jones et al., 2019; Singh, 2015). Although processes and structures in qualitative research have evolved, methodological stability and conceptual continuity remain essential (Daly, 2007; Koro-Ljungberg & Bussing, 2013; Levitt et al., 2021). The methodology for this study was a generic qualitative design, aligned with the focus of research on understanding how former foster care youths perceive self-sufficiency in the transition from foster care to adulthood and the role of interpersonal relationships with caregivers. A generic qualitative design, defined as not adhering solely to one established methodology, was appropriate for exploring the boundaries of established methodologies and promoting a comprehensive conceptual understanding of the self-sufficiency development in former

foster care youths (see Ellis & Hart, 2023; Kahlke, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Silverman, 2016).

Assumptions

The research study acknowledges the existence of assumptions, which are characteristics thought out but not demonstrated as factual and recognizes the value in shaping potential routes to a better conceptual understanding of the research problem (Davidson et al., 2017; Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). One assumption in this research study was the notion that former foster youths unilaterally need positive interpersonal relationships to transition into adulthood. While this assumption holds some validity, this research study considered other contributing factors, such as access to services that enhance skills building toward self-sufficiency (Best & Blakeslee, 2020; Hokanson et al., 2019; Rome & Raskin, 2019).

Another assumption was the notion that former foster youth need to perform better in school, work harder, and participate in independent living services. While this assumption seemed plausible, research suggests considering other contributing factors, such as maintaining quality mental and physical health services (Alston et al., 2021; Chapman et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2021). By exploring and challenging these assumptions, the objective of the research study was to gain a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how interpersonal relationships between caregivers and foster youth contribute to health and well-being by fostering the retention of longer-term self-sufficiency skills as youth age out of the foster care system and transition into adulthood. The following section explores the scope and delimitations of the research study.

Scope and Delimitations

Annually, a considerable number of children and youth leave the foster care/child welfare system, with less than half returning to the care of parents or a primary caregiver (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration of Children & Families, Children's Bureau, 2022). The alarming number of foster care youths facing challenges in transition, including unstable housing, financial instability, food insecurity, substance abuse, criminal contact with the justice system, and lack of consistent familial support or social networks (Antle et al., 2009; Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021; Merrin et al., 2020), underscores the urgency of investigating this issue. With 30 years of experience in the human services field, I have witnessed firsthand the challenges encountered by foster care youth transitioning out of the foster care system and into adulthood. I used my observations and supporting research literature to define the social problem explored in this study.

Delimitations in this generic qualitative study included the absence of conventional qualitative methodologies to guide the research, potential researcher bias, and considerations related to transferability (Alston et al., 2021; Pope et al., 2023; Tuncalp, 2021). Ethical considerations were paramount, particularly in protecting the anonymity of study participants, former foster care youth who have aged out of the system (Burner-Fritsch & Schwertel, 2023; Wendler, 2020). Despite reaching the age of majority at 18, these participants represent a vulnerable population with specific experiences related to the foster care system (Dawes et al., 2022; Langer et al., 2021; O'Brien et al., 2022). This research study adhered to applicable local, state/territorial, and

federal laws, assigned numeric IDs to participants, and employed informed consent to ensure an understanding of the purpose of the research and participants' rights (Colosi et al., 2019; McKibbin et al., 2021). I rigorously maintained the practice of confidentiality, with no disclosure of identifying information, following the guidelines of the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and minimizing potential ethical dilemmas in interactions with participants (Campbell et al., 2023; Feldman et al., 2019; Marcos & Noy, 2023). The following section explores the limitations of the research study.

Limitations

This research study anticipated encountering several challenges inherent in qualitative research, where participants' firsthand experiences and perspectives are subjective and susceptible to a researcher's influence. Transparency is a pivotal strategy to address this challenge, ensuring the existence of subjective views and contributing to the study's credibility (Shakman et al., 2017; Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Yip, 2023). I was considerate of my positionality, acknowledging the potential effect of identity on data collection and interpretation in this research study. Additionally, I considered the power dynamics between the participants and me, including factors such as gender or race, to mitigate potential bias and ensure a comprehensive analysis of positionality (Batool & Ali, 2021; Massoud, 2022; Reich, 2021).

Access to participants posed another challenge, especially with the preference for in-person interviews for this research study. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic added complexity, requiring flexibility in interview arrangements (Cornejo et al., 2023; Keen et al., 2022; Sah et al., 2020). To address this challenge, I considered alternative methods,

such as secure video chat platforms, such as Zoom (Archibald et al., 2019; Falter et al., 2022). However, this raised another challenge if participants lacked the necessary technology. In such cases, I explored alternative options, such as utilizing private rooms in local libraries equipped with the necessary technological resources to conduct interviews. This flexible approach was intended to accommodate participants' needs while maintaining a confidential and respectful environment (Pascale et al., 2022; White, 2020). The following section explores the significance of the research study.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its effort to address a critical gap in understanding interpersonal relationships between foster youth and caregivers. The findings aimed to provide valuable insights for future human services and social work professionals working to support the development and retention of self-sufficiency skills among children and youth in the foster care and child welfare systems (Geiger & Okpych, 2022; Hendren et al., 2023; Sattler et al., 2023). In addition, the study sought to offer relevant information for policymakers involved in creating and implementing policies related to child welfare (Danford, 2023; Morrison & Hirschkorn, 2020).

By examining strategies and interventions relevant to child welfare contractors in Kansas—such as The Family Initiative, KVC Health Systems, and St. Francis Ministries—the study contributes to efforts aimed at redesigning out-of-home placements and enhancing skill-building opportunities that support foster youth in their transition to adulthood.

At the state level, the study's qualitative findings are intended to inform policymakers and agencies, including the Kansas House of Representatives, the Kansas Senate, the Kansas Department of Children and Families, the Kansas Department of Corrections–Juvenile Services, and the Kansas Department of Aging and Disability Services. These findings are positioned to support the development of more effective policies and practices that directly impact the well-being of foster youth in Kansas.

On a national level, stakeholders such as the U.S. Health and Human Services–Children and Families Bureau and the U.S. Juvenile Justice System could apply the study's findings to enhance federal strategies. Additionally, organizations including Family First Programs, Chafee Independent Living Programs, and the Children's Defense Fund may find the insights valuable in improving life outcomes for foster youth (Chor et al., 2018; Rosenberg et al., 2019).

By highlighting the importance of skills acquisition and the retention of long-term self-sufficiency competencies, this study aimed to contribute to increased independence among foster youth transitioning to adulthood (Elgin, 2018; Russell & Macgill, 2015). The significance of the study extends beyond academic contexts, offering practical guidance for developing policies and programs that improve the quality of life for this vulnerable population.

Significance to Theory

This generic qualitative study explored themes associated with Bandura's SLT, which posits that individuals learn behavior through observation, modeling, and imitation (Bandura, 1977). The study examined how former foster youth acquired and retained life

skills and how these processes influenced their transition into adulthood. This exploration contributes to the application of SLT by offering insights into how social learning mechanisms operate in the context of foster care transitions. These findings may provide valuable guidance for researchers and practitioners working with foster youth.

The study aimed to inform evidence-based practices that support the learning and retention of long-term self-sufficiency skills, consistent with the principles of SLT (Barth et al., 2011; Bryson et al., 2014). Understanding how former foster youth develop and maintain these skills holds significant implications for improving life outcomes and addressing the challenges associated with transitioning into adulthood (Greeson et al., 2015; Leathers et al., 2023; Taussig et al., 2021). By framing the findings within SLT, this study sought to support the development of strategies and interventions that promote long-term self-sufficiency and well-being for youth aging out of the foster care system.

Significance to Social Change

As a scholar-practitioner committed to fostering positive social change, I encountered numerous opportunities to address issues that are deeply meaningful to me, with the intention of positively impacting communities in Kansas (Busch et al., 2019; Staller, 2011). My desire to support the well-being of children and youth who have experienced the foster care system initially led me to investigate the effectiveness of point/token economy behavioral management systems compared to positive support and relational-based behavioral systems (Melkman, 2015; Rauktis, 2016).

Over time, my focus evolved into a more refined exploration of how behavioral management systems influence the retention of long-term skill-building among youth

who had aged out of the foster care system. The concept of skill-building in this context includes a range of essential competencies, such as emotional regulation (e.g., coping with anger), daily living skills (e.g., cooking, cleaning, following schedules, ensuring safety), education (e.g., public school, vocational training, college preparation), employment readiness (e.g., job applications, interviews, maintaining employment), and financial literacy (e.g., budgeting, establishing bank accounts, building credit; Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021; Chun, 2020; Courtney et al., 2011; Sims, 1988).

Through my review of the literature, it became evident that approximately 23,000 youths age out of the foster care system in the United States each year without adequate preparation. This lack of preparation increases the risk of incarceration, homelessness, and even premature death due to insufficient retention of long-term life skills (Antle et al., 2009; Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021; Merrin et al., 2020). The persistence of this issue underscores a critical social problem and highlights the need for transformative change within the foster care and child welfare systems (Bryson et al., 2021; Hamby & Farrell, 2022).

I determined that a generic qualitative research design was the most appropriate approach for this study, as it aligned with my goal of fostering collaboration among former foster youth, child welfare professionals, and policy decision-makers to support transformational change (Fox & Post, 2021; Wolfe & Price, 2019). This methodology allowed me to gather and center the lived experiences of former foster youth, recognizing that complex social problems require community engagement and inclusive inquiry to produce meaningful, lasting solutions.

Summary

In summary, this chapter established the foundation for a generic qualitative research study that explores how former foster youth perceive their interpersonal relationships with caregivers in relation to self-sufficiency after aging out of the foster care system. The literature review examined critical themes including social problems, transitional periods, independence versus interdependent permanency planning, standard placements in foster care, and transitional supports. The review identified a central social problem: the high rate at which foster youth leave care without adequate preparation for adulthood.

The selected generic qualitative design aligned with the study's focus on understanding the lived experiences of former foster youth, particularly in relation to life skills acquisition. The research question guided the inquiry into these experiences, grounded in Bandura's SLT (1977), which posits that individuals learn behaviors through observation, modeling, and imitation.

This chapter emphasized the significance of the study and its potential to inform understanding of why some former foster youth transition successfully into adulthood, while many others continue to face significant barriers. The following chapters will present the qualitative data and explore the narratives of participants to identify factors that influence self-sufficiency during this critical life stage. The next chapter will provide a comprehensive review of the related literature.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

The impetus for my exploration of the literature was the disconcerting number of foster care youth aged out of the foster care system annually in the United States, often facing complex challenges in transitioning into adulthood compared to their non-foster care counterparts (Barnett, 2020; Verulava & Dangadze, 2021). In the literature review, my investigation explored the challenges faced by foster care youth in transitioning into adulthood compared to their non-foster care counterparts. Additionally, the exploration of the literature focused on examining how interpersonal relationships between caregivers and foster youth contribute to health and well-being by fostering the retention of longer-term self-sufficiency skills as youth aged out of the foster care system and transition into adulthood (Mihalec-Adkins et al., 2022; Ungar, 2004).

Researchers extensively examined the readiness of youth aging out of the foster care system and transitioning into adulthood (Barnow et al., 2015; Rome & Raskin, 2019; Stein et al., 2016; Vacca, 2008). The research literature comprised of various aspects of preparedness for foster care youth's transition into adulthood, including types of child welfare placements, educational attainment, employment, stable housing, psychological and mental health assessments, and interpersonal relationships (Chor et al., 2018; Rosenberg, 2019; Yelick, 2017). The research literature emphasized that preparation and retention of self-sufficiency skills were a central focus point for guiding policymakers and professionals working with foster care youth emerging into adulthood (Arnau-Sabatés et al., 2021; Lindner & Hanlon, 2024; Vallejo-Slocker et al., 2024).

The literature review focused on five crucial areas that encompassed the experiences of foster care youth in preparation for adulthood: social problems (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Stott & Gustavsson, 2010), transitional periods (Mech, 1994; Park et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2018; Saprio & Ward, 2020sap), independence versus interdependent permanency planning, standard placements for youth in foster care, and transitional supports. These five critical areas provided a qualitative perspective on the foster care system, examining the experiences of foster care youth and the perspectives of supportive professionals within the system. The qualitative perspectives from foster care youth and supportive professionals within the foster care system provided insights into the challenges faced in pre- and post-transitional support. Additionally, these distinctive experiences provided methods for sustaining, enhancing, or establishing practical resources for decision-makers and other professionals aiming to improve the quality of life for foster care youths as they transition into adulthood (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Greeson et al., 2020; Woodgate et al., 2017).

The literature review for this research study was selective and concentrated on peer-reviewed studies that exemplified issues and transitional supports affecting youth transitioning from the foster care system to adulthood. The following section explored the literature search strategies utilized in this research study.

Literature Search Strategies

I searched the Walden University Library databases for peer-reviewed articles relevant to the research study. My primary sources for the literature review included ProQuest, Sage Journals, SocINDEX, PsychARTICLES, EBSCOhost, and Google

Scholar. The search utilized keywords such as foster care youth, aging out or transitioning, emerging adulthood, preparedness, problems or dilemmas, transitional supports, child welfare/foster care system, self-sufficiency, self-efficacy, interpersonal relationships, transitional periods, mental and physical health, substance abuse, incarceration, decision-making, and permanency planning. The searches were limited to peer-reviewed articles, and the publication years ranged from 2018 to 2024.

The following section explored the literature review related to key variables and/or concepts.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

The key variables and/or concepts that I found in the literature review included the social problems faced by foster care youth in their emerging adulthood, pivotal transitional periods, independence versus interdependent permanency planning, standard placements for foster care youth, transitional supports, housing and homelessness, involvement with law enforcement/justice system, and interpersonal relationships/social connections. The following section explored the social problems experienced by foster care youth that were relevant to this research study.

The Social Problem

The social problem or issue that prompted further investigation was the alarming number of foster care youth who age out of the foster care system annually in the United States and are ill-prepared for the transition into adulthood. Researchers at The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2021) found that approximately 23,000 youth age out of the foster care system annually. Research emphasized that in the transitions to emergent adulthood,

foster care youth face troubling issues such as unstable housing, instability with finances, food insecurity, abuse of drugs and alcohol, repeated criminal contact with law enforcement/criminal justice system, and a lack of consistent familial supports or social networks (Antle et al., 2009; Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021; Merrin et al., 2020).

The problem was that these young people faced incarceration, death, and homelessness in disturbing numbers due to the lack of retention in longer-term skills building (Agnihotri et al., 2022; Chun, 2020; Gibbs et al., 2023). Research provided insights into how the foster care system utilized various programs to support longer-term skills building for foster care youths transitioning into adulthood. Specific ILPs specialized in helping foster youth develop and retain self-sufficiency skills contributed to more positive outcomes related to foster care youths' educational attainment, employment, and housing (Doucet et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2022; Greif-Hackett & Gallagher, 2018).

In the literature review, some research challenged the effectiveness of ILPs for some foster care youths, indicating that a significant portion of foster care youth lacked access to necessary resources and did not retain essential independent living skills while transitioning into adulthood (Kim et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2018).

While the body of literature outlined the numerous complex changes faced by foster youth transitioning to adulthood and identified ILPs as a resource to provide independent living services, there was no literature found that focused on how interpersonal relationships between caregivers and foster youth contributed to health and well-being by fostering the retention of longer-term self-sufficiency skills as youth aged

out of the foster care system and transition into adulthood. The following section explored the transitional period for foster care youth.

Transitional Period

Foster care youth faced many challenges in the foster care system and in the transition into adulthood, as previously noted in the research literature. One of the many challenges foster care youth faced was the lack of realistic permanency plans that supported skills building during pivotal transitional periods (Font et al., 2018; Howze, 2020; Lipp, 2018). The research indicated that these transitional periods serve as a periphery of several indistinctive or organized intervals in life for foster care youths in building skills for self-sufficiency (Glynn & Mayock, 2019; Mech, 1994; Park et al., 2020). Research emphasized the assertion that the transitional period was crucial for vulnerable foster care youth, affecting perceptions of inequalities and influencing the complexity of skill-building for self-sufficiency, emphasizing the importance of forming healthy connections and interpersonal relationships during this critical phase (Ball et al., 2021; Edbrooke & Deighton, 2021; Sapiro & Ward, 2020).

Previous studies indicated the critical nature of the transitional period to adulthood, exploring how interpersonal spin, characterized by barriers such as a lack of confidence or self-worth, influences a young person's career decision-making, with a higher interpersonal spin correlating to unfocused and unstable decision-making (Cote et al., 2012; Park et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2018). Career decision-making affected a young person's ability to have career success, healthy social networks/collaborations, and perceptions of identity (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). Furthermore, research emphasized

that heightened interpersonal spin in young individuals resulted in increased indecisiveness in career decision-making, emphasizing that early career decision-making significantly improved when there were interpersonal supports that foster positive affect and behavioral stability in interactions with the young person (Clegg et al., 2021; Park et al.,2021; Wang et al., 2023).

While the body of literature outlined the numerous complex changes faced by foster youth transitioning to adulthood and the necessity of a better conceptualization of transitional periods, there was no literature found that focused on how interpersonal relationships between caregivers and foster youth contributed to health and well-being by fostering the retention of longer-term self-sufficiency skills as youth aged out of the foster care system and transition into adulthood. The following section explored the role of independence versus interdependent permanency planning for foster care youth.

Independence Versus Interdependent Permanency Planning

Another critical area that foster care youth face in transitioning into adulthood from the foster care system is the development of interdependence skills versus the traditional independent living skills taught to sustain self-sufficiency in permanency planning (Frimpong-Manso, 2020; Hokanson et al., 2019; Moodley et al., 2020). Foster children and youth have a goal-directed, purposeful plan of action aimed at achieving permanency, referred to as a *permanency plan* (Burge, 2022; Nadeem et al., 2023; Salazar et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration of Children & Families, and Children's Bureau (n.d.). Although permanency planning for independent living was the primary route for youth aging out of the foster care system, research

indicated mixed results with a vast amount of youth being ill-prepared for transition into adulthood (Lee et al., 2023; Palmer et al., 2023). Further, research emphasized more of a focus on mentoring programs that taught interdependent living skills versus independent living skills for foster youth aging out of the foster care system (Narendorf et al., 2019; Powers et al., 2018).

The research highlighted the effectiveness of youth-initiated mentoring (YIM) relationships in re-engaging school dropouts among foster care youth, emphasizing the cultivation of interdependent skills and the empowerment of youths through the development of essential soft skills (Dantzer & Perry, 2022; Spencer et al., 2018). Furthermore, the studies involving mentors indicated that YIM, facilitating youth in selecting mentors, positively influenced the development of interdependent living skills, offering a beneficial approach for youth transitioning to adulthood.

While the body of literature outlined the numerous complex changes faced by foster youth transitioning to adulthood and the necessity of a better conceptualization of independence versus interdependence permanency planning, there was no literature found that focused on how interpersonal relationships between caregivers and foster youth contributed to health and well-being by fostering the retention of longer-term self-sufficiency skills as youth aged out of the foster care system and transition into adulthood. The following section explored standard placements for youth in foster care.

Standard Placements for Youth in Foster Care

Foster care youth who experience multiple placement transitions encountered instability that detrimentally affected well-being, manifesting in elevated rates of safety

concerns, maltreatment, and health issues (Konijn et al., 2019; Nelson & Thomas, 2022; Wurth, 2023), Although the foster care systems within the United States varied across the board on the implementation of policies regarding children and youth in care, there was consensus from policymakers and caregivers the necessity to having a consistent and stable approach to placement stability (Sattler et al., 2023: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration of Children & Families, Children's Bureau, 2022).

Out-of-home residential care facilities served as a standard placement for youth within the foster care system, where the imperative inclusion of skills building was underscored in the comprehensive care plan for children and youths, encompassing various facets such as coping with anger, daily living skills, educational proficiency, employment readiness, and financial acumen (Jedwab et al., 2019; Kothari et al., 2020; Ramdhonee-Dowlot et al., 2021).

Studies have indicated that foster homes are a common placement type for youth in the foster care system offering a transitory, safe, and nurturing milieu for children and youth until the process of family reintegration (Kothari et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration of Children & Families, and Children's Bureau, 2022). A specialized form of this placement is a therapeutic foster care home (TFC), designed to address the complex emotional and behavioral needs of youth (De Wilde et al., 2019; Tullberg et al., 2019). The research shows an increasing prevalence of TFC placements for youth, particularly as more states shift away from congregate residential treatment care to address the complex needs of youth, requiring foster parents

to adapt caregiving roles by assuming responsibilities typical of treatment providers (Eisenberg et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2018).

ILPs are another common placement option for foster youth transitioning into adulthood. These programs aim to cultivate essential self-sufficiency skills during the transition from the foster care system, with a particular focus on building and retaining life skills (Lemon et al., 2005; Stein et al., 2016flowe). Research shows that ILPs, particularly those employing a scattered-site model, are the most effective placement option for enhancing the life skills knowledge base among foster youth compared to foster homes or residential/congregate care settings, which highlights the crucial role of independent living coordinators in affecting intangible life skills within such programs (Brisson et al., 2022; Nathans & Chaffers, 2022).

While the body of literature outlined the numerous complex changes faced by foster youth transitioning to adulthood and the necessity of a better conceptualization of standard placements for foster care youth, there was no literature found that focused on how interpersonal relationships between caregivers and foster youth contribute to health and well-being by fostering the retention of longer-term self-sufficiency skills as youth age out of the foster care system and transition into adulthood. The following section explores the transitional supports for foster care youth.

Transitional Supports

Crucial for foster youth aging out of the foster care system, transitional support involves facing challenges such as sustainable social capital, permanency planning, mental health, and education, which the research has shown as transformative

opportunities during the transition into emerging adulthood (Hobbs et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2019; Nadon, 2020). Research indicated that a comparison between foster care youths who received initial transitional support services and those without participation revealed common themes in needs and perceived resiliency, emphasizing relationships, trust, and concern for well-being as high indicators of positive adulthood transitions; furthermore, former foster care youths advocated for themes such as early transition programming, increased decision-making opportunities, and consistent life skills training that enhanced overall transition programming (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021; Blakeslee & Keller, 2018; Chor et al., 2018; Wilson, 2020).

Ensuring high-quality mental health services for youths transitioning from foster care to adulthood was a prevalent challenge, where meaningful therapeutic relationships played a crucial role in building secure attachments (Cloitre et al., 2002; Lietz & Cheung, 2023; Villagrana & Lee, 2020). This research emphasized that foster care youth who engaged in weekly therapeutic sessions, experienced multiple placements, highlighted the need for a safe therapeutic environment, and fostered such relationships increased the likelihood of continued mental health service utilization post-transition.

Housing and Homelessness

In the literature review, another challenging aspect faced by foster care youth transitioning into adulthood is the effect of unstable housing and homelessness, representing an enduring challenge experienced by a significant number of foster youths as they enter adulthood (Bender et al., 2015; Cheatham et al., 2021; Kelly, 2020; Lee et al., 2023). The research categorizes three crucial descriptive factors—literal

homelessness, housing instability, and stable housing—in the housing difficulties faced by foster care youth transitioning into adulthood, with literal homelessness reflecting comparable challenges to other system-involved youth, reduced risks of homelessness associated with reuniting with parents, and stable housing environments significantly influencing overall housing stability during the transition (Fowler et al., 2019; Prince et al., 2019; Schelbe, 2018).

Involvement With Law Enforcement/Justice System

Studies acknowledged that some foster care youth encountered challenges involving law enforcement or the judicial system during the transition to adulthood, which highlighted the variability of foster youths' experiences and differing level of engagement with the criminal justice system (Braciszewski et al., 2018; Crawford et al., 2018; Gunawardena & Stich, 2021). The research showed a disproportionate rate of involvement with the criminal justice system among foster care youths compared to non-foster-care counterparts, with a significant portion of foster care youths exhibiting criminal behaviors, were male, had a substance use disorder, dropped out of school, experienced unstable housing, and lacked positive interpersonal relationships (Barth et al., 2020; Font et al., 2021; Hernandez & Jaegoo, 2020; Park & Courtney, 2023).

While the body of literature outlined the numerous complex changes faced by foster youth transitioning to adulthood and the necessity of a better conceptualization of transitional supports for foster care youth, there was little literature found that focused on how interpersonal relationships between caregivers and foster youth contributed to health and well-being by fostering the retention of longer-term self-sufficiency skills as youth

aged out of the foster care system and transition into adulthood. The following section explored interpersonal relationships/social connections for foster care youth.

Interpersonal Relationships/Social Connections

Previous research indicated that foster care youth experienced a multitude of challenges during the transition to adulthood, including difficulties in establishing interpersonal relationships or individual social connections with caregivers, relatives, mentors, and romantic partners (Gabrielli et al., 2023; Magee et al., 2019; Yoshioka-Maxwell & Rice, 2020). The research emphasized issues in forming these connections that affect positive outcomes related to mental and physical health, educational attainment, employment, involvement with the judicial justice system, and housing (Rademaker & Holland, 2021; Rajaram & Tidball, 2018; Salazar & Schelbe, 2021). Studies indicated that foster care youth who established robust interpersonal relationships or social connections tended to perceive more positive life outcomes in adulthood, mainly when those connections contributed to psychological and physical well-being (Galambos et al., 2018; Häggman-Laitila et al., 2019; Lee & Goldstein, 2016). The formation of healthy relationships or social connections was pivotal in supporting the development of practical self-sufficiency skills among foster care youth (Forenza et al., 2018; Lenhart et al., 2015; Rayburn et al., 2018).

While the body of literature outlined the numerous complex changes faced by foster youth transitioning to adulthood and the necessity of a better conceptualization of interpersonal relationships/social connections for foster care youth, there was little literature found that focused on how interpersonal relationships between caregivers and

foster youth contributed to health and well-being by fostering the retention of longer-term self-sufficiency skills as youth aged out of the foster care system and transition into adulthood. The following section explored the implications for research in this study.

Implications for Research

The systematic review of the research literature in this research study depicted a disproportionate amount of foster care youths emerging into an ill-prepared adulthood. Various research studies explored the perspectives of former foster care youths, focusing on potential risk and protective factors that contributed to preparation for the transition into adulthood. Areas of interest in the literature facing foster care youths in transition included issues with unstable housing, instability with finances, food insecurity, substance abuse, repeated criminal contact with law enforcement/criminal justice system, and lack of consistent familial support or social networks. Furthermore, researchers provided professionals working with foster care youths and policymakers with innumerable data and resources to assist foster care youths in building and retaining self-sufficiency skills, reducing contributing risk factors that hinder successful emergence into adulthood.

The inability of professionals in the social and human services field and researchers to effectively increase the retention of self-sufficiency skills for these youth was rooted in an insufficient understanding of trauma and the need for adequate transition support for youth (Lalonde et al., 2021; Rome & Raskin, 2019). Specifically, the research emphasized the importance of quality service programming (Chun, 2020; Prince et al., 2019). This limited focus excluded essential voices or perspectives from youths who have

experienced the transition from the foster care system into adulthood (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021; Goemans et al., 2018). Researchers found that a better understanding of how attachment and trauma-related difficulties affect children and adolescents experiencing the foster care system was necessary (Palmer et al., 2022; Spinelli et al., 2019). The inability of professionals in the social and human services field and researchers to comprehend these difficulties presented barriers to learning and the retention of necessary self-sufficiency skills for a positive transition to adulthood (Font & Gershoff, 2020; Gupta-Kagan, 2020).

The significance of this study lay in addressing a gap in understanding among current and future human services and social work professionals working with children and youth in the foster care system. This study explored strategies for child welfare contractors in Kansas, such as The Family Initiative, KVC Health Systems, Ember Hope, Cornerstone of Care, and St. Francis Ministries, to redesign out-of-home placements that promote more effective skills acquisition and support foster care youth in becoming self-sufficient, transitioning to adulthood.

Semistructured interviews were used to collect data on the perceived experiences of foster care youth. These findings aimed to inform policymakers, including the Kansas Legislature (House and Senate), Kansas Department of Children and Families (KSDCF), Kansas Department of Corrections-Juvenile Services (KDOC-JS), and the Kansas Department of Aging and Disability Services (KDADS), in developing and implementing policies that directly affect this population.

At the national stakeholder level, this study offered relevant insights for federal agencies such as the U.S. Health and Human Services-Children and Families Bureau and the U.S. Juvenile Justice System. Additional national stakeholders who may benefit from these findings include the Family First Programs, Chafee Independent Living Programs, and the Children's Defense Fund. By advocating for and supporting the acquisition and long-term retention of life skills, this study aimed to promote greater self-sufficiency among foster care youth transitioning into adulthood.

Summary

The literature review indicated that a substantial body of research existed on self-sufficiency among youth aging out of the foster care system. However, no research was found that examined how interpersonal relationships with caregivers contributed to the retention of longer-term skills-building with youth aging out of the foster care system and transitioning into adulthood. Due to this gap in the research, further studies were warranted to examine how interpersonal relationships with caregivers contributed to the retention of longer-term skills building, addressing the documented problem of youth leaving the foster care system ill-prepared for transitioning into adulthood (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021; Blakeslee & Keller, 2018; Leathers et al., 2019).

The following chapter focused on the research methods used to examine the narratives of former foster youths and perspectives on factors influencing self-sufficiency during the transition to adulthood.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Introduction

In this generic qualitative research design study, the exploration focused on how youth transitioning out of the foster care system perceived interpersonal relationships with caregivers and the acquisition of longer-term skills promoting self-sufficiency. The adoption of a generic qualitative approach was apt for eliciting insights into how former foster care youths would navigate the challenges of transitioning into adulthood. The research strategy aimed to identify the unique needs of foster care youth through lived experiences, contributing tangible insights for enhancing programs and policies within the foster care system (Ahn et al., 2021; Jones, 2019; Salazar et al., 2018).

The importance of practical strategies and interventions to mitigate the heightened risks of incarceration, homelessness, substance abuse, and premature mortality among youth aging out of the foster care system was consistently emphasized by caregivers, foster care professionals, and policymakers in the existing research (Best & Blakeslee, 2020; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). A persistent gap in the literature, particularly in qualitative research, involved the limited exploration of the lived experiences of youth aging out of the foster care system without acquiring essential skills for sustained self-sufficiency, and how interpersonal relationships with caregivers contributed to the retention of long-term skill-building (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021; Blakeslee & Keller, 2018; Leathers et al., 2019). This research study aimed to address that gap.

Research Design and Rationale

In this research study, I explored the research question: How do former foster care youth perceive self-sufficiency after aging out of the foster care system? Research questions that aim to explore participants' perceptions, lived experiences, or the meanings they assign to particular phenomena are characteristic of qualitative research (Baker, 2022; Barroga & Matanguihan, 2022; Biswas & Mubasher, 2023). In contrast, quantitative research typically involves questions designed to test hypotheses or examine relationships and effects between measurable variables (Lam et al., 2019; Leppink, 2017; Meng et al., 2024). The qualitative research design that best aligned with this study was a generic qualitative research design. This approach was appropriate to investigate how former foster care youth perceived self-sufficiency after transitioning into adulthood. Unlike phenomenology, grounded theory, or ethnology, a generic qualitative research design does not strictly adhere to one established framework (Ellis & Hart, 2023; Kahlke, 2014; Richards & Morse, 2007). According to Ellis and Hart (2023), Kahlke (2014), and Richards and Morse (2007), a generic qualitative design provided flexibility to explore research questions that do not neatly align with traditional qualitative approaches, allowing the study to draw from multiple frameworks to suit the purpose of research.

However, the research suggested two drawbacks to a generic qualitative research design (Caelli et al., 2003). First, researchers cautioned against incoherency or method-slurring, a situation that can arise when merging traditional methodologies without maintaining the structural singularity of the approaches (Holloway & Todres, 2003;

Thorne et al., 2004). Second, the researchers argued that generic qualitative research designs cannot be unfounded and cannot be completely detached from traditional methodologies (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006; Pasque et al., 2012). Despite these drawbacks, a generic qualitative research design was well-suited, as it supported a deeper understanding of how foster care youths acquire and retain longer-term skills related to self-sufficiency during the transition to adulthood.

Role of the Researcher

In a qualitative research study, the researcher typically assumes one of three roles: the observer, participant, or observer-participant. The role of the researcher is often complex, requiring a delicate balance to collect data from participants to construct narratives while exploring varying interactive perceptions (Karagiozis, 2018; Yoon & Uliassi, 2022). The goal is to amass rich material that contributes constructive knowledge for qualitative research (Fletcher-Brown, 2020; Reid et al., 2018; Rodríguez-Dorans, 2018). In this generic qualitative research design, I assumed the role of a participant observer, collecting participant data through semiformal interviews with former foster care youth (Aghazadeh & Aldoory, 2023; Johnson et al., 2019).

The research study's practices included obtaining informed consent and authorization from the IRB before initiating any formal aspects of the study (Daniels et al., 2023; Fernandez et al., 2023; Godskesen et al., 2023; Marcos & Noy, 2023; Xu et al., 2020). This study focused on gathering the perceived experiences of former male and female youths who aged out of the foster care system, collaborating with state-funded and nonprofit agencies providing transitional support in Kansas. Participants in this study

were at least 18 years old and had lived in an out-of-home residential/congregate care facility or foster home during the foster care experience. With my background of working in the Kansas foster care system for several decades, there existed a possibility that some potential research study participants and I might be acquainted through prior professional or personal interactions. In adhering to ethical practices, there is an acknowledgment and disclosure of such pre-existing relationships in the research study.

This research study conducted semistructured individual interviews with participants in person or via Zoom. The participants' interviews were video recorded, supplemented by a backup audio recorder to capture the interview data. The semistructured interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. The interview questions were open-ended and provided flexibility for follow-up questions as needed. The participants received no incentives in this research study. The following section explores the methodology of this research study.

Methodology

Research studies play a crucial role in expanding and establishing knowledge across various disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, medicine, and education (Burns et al., 2022; Karpa, 2021; Urcia, 2021). Research studies follow a standard practice that involves a thorough re-analysis, enabling other researchers to replicate the study (Heirene, 2021; Morrison, 2022). The centerpiece of research studies involves the establishment of the research methodology, which is a systematic process to answer a research question (Dhir & Gupta, 2021; Kothari, 2004; Ratan et al., 2019; Scharf & Dera, 2021).

Participant Selection

The selection of participants is a crucial aspect of the research study. Protecting participants, especially those representing vulnerable populations, is imperative against potential ethical or substandard practices (Braun & Clarke, 2022; George et al., 2023). This research study aimed to represent the voices of former foster youth, elucidating perspectives on self-sufficiency post-aging out of the foster care system.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants in this research study were at least 18 years old and had previously resided in an out-of-home residential/congregate care facility during foster care experience in the state of Kansas. This research study included both female and male participants.

Sampling Technique

In this study, I employed purposeful sampling and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants. These qualitative sampling methods are particularly effective for accessing targeted populations that may be difficult to reach through conventional means (Erdem et al., 2023; Fereshteh et al., 2017; Samuel & Merkebu, 2025; Stratton, 2024). I initially used purposeful sampling to recruit the first study participant. Subsequently, I employed snowball sampling to engage additional former foster care youth, using participant referrals to expand the sample.

Recruitment began with the distribution of an IRB-approved study flyer, which was shared on Facebook, posted at Washburn University in the School of Applied Sciences – Family and Human Services Department, and promoted with the assistance of

the Kansas Department for Children and Families' Youth Advisory Council. The goal of this recruitment strategy was to make an initial connection with a former foster youth and then encourage that individual to share the flyer with peers, thereby facilitating further participant recruitment.

Sample Size Rationale

In this study, a sample size of 16 former foster care youths was initially deemed appropriate, based on precedent set by similar qualitative studies. Armstrong et al. (2021) used a sample size of 16 youths aged 18-20 to examine former foster youths' perspectives on transitional support services. Similarly, Lalonde et al. (2021) studied experiences of unstable housing and homelessness post-care, utilizing a sample size of 10 youth aged at least 18 years and older. Paul (2020) and Singer et al. (2013) employed sample sizes of 21 and 20, respectively, to explore transitional supports and supportive relationships during the transition into emerging adulthood.

Although 18 individuals expressed initial interest in the study, only nine participants were ultimately recruited and interviewed due to limited availability and response follow-through. As a result, the study did not reach the originally intended sample size of 16. Nevertheless, the data collected provided valuable insights relevant to the research question and were sufficient for thematic exploration within the scope of this generic qualitative study (Christou, 2025; Jennings & Yeager, 2025; Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024).

Data Collection Instrument

I utilized a semistructured interview guide as the data collection instrument in this study. An interview guide/protocol (see Appendix A) was appropriate in this study to establish a practical route for conducting semistructured interviews as the data collection method. I selected in-depth interviews as the data collection method (Kabir, 2022; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). In-depth interviews were valuable for gathering research information from individuals or groups in an applied setting (Picardi & Masick, 2014; Rutakumwa et al., 2020). Picardi and Masick (2014) and Rutakumwa et al. (2020) highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of both individual and group interviews.

Establishing trust with interviewees was crucial in individual interviews due to potential barriers to trusting organizations or institutions (Fernandez et al., 2021; Henderson et al., 2024). The researchers emphasized that this lack of trust could impede the collection of high-quality information (Foláyan & Haire, 2023; Paquette & Derrington, 2018). Additionally, researchers suggested that interviewers could alleviate distrust by conducting interviews individually and in a secluded setting away from others.

Data Analysis Plan

The content in this section provided the data analysis method, steps in the analysis, and rationale for this research study.

Thematic Analysis Method

This research study employed thematic analysis as the chosen method. Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a widely used step-by-step

approach for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning from the data collected from study participants.

Steps in Thematic Analysis. As per Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, I conducted a thematic analysis that followed six distinct phases. First, I familiarized myself with the data by thoroughly reading the interview transcripts and reflecting on initial impressions. Second, I generated initial codes by systematically highlighting relevant statements and categorizing them based on commonalities related to the research questions. Third, I identified emerging themes by grouping similar codes and looking for patterns across participants' responses. Fourth, I reviewed the themes for internal coherence and ensured they meaningfully addressed the study's focus. Fifth, I defined and named each theme to reflect its core essence and significance. Finally, I produced a comprehensive written report that synthesized the findings and supported each theme with illustrative participant quotes.

Rationale for Thematic Analysis. For this research study, thematic analysis was selected as an appropriate method for examining the qualitative data collected from former foster youth (Coker, 2022; Nadroseneem et al., 2023). Thematic analysis was well-suited to identifying patterns of meaning across participants' narratives and allowed for flexibility in interpreting subjective experiences without being bound to a specific theoretical tradition (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was particularly valuable for capturing nuanced perspectives on how interpersonal relationships with caregivers contributed to participants' development of self-sufficiency during the transition to emerging adulthood. Additionally, thematic analysis supported the study's generic

qualitative design by facilitating the exploration of commonalities and variations across experiences, without imposing predefined categories.

Coding and Qualitative Data Analysis

The fundamental purpose of research has continued to be the advancement of knowledge and the facilitation of learning within societies (Jaffe & Loebach, 2024; Sellberg et al., 2021). Quantitative research (focused on numerical data), qualitative research (centered on experiences and perceptions), and mixed methods (a combination of both) have served as three common approaches, each offering valuable insights for researchers and targeted audiences (Busetto et al., 2020; H & Plano Clark, 2020; Novosel, 2022). This research study specifically focused on qualitative methods and underscored the pivotal role of coding in the post-data collection phase. The analysis of qualitative data—particularly the coding process—was essential for uncovering the complex layers of participant perspectives and lived experiences.

Coding in Qualitative Research

Coding remained a fundamental method for analyzing qualitative data, offering a structured approach to interpret and understand complex information. In this research study, coding was used to analyze qualitative data collected from participants, providing an organized process for identifying meaning within narrative accounts (May et al., 2022; Simula, 2018). Researchers have described coding as the act of assigning a word or short phrase that symbolically encapsulates a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and evocative attribute of language-based or visual data. This technique supported the analysis of various qualitative data sources, including interview transcripts, field notes,

journals, surveys, and visual materials. Saldana (2016) emphasized the importance of coding in interpreting qualitative data, helping researchers identify patterns, build theories, and form meaningful categorizations. LaPelle (2004) similarly noted that the coding process could be implemented using general-purpose software such as Microsoft Word, reflecting the common integration of both digital tools and manual methods in qualitative data analysis.

Experiences With Coding Using Software Tools

Following the mock trial and IRB approval of the study proposal, I conducted actual interviews with study participants using similar procedures. I recruited participants through purposeful and snowball sampling methods, distributing IRB-approved flyers via Facebook, Washburn University's School of Applied Studies, and the Kansas Department for Children and Families Youth Advisory Council. Ten former foster care youth were interviewed, and the sessions were recorded using Zoom, with both video and audio captured.

The transcripts were subsequently imported into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software designed to facilitate systematic coding, thematic development, and visual mapping. Using ATLAS.ti, I conducted an initial round of open coding, assigning descriptive codes to significant statements throughout the transcripts. These codes reflected early thematic patterns related to self-sufficiency, interpersonal relationships with caregivers, and barriers to independence. The initial coding process yielded approximately 50 distinct codes, which were then refined through iterative analysis. Through code consolidation and thematic categorization, the final analysis resulted in

three overarching themes and 13 subthemes, which provided a structured lens to interpret the lived experiences of former foster care youth transitioning into adulthood. The software's features—such as code frequency tracking, memoing, network visualization, and the ability to compare coded segments across participants—greatly enhanced the organization, reliability, and depth of analysis. ATLAS.ti allowed for more systematic application of the six phases of thematic analysis, as adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006).

ATLAS.ti support for linking quotes to codes, creating code groups, and memoing observations facilitated a richer understanding of participant narratives and reduced the likelihood of oversight in identifying emerging patterns. This also enhanced auditability and transparency in the qualitative analysis process.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Research endeavors have aimed at expanding the knowledge base in various fields, a cumulative process that spans centuries (Chalmers et al., 2002). Yet, challenges in synthesizing an abundance of individual studies have historically led to skepticism and criticism, underlining the importance of addressing trustworthiness issues. In the context of this research study, credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability, confirmability, and ethical procedures were pivotal considerations.

Credibility

Through triangulation and member checking, I ensured credibility, reflecting confidence in the reliability and precision of methods and findings (Ellis, 2019; Polit & Beck, 2014). Triangulation of sources involved comparing data from different points in

time, ensuring a robust understanding of participants' experiences (Hanson-DeFusco, 2023; Kern, 2018). I used member checking to guarantee accurate data representation, with participants reviewing and approving qualitative data before utilization (Burke Reifman et al., 2022; de Loyola González-Salgado et al., 2024).

Transferability

I recognized that limitations were inherent in any study, and the potential limitations of a generic qualitative study, such as researcher bias and transferability challenges, were potential factors in the research study (Caelli et al., 2003; Alston et al., 2021). This research study would consider these limitations to enhance transparency and contextual understanding.

Dependability

To ensure the study's dependability, I applied the triangulation of sources by interviewing participants at different time points, contributing to the reliability and repeatability of the study (Yin, 2003; Carcary, 2009).

Confirmability

I addressed confirmability by using noninvasive, open-ended interview questions to ensure consistent deductions from the methods and findings. This research study adhered to outlined data collection practices, maintaining consistency and avoiding undue influence (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022; Langtree et al., 2019).

Ethical Procedures

Protecting the anonymity of participants, particularly given the vulnerability of former foster care youth, involved assigning numeric identification codes (e.g., P1, P2,

P3) and obtaining informed consent from each participant prior to conducting interviews (Colosi et al., 2019; McKibbin et al., 2021). I rigorously maintained confidentiality by withholding all identifying information and adhered to IRB guidelines, prioritizing ethical considerations throughout the research process to protect participants' rights. Additionally, video and audio recordings of the interviews, along with transcripts, were stored on an encrypted flash drive kept in a locked bank deposit box and will be retained for a period of 5 years. After 5 years, the video and audio recordings will be destroyed by wiping the data from the flash drive, and the transcripts will be shredded by a professional shredding company.

In conclusion, the meticulous consideration of these trustworthiness elements contributed to the robustness and ethical integrity of the research study.

Summary

High-quality research studies are rooted in sound methodological frameworks and consistently demonstrate specific, rigorous characteristics. This chapter outlined the research methods applied in the present study, which investigated the research question: How do former foster care youth perceive self-sufficiency after aging out of the foster care system? A generic qualitative research design was selected due to its methodological flexibility and its suitability for exploring lived experiences without adherence to the constraints of more traditional approaches such as phenomenology, grounded theory, or ethnography. While this design presents both strengths and limitations, the study incorporated strategies to mitigate potential drawbacks and ensure methodological rigor.

Albert Bandura's SLT served as the guiding theoretical framework. Emphasizing observational learning, modeling, and imitation, SLT offered a valuable lens through which to examine how interpersonal relationships with caregivers influenced the development of self-sufficiency skills among former foster care youth.

As the researcher, I adopted a participant-observer role, collecting qualitative data through semistructured interviews. Recognizing the influence of researcher subjectivity, I maintained conscious awareness of my actions and decisions throughout data collection and analysis. The chapter also addressed trustworthiness, a critical component in qualitative research, by outlining procedures related to credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical safeguards.

Chapter 4 details the application of these research methods, providing a comprehensive account of the data collection, thematic analysis, and emerging findings.

Chapter 4: Study Results

Introduction

In this qualitative study, I investigated how former foster care youths perceived self-sufficiency after aging out of the foster care system and transitioning to adulthood (see Ellis & Hart, 2023; Kahlke, 2018; Oterholm & Höjer, 2024). To gain a better understanding, I sought out participants who had lived experiences in the Kansas foster care system and were in an out-of-home residential or foster home placement. Nine former foster care youths met the research study requirements and had lived experiences within the Kansas foster care system.

During interviews, the former foster care youths were asked about their lived experiences while in the foster care system. I offered the opportunity to share their lived experiences within the foster care system by asking a series of questions. The initial set of questions aimed to introduce the participants to the broader context of the foster care system. This was followed by more specific questions regarding their personal experiences within the system, allowing them to reflect on key aspects of their time in foster care. Finally, I included questions focused on their self-sufficiency and the transitional supports they perceived as being available to them during their time in the foster care system.

The findings of this qualitative study may inform human services and social work professionals working with foster care youths regarding the necessary tools in the building and retention of self-sufficiency skills. Additionally, this study may provide

additional insights for policymakers who formulate or implement policies related to the Kansas foster care system.

A central aim of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how interpersonal relationships between foster youth and their caregivers influenced the development and retention of self-sufficiency skills during their transition to adulthood (Bendeck & Moore, 2024; Boel-Studt et al., 2024). To effectively explore this aim, I utilized a qualitative approach, which allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of former foster care youth. Each study participant offered valuable insights, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, I used semiformal individual interviews, which allowed me to ask questions in a coherent sequence while also providing flexibility for further explanation and follow-up questions.

SLT served as the framework for understanding former foster youth's perceptions of their experiences with caregivers in developing and maintaining self-sufficiency skills during their transition into emerging adulthood. I employed the theoretical framework to develop the following research question that guided the study: How do former foster care youths perceive self-sufficiency after aging out of the foster care system?

Demographics

The former foster care youth who participated in this study had previously experienced the Kansas foster care system, either a residential facility/group home, a foster family home, or both. All study participants were asked to provide information

about their current age, gender identity, race, highest level of education, and current occupation.

A total of 18 former foster care youth responded to recruitment efforts and were considered for participation in the study. Purposeful sampling was employed by posting the study flyer on social media platforms and emailing child welfare providers across the state of Kansas to identify initial participants. These participants were then asked to refer additional individuals, implementing snowball sampling to extend the recruitment process. I selected study participants based on the order in which they contacted me about participating, their fulfillment of the inclusion criteria, acknowledgment of having read the consent form, confirmation of consent via email, and their availability. All selected study participants met the inclusionary criteria. The final study participants consisted of nine of the 18 responding participants. There were six female and three male study participants. The average age of the study participants was 34.2 years. There were one male and two female participants who identified as White, two male participants who identified as Black, two female participants who identified as both Black and White, and two female participants who identified as Hispanic. Three female participants and two male participants earned their high school diplomas. One female earned an associate degree, one female earned a bachelor's degree, one female earned a master's degree, and one male earned a doctorate. During the individual study participant interviews, the following occupations were reported: one participant worked with adults with disabilities, one worked in administration at a human/social services agency, one was the owner/operator of a daycare home, one was a stay-at-home mother and college student,

one worked in child care development, one was a senior recruiting account manager, one was a higher education administrator, one participant was disabled, and one participant was unemployed. Table 1 offers a comprehensive overview of the characteristics of each participant.

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Characteristics Overview

	Age	Gender	Race	Highest level of education	Current occupation
P1	27	Female	Black and White	MSW	Administrator in human/social services agency
P2	35	Female	White	AAS	Daycare owner/operator
P3	33	Female	White	BS	Advocate for adults with disabilities
P4	39	Male	White	HS	Disabled
P5	30	Female	Hispanic	HS	Stay-at-home parent/college student
P6	33	Female	Hispanic	HS	Child care development
P7	35	Female	Black and White	HS	Senior recruiting account manager
P8	22	Male	Black	HS	Unemployed
P9	54	Male	Black	EdD	Administrator in higher education

Note. MSW = Master of social work degree; AAS = Associate applied sciences degree; BS = Bachelor of science degree; HS = High school diploma; and EdD = Doctor of education.

Additionally, in the first set of demographic questions, I asked each participant to provide details about the reasons they entered the foster care system, the number of placements they had, and the types of placements they experienced. Each study participant entered the Kansas foster care System as a Child In Need of Care (CINC) for abuse and neglect issues. Seven of the study participants experienced both residential

facility/group home and foster home placements, while two participants were only in foster home placements. On average, participants had 10.8 placements throughout their time in the foster care system. The highest number of placements reported by a single participant was 30, while the lowest was two placements. Table 2 offers a comprehensive description of the study participants' placement information while in the Kansas foster care system.

Table 2

Participant Demographics and Placement Overview

	Reason for entering Kansas foster care	# of placements	Placement type(s)
P1	Abuse and neglect	20	Residential facility, foster home
P2	Abuse and neglect	10	Residential facility, foster home
P3	Abuse and neglect	30	Residential facility, foster home
P4	Abuse and neglect	2	Foster home
P5	Abuse and neglect	4	Residential facility, foster home
P6	Abuse and neglect	12	Residential facility, foster home
P7	Abuse and neglect	10	Residential facility, foster home
P8	Abuse and neglect	7	Residential facility, foster home
P9	Abuse and neglect	3	Foster home

Data Collection

I used in-depth interviews as the data collection tool for this qualitative research study (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Kabir, 2022). Each participant was sent the study's consent form, which included the interview questions, via email. Participants were asked to review the consent form and confirm their willingness to participate by replying to the email. All participants provided their consent prior to the interview by responding to the request, thereby indicating that they had reviewed the consent form and

agreed to participate in the study. I inquired about each participant's availability and scheduled the interviews based on the information they provided.

Each participant's interview was scheduled for one hour, and all interviews were conducted virtually via the Zoom platform. The interviews were conducted in a secure and private location within my home. Each interview began with an opportunity for the participant to ask any questions, followed by a disclaimer that they could discontinue the interview at any time or choose not to answer any question for any reason. Participants were asked 15 open-ended questions, and follow-up questions were posed as needed for clarification.

The first set of five interview questions was considered introductory. The first question in this set asked participants to describe the reason they entered the foster care system. The second question inquired about the number and types of placements participants experienced (e.g., family foster homes or residential facilities). The third question explored any similarities participants noticed in the behavioral management systems across their placements. The fourth question examined any differences they experienced in the behavioral management systems within their placements. The fifth and final question in this set asked participants what, if anything, they would change about the behavioral management systems in their placements if they had the power to do so.

The second set of four questions focused on participants' experiences in the foster care system. The sixth question asked participants to describe their overall experiences within the foster care system. The seventh question inquired about the connections they made with peers, staff, case managers, or foster parents during their time in the system.

The eighth question asked participants to reflect on the ways in which they believed the foster care system had affected their lives. The ninth and final question in this set asked participants what, if anything, they would change about the foster care system if they had the power to do so.

The third and final set of questions focused on participants' experiences with self-sufficiency and transitional supports. The tenth question asked participants to describe the age at which they were first introduced to self-sufficiency training in the foster care system and how it was introduced. The eleventh question inquired about the skills related to self-sufficiency that participants believed they developed while in the foster care system. The twelfth question asked participants how the connections they made within the foster care system influenced their skill-building toward self-sufficiency. The thirteenth question asked participants to identify, if any, the most influential person who impacted their development and retention of self-sufficiency skills. The fourteenth question asked participants what they wished they had learned while in the foster care system that would have helped them with self-sufficiency as they aged out. The fifteenth and final question asked participants what, in their view, decision-makers (e.g., legislators, courts, and state or federal agencies) could do to assist youth aging out of the foster care system and transitioning into adulthood.

At the conclusion of each interview, I asked participants if they had any additional information they wished to provide and allowed them the opportunity to share if desired. I then thanked each participant for their time and participation in the study. I informed participants that the next steps would involve transcribing the interview, after which I

would send them a copy of the transcript for review. Participants were notified that they would have the opportunity to make any amendments or clarifications to ensure their voices were accurately represented. After transcribing each interview, I sent the transcript to the respective participant via email. In the email, I requested that participants provide any feedback they may have or approve the transcript if no revisions were necessary. Only one participant provided feedback, specifically regarding their highest level of education. I made the necessary corrections, and the participant subsequently approved the transcript.

Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis as the data analysis method to identify themes emerging from the participant interviews (Coker, 2022; Nadeem et al., 2023). I used the six steps outlined in thematic analysis to analyze the data provided by each participant (Nolan-Cody et al., 2024; Scharp & Sanders, 2019; Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). According to Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, in the first step, I became familiar with each participant's interview by carefully listening to the audio recording and reviewing the transcripts. In step two, I used the familiarity of each participant's interview to develop initial codes. The interview questions were organized into three main sections: (a) introductory questions, which included reasons for entering custody, the number of placements, types of placements, and potential changes; (b) questions about the participant's experiences in the foster care system, including overall experiences, connections made within the system, the system's impact on their current lives, and potential changes; and (c) questions regarding self-sufficiency and transitional support,

which included the age at which they were first introduced to self-sufficiency training, skills developed, the influence of connections on skill-building and retention, the most influential person in their skill development, skills they wished they had learned, and potential changes.

I used transcript excerpts, such as a statement made by P2, "I had nothing, I had to learn on my own," to create an initial code *lack of preparation for independence*. In step three of the thematic analysis, I used the initial codes to identify emerging themes from the participants' transcripts. For example, the initial code *lack of preparation for independence* evolved into the emerging theme *sufficiency and transitional supports*. I found this emerging theme to be prevalent across all the study participants.

In step four, I reviewed the themes for coherence and relevance to the research question: How do former foster care youth perceive self-sufficiency after aging out of the foster care system? Upon review, I found that all the themes were coherent and relevant to the research question. In step five, defining and naming the identified theme, *skills development for independent living*, I captured the participant's lived experiences of leaving the foster care system ill-prepared and without sufficient support for independent adulthood. Furthermore, participants highlighted the absence of practical support or structured programs to assist them in transitioning into adequate skills-building and retention of those skills to maintain self-sufficiency. In the final step of thematic analysis, I formulated a report on the identified themes, which is provided in the results section of this chapter. I employed ATLAS.ti as the qualitative data analysis software to facilitate the transcription analysis, coding, theme development, and text interpretation for each

participant. This tool provided systematic support for organizing and analyzing the data, ensuring a rigorous and structured approach to the analysis process.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The evaluation of trustworthiness in qualitative research is shaped by the researcher's ontological, epistemological, and theoretical perspectives, as these foundational stances influence the interpretation of data and the determination of validity within the research process (Christou, 2025; Nasrabad, 2018; Subedi, 2023). I recognized at the outset of the research process the necessity of ensuring trustworthiness throughout all stages of the study. This included becoming familiar with potential threats to credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical procedures.

Credibility

To ensure credibility (internal validity) in this study, I employed triangulation and member checking. Triangulation was used to analyze data from each participant's semistructured interviews, allowing for the examination of various points in time regarding their lived experiences within the Kansas foster care system (Fusch et al., 2018; Morgan, 2024; Rooshenas et al., 2019). Specifically, this process revealed that all participants entered the system due to experiences of abuse and neglect. Triangulation involved comparing data from different phases of the participants' lives, including their age at entry into the system, the familial relationship of the abuser or neglector (e.g., biological parent, grandparent), and the duration of their time within the foster care system.

Member checking was employed to ensure the accuracy of the data collected and to confirm that it adequately reflected each participant's lived experiences (Motulsky, 2021; Thomas et al., 2024). During the participant selection process, I informed each individual of the procedures for data collection, transcription, and the subsequent review and approval of the transcriptions. Following the transcription of each participant's semistructured interview, I sent the transcript to the participants via the email addresses they provided, requesting their feedback and/or approval. This process allowed participants to review their documented experiences, offer feedback for accuracy or clarification, and ultimately approve the final transcript. One participant noted that their highest level of education was inaccurately recorded, and I subsequently revised this information and submitted the corrected transcript for their approval.

Transferability

To ensure transferability in this study, I remained mindful of how my own thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences with foster care could pose a threat to the research's transferability (Drisko, 2025; Maxwell, 2021). Given my 30 years of experience working with youth in the Kansas foster care system, I recognized that my prior exposure to their lived experiences might introduce biases, potentially influencing how I interpreted the data from study participants. To mitigate these risks, I took conscious steps such as member checking to minimize the impact of my background on the study's trustworthiness. Additionally, I ensured that the data from this study could be applicable to a variety of populations. Insights gained regarding how abuse and neglect contribute to foster care placement could be relevant to foster care youth in different

regions or systems. Similarly, the resiliency factors identified in one group of foster care youth may be transferable to other groups, and the development of self-sufficiency skills could provide valuable support for foster youth as they transition into adulthood.

Dependability

To ensure dependability in this study, I employed triangulation of data from the participants' semistructured interviews. To enhance reliability and repeatability, I asked each participant the same 15 questions and used follow-up questions to clarify responses or solicit additional information related to the original questions (Adler, 2022; Rose & Johnson, 2020; Zia Ul Haq Kakar et al., 2023). Additionally, I engaged in reflective journaling after each interview to foster self-awareness and introspection, document the experience, and critically reflect on the interview process.

Confirmability

To ensure confirmability in this study, I conducted semistructured interviews via the Zoom video platform, using open-ended and noninvasive questions (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021; Bowden et al., 2022; Devost, 2023). Prior to beginning the interview, I briefed each participant on the interview process and emphasized that they could pause or discontinue the interview at any time and were not required to answer any questions that might cause harm or lead to traumatic experiences. Each participant was asked 15 open-ended, noninvasive questions and was given the opportunity to review and provide clarification on their transcripts before granting final authorization for their use in the study.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical procedures are crucial for establishing trustworthiness between the researcher and study participants, safeguarding vulnerable populations, and ensuring the credibility of the research findings (Buchanan, 2024; Findley et al., 2024; Haile et al., 2025; Roest et al., 2023). To uphold high ethical standards in this study, I implemented measures to protect the anonymity of each participant by assigning numeric identification numbers. Additionally, I obtained informed consent from all participants and rigorously maintained confidentiality by ensuring that no identifying information was disclosed throughout the research process. I also followed all IRB guidelines and received the necessary approvals for conducting this research study.

Results

Each participant provided responses to 15 open-ended, noninvasive questions about their lived experiences in the Kansas foster care system during their semistructured interviews. During the initial phase of data analysis, I employed open coding across all interview transcripts to identify recurring ideas and experiences. This process resulted in over 70 distinct codes, including examples such as cooking skills and budgeting lessons. I then grouped these individual codes into broader conceptual categories, such as skill acquisition, based on patterns and relationships among the data. From these categories, I developed overarching themes—such as self-sufficiency and transitional supports—which captured the participants' shared perceptions and experiences. This progression from coding to categorization and ultimately to theme development followed a structured thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The interview questions were organized into three main themes: reasons for entering the foster care system and placement experiences, experiences in the foster care system, and self-sufficiency and transitional support. Additionally, there were 13 subthemes that emerged from the participants' data. In the theme on reasons for entering the foster care system and placement experiences, the emerging subthemes included family disruption and circumstantial factors, instability and transitions in foster care placement, and behavior management systems and their impact. In the theme on experiences within the foster care system, the subthemes identified were positive and negative foster care experiences, connections and support networks within the system, the long-term effects of the foster care system, and the desire for system change. In the self-sufficiency and transitional support theme, the emerging subthemes included late introduction to self-sufficiency training, skills development for independent living, the influence of relationships on skills building, role models and mentorship in skills development, missing knowledge and preparation for aging out, and policy and structural changes for youth aging out.

Each theme contributed to answering the research question: How do former foster care youths perceive self-sufficiency after aging out of the foster care system? The themes that emerged provided insight into various aspects of the participants' experiences, from their reasons for entering the system and placement experiences to their perceptions of self-sufficiency and transitional support after aging out.

Reasons for Entering the Foster Care System and Placement Experiences

In this theme, I solicited each participant's reasons for entering the Kansas foster care system. Additionally, I asked participants to describe the types of placements they experienced (e.g., residential facilities, foster homes, etc.) and the number of different placements they had during their time in the foster care system. I also inquired about their experiences with behavior management systems, including how behaviors were rewarded or addressed through consequences. There were three subthemes identified within the main theme of reasons for entering the foster care system and placement experiences.

Subtheme 1: Family Disruption and Circumstantial Factors

Each participant identified abuse and neglect as the primary factors contributing to family disruption when entering foster care. Two participants noted the death of a parent, who had been their primary caregiver, followed by abuse and neglect by another familial relation (e.g., grandparent, aunt, or uncle). Additionally, two participants reported entering the system multiple times due to recurring abuse and neglect situations. Six participants entered the system at younger ages, under 13, while the remaining three participants entered after the age of 13.

The data highlight that family disruption often results from a combination of abuse, neglect, and other complex circumstantial factors like the death of a primary caregiver or repeated maltreatment by other family members (Freisthler et al., 2023; Hindt & Leon, 2022; Kaufmann, 2024). It also shows that children enter foster care at different ages, which may influence their experiences within the system (Atkins & Durrance, 2021; Callejas et al., 2023). Additionally, the fact that some children re-enter

the system multiple times emphasizes the cyclical nature of family dysfunction and its long-term impact on children's lives (Chiang et al., 2025; Chiang et al., 2022).

These insights suggest that the nature of family disruption and the circumstantial factors surrounding it are multifaceted and can have long-lasting effects on children's stability, development, and experiences within the foster care system.

Subtheme 2: Instability and Transitions in Foster Care Placement

Each participant reported residing in either a residential facility providing congregate care or in a foster home during their time in the foster care system. Seven participants indicated that they had experienced both residential facilities and foster home placements. Two participants reported being placed solely in foster homes, without any time spent in a residential facility. In total, participants experienced 98 different placements, with an average of 10.8 placements across their time in care. Three participants reported having four or fewer placements, four participants reported between seven and 12 placements, and two participants experienced between 20 and 30 placements. The length of stays in these placements varied considerably, ranging from a single day to several years.

The data highlight the instability and transition within the foster care system, pointing to the negative effects of placement instability on children's well-being. The number of different placements and varying lengths of stay reflect the challenges children face in finding stability and permanence while in care (Hornset & Smedsvik, 2024; MacDonald & Gillespie, 2023; Maguire et al., 2024; Wurth, 2023). The diversity in participants' experiences, from those with relatively few placements to those with many,

underscores the variability in foster care experiences, which are shaped by family disruption and circumstantial factors such as the availability of placements and the child's specific needs. These factors can have a significant impact on emotional development, attachment, and overall adjustment to the foster care system (Clark et al., 2020; Elad et al., 2023; LaBrenz et al., 2022).

Subtheme 3: Behavior Management Systems and Their Impact

Each participant was asked to reflect on their experiences with behavior management systems during their placements. Additionally, they were inquired about any perceived similarities or differences between the systems across various placements. Participants reported that some residential facilities employed structured behavior management systems, such as point and level systems, where positive behavior was rewarded with points that determined levels and privileges. However, no participant identified any formal behavior management systems in foster homes. Six participants noted that harsh or punitive measures were commonly used as the primary method of behavior management, which they described as having a negative impact on their overall foster care experience. Other participants reported concerns about the lack of fairness in how consequences were administered, particularly noting discrepancies between residents in the same placement, including instances where siblings placed together experienced unequal treatment.

The information underscores the importance of structured, fair, and consistent behavior management systems in foster care. The findings suggest that disparities in how behavior is managed between residential facilities and foster homes, as well as the use of

punitive measures, may significantly affect children's experiences and well-being within the foster care system (Beal et al., 2024; Platt et al., 2024; Ryan & Mooney, 2025; Trubey et al., 2024). Ensuring fairness and consistency in how children are treated could foster more positive outcomes for children in care, especially those dealing with trauma or instability (Cooper et al., 2023; Mishra et al., 2020; Quick & Halasz, 2025; Strömpl et al., 2024).

Experiences Within the Foster Care System

In this theme, participants were asked to reflect on their positive and negative experiences within the Kansas foster care system, the types of connections they were able to establish (e.g., with peers, case managers, staff members, foster parents, etc.), the impact of the foster care system on their lives, and the changes they would recommend to improving the system. There were four subthemes identified within the main theme of experiences within the foster care system.

Subtheme 1: Positive And Negative Foster Care Experience

Each participant was asked to reflect on their overall experiences within the foster care system. Four participants described their experiences as both positive and negative, noting that while some placements and individuals were beneficial, others were not. Two participants characterized their experiences as traumatizing, citing multiple threats of forced relocations and instances of abuse while in care. One participant reported feeling isolated and alone, describing their experience as "awful." Another participant shared that their experience was negative due to a perceived lack of care and affection from some

caregivers. Conversely, one participant indicated that their experience in the foster care system was more positive compared to that of their peers.

The data suggest that foster care experiences are not uniform, and outcomes can vary greatly depending on factors such as placement stability, the quality of relationships with caregivers, and the level of emotional support provided (Coe et al., 2025; Sprecher et al., 2021). While some participants report positive aspects of their foster care experience, many others face significant challenges, including trauma, isolation, and emotional neglect. The trauma and instability experienced by some participants underscore the importance of ensuring that foster care placements are not only safe and secure but also emotionally nurturing (Ballentine et al., 2023; Cross et al., 2021; Lotty et al., 2020; Schofield et al., 2019). There is a clear need for consistent, high-quality care that prioritizes the emotional well-being of foster youth, as well as more support for those who experience multiple disruptions or abusive environments within the foster care system. These data highlight the complexity and variability of the foster care experience and point to areas where the system can improve, especially in terms of emotional support, stability, and the prevention of abuse.

Subtheme 2: Connections and Support Networks Within the System

Each participant was asked to reflect on their ability to establish connections with peers, case managers, staff members, and foster parents during their time in the foster care system. Seven participants reported forming positive connections while in care, while two participants indicated they were able to get along with others but built few meaningful relationships, as they were primarily focused on aging out of the system.

Participants emphasized the importance of strong connections with case workers, particularly in relation to placement transitions. Some participants also noted the significance of their connections with case managers in terms of their sense of safety and support. Additionally, peers, residential staff members, and foster parents were recognized as key sources of positive connections during their time in the foster care system. Participants reported that some relationships developed during their time in the foster care system continue to exist today. Relationships with case managers, peers, and foster parents appear to be key factors influencing foster youth's overall experiences. Positive relationships can contribute to a more supportive and stable foster care experience, while a lack of deep connections or a focus on aging out may result in a sense of disconnection or emotional withdrawal (Hedenstrom, 2021; Ocsana Abramova, 2022; Paul & Cruys, 2024).

These data underscore the critical role of relationships within the foster care system, particularly how they can impact youth's emotional and psychological well-being. Building supportive, positive connections is key to fostering resilience and helping youth navigate the challenges they face in foster care (Bendeck & Moore, 2024; Findley & Praetorius, 2023; Lamb et al., 2022).

Subtheme 3: The Long-Term Effects of the Foster Care System

Each participant was asked to reflect on how they felt the foster care system had impacted their life. The majority of participants reported positive experiences, noting that the foster care system had a significant and beneficial influence on their lives. Those with less positive experiences described the impact as detrimental, with some feeling that the

system deprived them of a typical adolescence and others highlighting the challenges of constant relocations between placements. On a more positive note, participants shared that the foster care system shaped their outlook on life, saved their lives, and provided them with opportunities they may not have had otherwise. Many participants reported that their experiences made them stronger, more independent, and hardworking. Additionally, lasting connections with case managers and staff members were mentioned, as well as the development of a strong work ethic and a sense of stability.

These data provide insights into the impact of the foster care system on the lives of youth, highlighting both positive and negative outcomes that emerge from their experiences. These data emphasize the dual nature of foster care, illustrating how it can simultaneously provide life-changing opportunities and present significant challenges (Martinez, 2023; Peel & Davison, 2023). The findings underscore the importance of stability, support, and positive relationships in fostering youth development and ensuring that the foster care system meets the diverse needs of the children and adolescents it serves.

Subtheme 4: The Desire for System Change

At the conclusion of this section, participants were asked to share what changes they would make to the foster care system if they had the power to do so. The majority of participants expressed a desire to change the way children and youth are treated upon entering the system. They described the experience as often cold and isolating, with some participants recalling being told that foster homes were their "home too," yet feeling as though they were treated like prisoners. Participants emphasized the importance of better

matching children and youth with foster homes, particularly addressing cultural compatibility. Many participants also advocated for more thorough vetting of potential foster parents, suggesting that the system should prioritize ensuring that foster parents are genuinely committed to the well-being of children and youth, rather than viewing the role as a financial opportunity. Additionally, several participants highlighted the need for more resources and comprehensive planning to support youth aging out of the system, suggesting that the current lack of preparation exacerbates the challenges they face as they transition to adulthood.

These data provide valuable insights into the perceived shortcomings of the foster care system as seen by the participants, particularly in areas related to treatment, placement matching, and support for youth aging out. These findings point to several key areas for improvement in the foster care system, including emotional support for youth entering care, better matching of placements, more thorough foster parent vetting, and enhanced support for aging-out youth (Havlicek & Lansing, 2025; Hayes et al., 2024; Masuda & Helm, 2024). These changes are essential for improving the overall experiences and outcomes for youth in foster care.

Self-Sufficiency and Transitional Support Section

In this final section of the interview, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences regarding self-sufficiency and transitional support within the foster care system. The questions focused on various aspects of self-sufficiency development, including the age at which participants were first introduced to self-sufficiency training, the specific skills they believe they developed during their time in care, and how the

connections they made within the foster care system influenced their skill-building efforts. Participants were also asked to identify the most influential individual who positively impacted their acquisition and retention of self-sufficiency skills. Additionally, they were prompted to reflect on any skills or knowledge they wish they had learned while in foster care and to provide suggestions for decision-makers—such as legislators, courts, and state/federal agencies—on how they could better support youth aging out of the foster care system as they transition into adulthood. There were six subthemes identified within the main theme of self-sufficiency and transitional supports.

Subtheme 1: Late Introduction to Self-Sufficiency Training

In the first question of this section, participants were asked to reflect on the age at which they first recall being introduced to self-sufficiency skills and the reasons behind their recollections. Three participants reported receiving formal self-sufficiency training during their time in the foster care system. The ages at which these participants first encountered such training varied, with one participant recalling being introduced at age 10, another at age 14 or 15, and the third at age 17. In contrast, six participants reported not receiving any formal self-sufficiency training, instead learning these skills independently.

These data provide insight into the unequal access to self-sufficiency training within the foster care system and its potential impact on youth development. The data reveal significant gaps in self-sufficiency training and highlights the need for more structured and equitable programs across the foster care system to support youth in their

transition to adulthood (Dumais & Spence, 2021; Schelbe et al., 2024; Weems et al., 2024).

Subtheme 2: Skills Development for Independent Living

Each participant was asked to reflect on the self-sufficiency skills they believed they developed during their time in the foster care system. Three participants reported acquiring a wide range of practical skills, including tax preparation, budgeting, purchasing a car, pumping gas, balancing a checkbook, opening a bank account, time management, performing household chores, lawn care, cooking, hygiene, establishing a consistent routine, and cultivating self-discipline. In contrast, six participants indicated that they developed these self-sufficiency skills independently, without formal support from the foster care system. Several participants expressed feelings of isolation, noting that they often had to navigate and learn these skills on their own, without guidance or assistance from the system or caregivers.

These data provide several important insights into the experiences of foster youth regarding their development of self-sufficiency skills. These data reveal that while some foster youth benefit from self-sufficiency training, many others are left to navigate adulthood without adequate support, indicating a need for systemwide changes to ensure consistent and effective preparation for independent living (Liabo et al., 2017; Nesmith, 2025; Park et al., 2024).

Subtheme 3: The Influence of Relationships on Skills Building

Each participant was asked to reflect on how relationships within the foster care system influenced their ability to develop and/or maintain self-sufficiency skills.

Specifically, they were asked to share their perceptions of the role that connections with case managers, foster parents, peers, and other individuals in the system played in their skill-building process. Six participants reported that these connections were helpful in developing their skills. Three participants specifically noted that the support they received was beneficial in providing a sense of consistent assistance and someone to turn to for information. One participant indicated that these connections helped them retain self-sufficiency skills, while another stated that the support facilitated the acquisition of new skills. However, one participant expressed uncertainty about whether the relationships they formed had any impact on their skill development, and another reported that, despite forming connections, these relationships did not contribute to their ability to build or maintain self-sufficiency skills.

These data provide valuable insights into the role of relationships in fostering the development and retention of self-sufficiency skills among foster care youth. These data suggest that while relationships within the foster care system can play a critical role in helping youth develop self-sufficiency skills, the quality and nature of those relationships vary significantly. Some foster youth benefit greatly from these connections, while others may feel neglected or unsupported, highlighting the need for more consistent, impactful relationship-building in the foster care system to ensure all youth are adequately prepared for independent living (Blakeslee & Best, 2019; Katz & Geiger, 2019; Taylor, 2024).

Subtheme 4: Role Models and Mentorship in Skills Development

Each participant was asked to share their experiences related to role modeling and/or mentorship in the development of self-sufficiency skills. Specifically, participants

were asked to identify, if applicable, the most influential person who positively impacted their ability to build and retain these skills. One participant identified themselves as the most influential, as their skills development occurred prior to entering the foster care system. Another participant pointed to their social worker, highlighting her kindness and genuine concern for their well-being. Four participants named their foster parents as the most influential figures in their skill development. These participants noted the foster parents' willingness to listen, teach new skills, assist in preparing for life after foster care, and provide support during both positive and challenging times. One participant also credited foster family members with instilling a strong work ethic. Three participants identified staff members from residential facilities as key influences in their development. These participants shared that staff members held them accountable, taught them academic and life skills, and, in one case, helped the participant recognize potential they had not seen in themselves.

These data provide valuable insights into the role of mentorship and role modeling in the development of self-sufficiency skills among youth in foster care. The findings suggest that various individuals within the foster care system—such as foster parents, case managers, and residential staff—play significant roles in shaping the ability of youth to develop critical life skills. The data underscore the importance of positive, supportive relationships in the foster care system for the development of self-sufficiency skills. These relationships—whether with foster parents, social workers, or residential staff—are instrumental in shaping the capacity of youth to navigate adulthood with

confidence and independence (Colonnesi et al., 2022; Haggerty et al., 2023; Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2021).

Subtheme 5: Missing Knowledge and Preparation for Aging Out

Each participant was asked to reflect on the knowledge and preparation they felt were lacking during their time in the foster care system, particularly in relation to transitioning out of care. Specifically, participants were asked to identify skills or areas of knowledge they wished they had learned that would have supported their self-sufficiency upon aging out of the system. Although responses varied due to the broad nature of the question, several subject areas emerged. These included financial skills such as money management, understanding credit cards and debt, and purchasing a house or car; educational preparation, particularly for college; basic life skills, including house maintenance and car repair; and employment-related skills, such as navigating the work environment.

These data indicate that participants felt a significant gap in essential skills and knowledge that could have better equipped them for self-sufficiency upon aging out of the foster care system. While responses varied, several key areas of need emerged consistently. The participants identified financial literacy as a crucial area, with a focus on money management, understanding debt, and making significant purchases like a house or car. Additionally, many expressed a lack of educational preparation, particularly in relation to college readiness. Basic life skills such as house maintenance and car repair were also noted, along with the necessity of learning how to navigate the work environment. These findings suggest that there is a critical need for more comprehensive

training and support in these areas for youth in foster care, which could improve their ability to transition into adulthood with greater stability and independence (Bencomo, 2022; Reilly & Schlinkert, 2024; Yang & Bechtold, 2022).

Subtheme 6: Policy and Structural Changes for Youth Aging Out

In the final question, participants were asked to provide insights on the policy and structural changes they believe are necessary for supporting youth aging out of the foster care system. Specifically, they were asked to suggest actions that decision-makers, including legislators, courts, and state or federal agencies, could take to better assist these youth in transitioning into adulthood. Two participants expressed uncertainty regarding how decision-makers could assist in improving the transition of youth aging out of the foster care system into adulthood. However, several recurring themes emerged across participant responses. Key suggestions included the need for more comprehensive exit or transition planning, enhanced financial planning and support, and increasing the ability for youth to have a stronger voice in decision-making processes. Participants emphasized the importance of decision-makers listening more attentively to the lived experiences of both youth and families, as well as professionals working within the foster care system. Additional recommendations included increasing scholarships and opportunities for trade schools and colleges, providing more training on building trusting relationships with adults, and ensuring greater oversight and support for foster families.

These data reveal several critical insights into the experiences and perspectives of foster youth regarding the transition out of the system. The responses indicate there is a significant need for enhanced support and planning during the aging-out process.

Specifically, participants highlighted gaps in transition planning, financial preparedness, and opportunities for higher education and vocational training. The emphasis on giving youth a stronger voice in the decision-making process suggests that they feel marginalized or unheard within the system. Additionally, the call for better support for foster families, along with improved relationship-building training, suggests that fostering healthy adult-youth connections plays a pivotal role in the transition process. Overall, the data underscore the importance of comprehensive, multifaceted support systems and structures to better prepare foster youth for successful adulthood (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2024; Dowdy-Hazlett & Clark, 2025; Soto-Ramírez et al., 2024).

Summary

This qualitative study explored the experiences of former foster care youth in the Kansas foster care system, focusing on their perceptions of self-sufficiency, transitional support, and the foster care system's impact. The findings revealed that abuse and neglect were primary factors for entering care, with participants experiencing various placement types and numbers, ranging from residential facilities to foster homes. While some youth reported positive connections and mentorship that aided their development of self-sufficiency skills, others felt isolated or unsupported. Many participants highlighted a lack of formal training in essential life skills, such as financial management and job readiness, and wished they had received better preparation for aging out of the system. Suggestions for improvement included more comprehensive transition planning, financial support, and increased education and vocational training opportunities. Participants also

emphasized the need for policy changes, such as better support for foster families and a more youth-centered approach to decision-making.

In Chapter 5, I provided a comprehensive analysis of how the findings of this study can inform and enhance professional practice within social work, human services, and other fields connected to the foster care system. Chapter 5 also examined the broader implications of the research for advancing social change, with particular attention to improving outcomes for vulnerable and system-involved populations.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how youth who have aged out of the foster care system perceive their experiences with interpersonal relationships with caregivers and their retention of long-term skill-building aimed at promoting self-sufficiency. Using thematic analysis of in-depth interview data, the study sought to answer the research question: How do former foster care youths perceive self-sufficiency after aging out of the foster care system? The analysis yielded three main themes: reasons for entering the foster care system and placement experiences, experiences in the foster care system, and self-sufficiency and transitional support. The main themes produced 13 emergent subthemes: (a) family disruption and circumstantial factors, (b) instability and transitions in foster care placement, (c) behavior management systems and their impact, (d) positive and negative foster care experiences, (e) connections and support networks within the system, (f) the long-term effects of the foster care system, (g) the desire for system change, (h) late introduction to self-sufficiency training, (i) skills development for independent living, (j) the influence of relationships on skills building, (k) role models and mentorship in skills development, (l) missing knowledge and preparation for aging out, and (m) policy and structural changes for youth aging out. These themes reflect a multifaceted understanding of how former foster care youth interpret their preparedness for adult life, and they underscore both the limitations and opportunities present within the foster care system. The following section provides an in-depth interpretation of the

three overarching themes and 13 subthemes, along with their implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Interpretation of the Findings

This section presents an interpretation of the findings derived from the thematic analysis of participant narratives. The three overarching themes and 13 subthemes are examined in relation to existing literature, providing insight into how the current study's results confirm, disconfirm, or extend prior research on youth aging out of the foster care system. This analysis offers a deeper understanding of how former foster care youth perceive their interpersonal relationships with caregivers and their capacity for long-term skill retention related to self-sufficiency. Additionally, these findings are situated within the study's conceptual framework, allowing for a more nuanced discussion of the systemic and relational factors that influence independent living outcomes. The interpretation underscores the complexities of the transition from foster care to adulthood and highlights implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Family Disruption and Circumstantial Factors

Although previous studies in the literature addressed transitional periods for children and youth in foster care, there is a notable gap regarding how foster care youth perceive their initial entrance into the system as it relates to family disruption and circumstantial factors. Specifically, no studies were identified that explored how these early life experiences influence the development of interpersonal relationships with caregivers or the acquisition and retention of self-sufficiency skills necessary for a successful transition to adulthood. This study extends the existing body of literature by

offering insight into foster care youths' perceptions of how family-related factors impacted their ability to form relationships and acquire essential life skills during their time in care. These findings suggest a critical need for further research that examines the role of early entry conditions on long-term developmental outcomes for foster care youth.

This is supported by Bandura's (1977) SLT, which served as the conceptual framework for this study. SLT posits that individuals learn behaviors, values, and skills through observation, imitation, and modeling within social contexts. Within the foster care setting, interpersonal relationships with caregivers serve as a primary context through which self-sufficiency skills can be modeled and internalized. Participants in this study reported that their entry into foster care was primarily due to abuse, neglect, family instability, and various circumstantial factors. Additionally, many participants entered the system at different developmental stages, and some experienced multiple reentries, further contributing to instability.

The multifaceted nature of these disruptions appeared to have long-lasting effects on participants' emotional development and relational capacity. In turn, these factors influenced their ability to build trust with caregivers, an essential component of modeling and learning behaviors that support independent living. Thus, SLT provides a meaningful lens through which to interpret this theme, offering a deeper understanding of how foster care youth acquire and retain self-sufficiency skills through social interactions within the caregiving environment.

Instability and Transitions in Foster Care Placement

This subject area aligns with findings presented in the literature reviewed. Konijn et al. (2019), Nelson and Thomas (2022), and Wurth (2023) examined the detrimental effects of instability resulting from multiple placement transitions in foster care. These scholars concluded that such instability significantly impairs foster care youths' well-being, sense of safety, susceptibility to maltreatment, and overall health outcomes. Moreover, frequent placement transitions hinder the development of interpersonal relationships between youth and caregivers, reducing opportunities to teach and reinforce self-sufficiency skills.

This subject area is also grounded in Bandura's (1977) SLT, which served as the conceptual framework for this study. According to Bandura, learning occurs within a social context through observation, imitation, and modeling. Placement stability within the foster care system is essential to providing youth with consistent, ongoing opportunities to learn adaptive behaviors and life skills from caregivers. Participants in the present study reported that frequent changes in placement negatively affected their emotional development, attachment capacity, and overall adjustment. The instability of multiple placements disrupted their ability to build trust and consistency in relationships, which are vital for observational learning and skill retention.

When interpersonal relationships with caregivers are repeatedly interrupted, foster care youth may have limited opportunities to model and practice self-sufficiency behaviors over time. The findings suggest that placement stability is critical in facilitating the social learning process, allowing youth to build enduring connections with caregivers

who can serve as role models. Therefore, SLT provides a valuable lens through which to interpret this subject area, highlighting the importance of consistent placements in promoting developmental continuity and skill acquisition for youth transitioning to adulthood.

Behavior Management Systems and Their Impact

The reviewed literature did not include studies that examined foster care youths' perceptions of behavior management systems or their impact during placement in the foster care system. Additionally, no research explored how such systems influence the development of interpersonal relationships between youth and caregivers, particularly in relation to building and retaining self-sufficiency skills essential for the transition to adulthood. Consequently, this third subject area has the potential to extend the existing body of literature by offering new insights into this understudied area. Further research is necessary to understand how foster care youth perceive the effects of behavior management systems on their capacity to form meaningful caregiver relationships that support their development of self-sufficiency skills for adulthood.

This subject area finds support in Bandura's (1977) SLT, which provided the conceptual framework for this study. SLT asserts that individuals acquire behaviors, values, and skills through processes of observation, imitation, and modeling within social environments. In foster care, interpersonal relationships with caregivers represent a central avenue through which youth can observe and internalize self-sufficiency skills essential for healthy development and successful transitions to adulthood. Participants in this study reported that some residential placements implemented behavior management

systems, while none of the foster homes they experienced utilized such structures. Former foster care youth described these systems as inconsistently applied, noting a lack of fairness in distributing rewards and consequences. They also reported that punitive or harsh disciplinary measures were often used as the primary method of behavioral control. These experiences negatively influenced their overall perceptions of foster care and contributed to a sense of instability and inequity.

The findings suggest that foster care youth require safe, consistent, and supportive environments where behavioral expectations are communicated clearly and implemented equitably. Such conditions foster opportunities for learning and retaining essential life skills. SLT aligns with this subject area by emphasizing the importance of structured, stable, and socially supportive placements in promoting positive behavioral development. The theory helps to frame the need for caregiving environments that are not only behaviorally structured but also relationally nurturing, as these characteristics are critical to supporting foster care youths' acquisition of self-sufficiency skills and successful transitions into adulthood.

Positive and Negative Foster Care Experience

This subject area aligns with findings from prior research examining foster care youths' perceptions of positive and negative experiences within the foster care system. Several studies have explored the relational challenges foster care youth frequently encounter, particularly difficulties establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Gabrielli et al. (2023), Magee et al. (2019), and Yoshioka-Maxwell and Rice (2020) found that foster care experiences—whether supportive or adverse—can

significantly influence a youth's ability to form and sustain healthy relationships with caregivers, relatives, mentors, and romantic partners during the transition to adulthood. These studies emphasized the importance of meaningful relationships as a foundation for developing and retaining self-sufficiency skills necessary for independent living.

As previously outlined, Bandura's (1977) SLT provides a valuable lens through which to interpret these findings. The theory posits that individuals learn behaviors, values, and skills through observation, imitation, and modeling within their social environments. In foster care settings, caregiver–youth relationships are central to the modeling and internalization of self-sufficiency skills. Through consistent behavioral modeling and emotional support, caregivers influence how foster care youth acquire the tools to navigate adulthood.

Foster care experiences, however, are highly variable and often shaped by factors such as placement instability, the quality of caregiver relationships, and perceived emotional support. While one participant described their overall foster care experience as positive, most participants reported a range of experiences, from positive and mixed to profoundly negative or traumatic. These narratives underscore the importance of fostering positive experiences within the system to support youths' development of critical life skills. The participants' perceptions highlight a pressing need to strengthen protective factors that contribute to positive experiences while minimizing conditions that lead to harmful or destabilizing outcomes. This subject area reinforces the relevance of the conceptual framework, demonstrating how positive and negative foster care experiences

impact caregiver–youth relationships and, in turn, the acquisition and retention of self-sufficiency skills essential for a successful transition to adulthood.

Connections and Support Networks Within the System

This subject area aligns with prior research reviewed in the literature, emphasizing the importance of healthy connections and support networks for foster care youth within the system. Multiple scholars, including Galambos et al. (2018), Häggman-Laitila et al. (2019), and Lee and Goldstein (2016), found that foster care youth who establish robust interpersonal relationships tend to report more positive life outcomes in adulthood, with improved psychological and physical well-being. Further studies by Rademaker and Holland (2021), Rajaram and Tidball (2018), and Salazar and Schelbe (2021) suggested that these positive connections extend to enhanced educational attainment, employment prospects, reduced involvement with the justice system, and greater housing stability. These findings underscore the consensus in the literature regarding the necessity of healthy connections and support networks to foster the development and retention of self-sufficiency skills during the transition into adulthood.

This subject area also aligns with the study's conceptual framework, SLT, which provides a theoretical foundation for interpreting the findings. The theory posits that individuals acquire behaviors, values, and skills through observation, imitation, and modeling within their social environments. The relationships between youth and caregivers in the foster care system play a crucial role in this process, offering key opportunities for the modeling and integration of self-sufficiency skills. Through consistent behavioral modeling and emotional support, caregivers help foster care youth

develop the competencies required to navigate adulthood. Conversely, the lack of supportive relationships—or an inability to build stable, trusting networks—can impede development and introduce additional challenges during the transition to independent living. Participants emphasized the significance of strong connections with case workers, particularly during placement transitions, and reported that these relationships contributed significantly to their sense of safety and support. Additionally, peers, residential staff, and foster parents were identified as key sources of positive connections, with some relationships continuing beyond their time in foster care. These enduring connections highlight the importance of healthy relationships in influencing foster care youth's overall experiences, aligning with the conceptual framework and reinforcing the need for supportive networks in the foster care system.

Long-Term Effects of the Foster Care System

This subject area aligns with findings from the reviewed literature, which highlights the numerous challenges foster care youth face during and after their time in the foster care system. Several studies (Antle et al., 2009; Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021; Merrin et al., 2020) found that foster care youth often struggle with securing and maintaining stable housing, financial instability, inconsistent employment, food insecurity, substance abuse, frequent encounters with law enforcement, and a lack of consistent family or social support networks. Additional research by Agnihotri et al. (2022), Chun (2020), and Gibbs et al. (2023) found that these issues frequently arise due to the failure to build and retain long-term skills during emerging adulthood. The studies suggest that the absence of necessary skills development in foster care placements

contributes to these ongoing challenges after youth exit the system. Thus, the literature underscores the importance of equipping foster care youth with the necessary skills to facilitate a smoother transition to adulthood and mitigate the long-term negative effects of foster care.

The study is grounded in the conceptual framework, which provides a theoretical underpinning for understanding how individuals acquire behaviors, skills, and values through observation, imitation, and modeling within social environments. In SLT, learning occurs within a social setting, where individuals observe and replicate the behaviors of role models, particularly caregivers and peers. In the context of foster care, the absence of consistent, supportive relationships and the lack of structured opportunities for learning essential life skills can hinder foster care youth's development. The majority of participants shared positive experiences with the longer-term effects of the foster care system on their lives, emphasizing its significant and beneficial impact, with many stating it shaped their outlook, saved them, and provided opportunities they may not have otherwise had. However, participants with less positive experiences described the system as detrimental, highlighting the loss of a typical adolescence, frequent relocations, and challenges in forming stable connections, though many also shared how the experience made them stronger, more independent, and hardworking, with lasting connections to case managers and staff members.

Without these key role models or social networks, foster care youth may struggle to acquire the essential skills for a successful transition into adulthood, such as securing stable housing, managing finances, and maintaining employment. SLT suggests that the

lack of appropriate modeling and support contributes to the difficulties foster care youth face later in life, including financial instability, poor mental health, and involvement with the judicial system. Therefore, this subject area from the study, which examines foster care youth's perceptions of the longer-term effects of the foster care system on their ability to learn self-sufficiency skills and successfully transition into adulthood, aligns with the principles of this conceptual framework.

Desire for System Change

This subject area aligns with findings from the reviewed literature and centers on foster care youths' perceptions of how they would improve the foster care system if given the opportunity to enact change. Multiple studies have examined systemic reforms intended to enhance foster care youths' transitions into emerging adulthood. For example, Doucet et al. (2022), Huang et al. (2022), and Greif-Hackett and Gallagher (2018) emphasized the need for a broader range of placement options, such as ILPs, to support the development and long-term retention of self-sufficiency skills. Other studies highlighted the significance of transitional periods in foster care youths' development. Ball et al. (2021), Edbrooke and Deighton (2021), and Sapiro and Ward (2019) found that targeted support during these critical phases shapes perceptions of equity and strengthens the complexity of skill-building, particularly through the establishment of healthy interpersonal relationships. Further research by Frimpong-Manso (2020), Hokanson et al. (2019), and Moodley et al. (2020) advocated for a shift from traditional independence-oriented strategies to interdependence-based permanency planning that more effectively fosters self-sufficiency. Additionally, scholars have stressed the importance of providing

adequate transitional support and encouraging youth participation in transition-related services (Hobbs et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2019; Nadon, 2020). Finally, studies by Forenza et al. (2018), Lenhart et al. (2015), and Rayburn et al. (2018) emphasized the role of healthy relationships and social connections in facilitating the real-world application of self-sufficiency skills. The literature affirms the value of implementing system-level changes that promote strong caregiver–youth relationships and holistic transitional supports to help foster care youth build and sustain self-sufficiency as they enter adulthood.

This subject area aligns with the study's conceptual framework, which posits that individuals acquire behaviors, values, and skills through observation, imitation, and modeling within social environments. Within the context of foster care, this theory underscores the importance of structured, supportive relationships and environments that enable youth to observe and adopt self-sufficiency behaviors modeled by caregivers, staff, and peers. Participants described their entry into foster care as often cold and isolating, with some recalling being told foster homes were their "home too," yet feeling as though they were treated like prisoners. Participants emphasized the importance of better cultural matching, more thorough vetting of foster parents to ensure genuine care, and stronger preparation for aging out of the system—changes that reflect a desire for environments more conducive to positive development and social learning. Participants' perceptions of needed changes to the foster care system reflect a desire for environments that offer consistent opportunities for skill-building through healthy interpersonal connections and supportive transitional programs. When such modeling is absent or

systems fail to create environments conducive to observational learning, youth may enter adulthood without the necessary tools for independence. Therefore, the suggested reforms identified in this subject area—such as enhanced placement options, independence-focused planning, and relational support—are consistent with SLT's emphasis on learning through social interaction and reinforcement.

Late Introduction to Self-Sufficiency Training

This subject area aligns with findings from the reviewed literature. Several studies have highlighted the significance of pivotal transitional periods in the lives of foster care youth, emphasizing the importance of implementing realistic permanency plans that foster opportunities for skill development (Font et al., 2018; Howze, 2020; Lipp, 2018). Additionally, research has shown that the nature and quality of these transitional phases can shape foster care youths' perceptions of systemic inequalities and influence the complexity of building self-sufficiency skills (Ball et al., 2021; Edbrooke & Deighton, 2021; Sapiro & Ward, 2020). These studies underscore the importance of fostering healthy interpersonal relationships during these critical periods, as such connections serve as foundational supports for successful transitions into adulthood. The consensus found in the literature review emphasizes the critical need for earlier exposure to self-sufficiency training for foster care youth to support their transition to adulthood. Early training in self-sufficiency skills is essential in equipping foster care youth with the necessary competencies to manage independent living. Such training helps foster care youth navigate common challenges such as securing housing, managing finances, and maintaining stable employment. The literature indicates that providing foster care youth

with structured opportunities for skill development during pivotal periods of their transition into adulthood significantly improves their long-term outcomes.

This subject area aligns with the study's conceptual framework, which posits that individuals acquire skills, values, and behaviors through observation, imitation, and modeling within social contexts. In foster care, transitional periods represent critical opportunities for youth to observe and internalize self-sufficiency behaviors modeled by supportive caregivers and professionals. Participants shared that some received formal self-sufficiency training in the foster care system. However, the ages at which they first encountered such training varied, with one participant recalling being introduced at age 10, another at age 14 or 15, and another at age 17. In contrast, other participants shared that they did not receive formal training but learned these skills independently. This variation in experiences reflects the importance of structured support and training during these critical transitional moments. When these phases are designed with realistic permanency planning and healthy interpersonal relationships, they become essential environments for skill-building. However, when such modeling or support is absent, youth may struggle to develop the competencies necessary for independent living. This subject area underscores the importance of intentional structures that support learning through positive social interactions and reinforcement during critical transitional periods. This subject area highlights the delayed introduction of self-sufficiency skills to foster care youth and aligns with the study's conceptual framework, emphasizing the need for timely and supportive interventions that facilitate skill development and successful transitions to adulthood.

Skills Development for Independent Living

This subject area aligns with findings from the reviewed literature. Research conducted by Ball et al. (2021), Edbrooke and Deighton (2021), and Sapiro and Ward (2019) emphasized the importance of transitional periods and the role of healthy interpersonal relationships in promoting skill development among foster care youth. These studies found that youth lacking supportive connections were more likely to experience instability and a lack of focus in career decision-making (Côté et al., 2012; Park et al., 2021; st et al., 2018). This instability negatively affected their ability to develop the self-sufficiency skills necessary for successful career trajectories. In connection with findings discussed in this subject area, other studies also highlighted the importance of placement programs specifically designed to foster skill development for independent living. Therefore, the literature reflects a consistent consensus regarding the need for intentional, skills-based programming to support foster care youth transitioning to adulthood.

Bandura's (1977) SLT provides a foundational lens through which this theme can be understood. The theory maintains that individuals develop behaviors, competencies, and values by observing and engaging with others within their social environments. In the context of foster care, the acquisition of self-sufficiency and career-related skills is often fostered through consistent exposure to supportive relationships and modeled behaviors. Participants shared varied experiences regarding skill development during their time in care. Some reported acquiring a wide range of practical skills—including budgeting, tax preparation, time management, hygiene, and car maintenance—through formal

instruction or caregiver modeling. In contrast, others indicated that they developed these competencies independently, without structured guidance or support from the foster care system. Several participants expressed a sense of isolation, describing how they had to learn essential life skills on their own. These disparities underscore the importance of stable, skill-oriented environments where youth can engage in meaningful social learning. This subject area, therefore, reflects the core principles of SLT by highlighting how access to—or the absence of—modeled behaviors significantly influences the development of self-sufficiency during critical transitional periods.

Influence of Relationships on Skills Building

This subject area aligns with the reviewed literature presented in this study. Research highlights the transitional period as a critical phase for vulnerable foster care youth, shaping their perceptions of systemic inequities and presenting challenges to develop self-sufficiency skills. This phase further underscores the importance of cultivating healthy connections and interpersonal relationships, which serve as foundational supports during the transition to adulthood (Ball et al., 2021; Cote et al., 2012; Edbrooke & Deighton, 2021). Additional research by Gabrielli et al. (2023), Magee et al. (2019), and Yoshioka-Maxwell and Rice (2020) found that foster care youth often face significant difficulties in forming and sustaining meaningful social relationships with caregivers, relatives, mentors, and romantic partners—connections that are vital for navigating the demands of early adulthood. Therefore, this subject area from the current study supports the prevailing consensus in the literature that strong, supportive

relationships are central to developing self-sufficiency skills among foster care youth as they transition out of care.

The conceptual framework for interpreting this subject area is relevant for this study. The theory posits that individuals acquire behaviors, values, and skills through observation, imitation, and modeling within social contexts. In the foster care environment, caregivers, mentors, and peers serve as critical models who influence youth through consistent interaction and relational support. Participants in the current study shared that their ability to build self-sufficiency skills was deeply shaped by the presence or absence of these key social connections during their transition to adulthood. Several participants shared that these connections were helpful in developing essential skills. Some noted that the support they received offered consistent guidance and someone to rely on for information. One participant expressed that such relationships helped retain self-sufficiency skills, while another explained that this support facilitated the acquisition of new skills. However, not all experiences were positive. A few participants expressed uncertainty about whether their relationships contributed meaningfully to skill development, and others reported that, despite forming connections, the relationships did not support their ability to build or maintain self-sufficiency. These variations reinforce the importance of structured and meaningful relational environments, as per SLT and highlight how inconsistent modeling and support can influence foster care youths' ability to navigate adulthood successfully. Therefore, this subject area, focused on the influence of relationships on skills development, aligns with the study's conceptual framework, as

it underscores the role of social learning in shaping foster care youths' acquisition and retention of self-sufficiency skills.

Role Models and Mentorship in Skills Development

This aligns with the reviewed literature, highlighting the significant challenges faced by youth aging out of the foster care system and the pivotal role that role models and mentorship play in developing self-sufficiency skills. Narendorf et al. (2019) and Powers et al. (2018) advocated for mentorship programs emphasizing interdependent living skills rather than focusing solely on independent living, suggesting that supportive relational structures better prepare youth for long-term success. These findings indicate that structured mentoring relationships enhance the social and emotional competencies necessary for sustainable adult functioning. Additional research by Dantzer and Perry (2022) and Spencer et al. (2018) demonstrated the effectiveness of youth-initiated mentoring (YIM) in reengaging school dropouts within the foster care population. These studies underscore the value of empowering foster care youth to select their mentors and develop critical soft skills, reinforcing interdependent living competencies and supporting more effective transitions into adulthood. Therefore, there is a consistent consensus in the literature on the importance of mentorship and role modeling as integral components of skills development for foster care youth transitioning into adult life.

This subject area aligns with the study's conceptual framework, Bandura's (1977) SLT, which posits that individuals learn behaviors, skills, and values through observation, imitation, and modeling within social environments. In the context of foster care, mentors and role models serve as critical social agents who demonstrate adaptive behaviors and

competencies associated with successful adult functioning. Participants shared that foster parents, social workers, and residential staff were particularly influential in this process—foster parents provided guidance, taught life skills, and supported youth through transitions; social workers were remembered for their kindness and advocacy; and residential staff members were credited with holding youth accountable and helping them recognize their potential. These relationships enabled participants to observe and emulate self-sufficiency behaviors, including emotional regulation, decision-making, and interpersonal communication. Mentorship relationships, especially those initiated by the youth, created learning environments grounded in trust and relatability, facilitating the adoption of interdependent living skills. When such role models were absent, participants described feeling unsupported, which impeded their ability to acquire the competencies required for a stable and self-sufficient adulthood. Therefore, this subject area from the study of role models and mentorship in skills development for foster care youth transitioning into adulthood aligns with this conceptual framework.

Missing Knowledge and Preparation for Aging Out

This subject area aligns with the reviewed literature, highlighting the gaps in knowledge and preparation that foster care youth often face when aging out of the system. Studies by Antle et al. (2009), Armstrong-Heimsoth et al. (2021), and Merrin et al. (2020) reported that many youth exit foster care without the foundational knowledge or preparation needed to navigate adulthood, frequently encountering issues such as unstable housing, food insecurity, limited financial literacy, substance use, contact with the justice system, and a lack of supportive interpersonal relationships. Additional

research by Kim et al. (2019) and Thompson et al. (2018) emphasized that youth who did not receive structured support or transitional training often struggled to retain the self-sufficiency skills necessary for independent living. Collectively, these findings underscore a consensus in the literature on the importance of providing foster care youth with sustained skill-building opportunities and targeted support to promote successful and stable transitions into adulthood.

This subject area aligns with the study's conceptual framework, Bandura's (1977) SLT, which states that individuals learn behaviors, skills, and values through observation, imitation, and modeling within social environments. In the foster care context, the absence of structured guidance and consistent role models can significantly impede the learning process necessary for adulthood. Without adequate modeling, foster care youth may struggle to develop and retain critical life skills needed for independence. Participants in the study shared that they were often unprepared for key adult responsibilities upon leaving care. Participants shared the need for learning more about financial literacy (e.g., money management, understanding credit cards and debt, purchasing a house or car), educational preparation for college, basic life skills (such as home maintenance and car repair), and employment-related skills (like navigating workplace expectations). The lack of exposure to these skills during care left many participants unprepared for independent living, reflecting the consequences of a system failing to provide consistent opportunities for observational learning and practice. Therefore, this subject area underscores the need to expand foster care youths' knowledge and preparedness in self-sufficiency skills to better support their transition into adulthood.

Policy and Structural Changes for Youth Aging Out

This subject area aligns with the literature reviewed, emphasizing the critical need for policy and structural reforms to better support youth aging out of the foster care system. Research by Lalonde et al. (2021) and Rome and Raskin (2019) indicated that a major barrier to improving the retention of self-sufficiency skills among foster care youth lies in professionals' and researchers' insufficient understanding of trauma and the corresponding need for comprehensive transitional supports. Additional studies by Chun (2020) and Prince et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of enhancing the quality and accessibility of service programming. Furthermore, Armstrong-Heimsoth et al. (2021) and Goemans et al. (2018) emphasized the value of incorporating the lived experiences of foster care youth who have transitioned into adulthood to inform more effective services and policy development. These findings reflect a consistent consensus in the literature regarding the urgent need for systemic change to ensure more stable and successful transitions to adulthood for foster care youth.

This subject area aligns with the study's conceptual framework, Bandura's (1977) SLT, which contends that individuals learn behaviors, skills, and values through observation, imitation, and modeling within social environments. In the foster care context, the absence of structured guidance and consistent adult role models can significantly hinder this learning process, especially during the transition to adulthood. Participants shared that they were often unprepared for key adult responsibilities upon exiting care, attributing this to a lack of formal modeling and support. Participants noted missing instructions in essential areas such as money management, understanding credit

and debt, purchasing a house or car, college preparation, home and car maintenance, and workplace navigation. This absence of practical, real-world skill exposure disrupted opportunities for observational learning, an essential mechanism of SLT, leaving many to struggle independently. These participants' experiences illustrate how limited access to structured learning environments and adult mentors may prevent the internalization of self-sufficiency skills, ultimately impeding a successful and stable transition into adulthood. Therefore, this subject area regarding the need for policy and structural changes to support youth aging out of the foster care system and transitioning into adulthood is consistent with the principles of SLT, which emphasize the importance of modeled behavior and supportive environments in skill development.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of this study included the potential for bias stemming from my extensive professional background working with youth in the foster care system. Over the course of three decades, I held a range of positions within residential and congregate care settings, including child care worker, shift supervisor, house manager, and program supervisor. At the organizational level, I served as assistant director, overseeing five distinct programs, as vice president of residential and treatment services, overseeing several psychiatric residential programs, and ultimately as chief operating officer of a private not-for-profit child welfare organization. Due to these prior professional experiences and my role as the researcher, it was essential to maintain transparency regarding any existing relationships with study participants. I had prior professional contact with five participants and disclosed this as part of the study's limitations to

enhance credibility. Recognizing that these relationships may have introduced issues related to positionality and power dynamics, I implemented member checking by providing transcribed interviews to participants for review. This process allowed participants to verify the accuracy of their statements and make any necessary corrections, thereby reinforcing the validity of their reported experiences.

Another limitation of this study was restricted access to participants due to concerns related to the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. To prioritize health and safety, participants were given the option to participate in interviews either in person or via Zoom, a secure video conferencing platform. All participants chose to use Zoom; however, several experienced technical difficulties, such as challenges logging in and downloading the application to their devices. Additionally, the free version of Zoom imposed a 40-minute session limit, requiring some interviews to be continued immediately in a second session. Despite these logistical constraints, no interview exceeded the 45-minute to 1-hour time frame communicated to participants in advance. All interviews were conducted in a confidential and respectful environment within my home to ensure privacy and participant comfort. To build rapport and trust with participants, at the beginning of each Zoom session, they were reminded that they could decline to answer any question or discontinue the interview at any time should they experience trauma, stress, anxiety, or discomfort.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the three overarching themes and 13 subthemes identified in this study, several key recommendations are to improve the transition of

foster care youth into adulthood by enhancing their ability to acquire and retain self-sufficiency skills, particularly through the development of meaningful interpersonal relationships with caregivers. The findings underscore the importance of fostering stable, supportive environments where foster care youth can learn essential life skills through consistent modeling, mentorship, and emotional connection. Interpersonal relationships with caregivers emerged as a critical component in skill acquisition, as these connections provide not only practical guidance but also the emotional security needed to navigate the complexities of adulthood. Therefore, the recommendations presented here are rooted in both the lived experiences of the participants and the conceptual framework of SLT, which emphasizes learning through observation, modeling, and social reinforcement. These recommendations also aim to inform future policy, practice, and research directions for child welfare professionals and stakeholders.

Expand Early Exposure to Self-Sufficiency Training

This study revealed that many foster care youth receive limited or delayed exposure to essential life skills such as budgeting, cooking, hygiene, and time management. Participants who had positive, supportive relationships with caregivers often acquired these skills earlier and more effectively, underscoring the role of interpersonal connection in practical learning. Child welfare systems should incorporate self-sufficiency training beginning in early adolescence and delivered consistently throughout a youth's time in care. These trainings should be embedded within daily interactions with caregivers, who must be equipped to model, teach, and reinforce these skills. Future studies should examine the long-term impact of early self-sufficiency

training that is integrated within strong caregiver-youth relationships, with attention to how timing, frequency, and delivery methods affect skill retention.

Strengthen Interpersonal Relationships Between Foster Care Youth and Caregivers

Participants emphasized the transformative role of caregivers who provided emotional support, guidance, and accountability. Those with strong bonds were more likely to report confidence in their adult readiness and life skills. Agencies should prioritize placement stability and caregiver training that focuses on trauma-informed, relational caregiving. Programs that encourage youth to engage meaningfully with their caregivers, such as through mentorship programs or family-based interventions, should be expanded. Further research is needed to explore the specific relational dynamics between foster care youth and caregivers that most effectively support skill-building and long-term self-sufficiency.

Improve Transitional Planning and Support

Many participants shared that they were unprepared for adulthood, citing a lack of exit planning, housing options, financial literacy, and emotional readiness. Those who had strong relationships with caregivers or staff were more likely to feel supported and less isolated during the transition. Agencies must adopt comprehensive transition planning protocols that begin early and are personalized to each youth's goals. Caregivers should be active partners in the process, providing ongoing emotional and practical support. More investigation is needed into how the structure and consistency of transition planning, including the role of caregivers, impact outcomes like housing stability, educational attainment, and employment.

Enhance Mentorship and Role Model Access

Participants described the positive influence of mentors, foster parents, and residential staff who taught them life skills and provided emotional encouragement. These relationships often compensated for gaps in formal training. Child welfare systems should facilitate youth-initiated mentoring (YIM) programs, encourage natural mentoring relationships with adults in youth's lives, and provide training to mentors to promote healthy, interdependent living. Future research should evaluate the outcomes of mentorship programs that emphasize long-term relational continuity and interdependence, particularly in relation to self-sufficiency and emotional resilience.

Reform Placement Practices and Cultural Matching

Participants expressed frustration with being placed in homes that felt impersonal or culturally incompatible. Positive experiences often included caregivers who respected their identities and invested in their personal growth. Placement decisions should consider cultural, racial, and relational compatibility to foster meaningful connections between youth and caregivers. Agencies should expand recruitment and support for diverse foster families and emphasize cultural humility in caregiver training. Further studies should assess how cultural matching and emotional compatibility between caregivers and youth influence self-sufficiency outcomes and relational stability post-transition.

Promote Youth Voice in Systemic Decision-Making

Former foster care youth in this study advocated for stronger input into the decisions affecting their lives, including placement, transition planning, and access to

services. Participants also emphasized that decision-makers should listen more to the lived experiences of foster care youth and caregivers. Policymakers and agency leaders should implement structures that amplify youth voice, such as advisory councils, youth-led evaluations, and participatory program design. Caregivers should also be empowered to advocate for foster care youth, creating a united front. Research should explore the effectiveness of foster care youth-led decision-making processes and how caregiver support influences the youth's capacity to participate in systemic change.

Invest in Training for Caregivers and Child Welfare Professionals

Training should be enhanced for foster parents, case managers, and residential staff in areas such as trauma-informed care, skill-building facilitation, and relational engagement. Ensuring that adults in the system are well-equipped to guide youth through developmental transitions is key to improving long-term outcomes. Research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of different caregiver and staff training models and their direct impact on foster care youth's ability to transition to adulthood.

Reform Policies to Address Systemic and Structural Barriers

Structural reforms are needed to address the longstanding challenges that prevent foster care youth from retaining self-sufficiency skills post-emancipation. These include extending care beyond age 18, increasing oversight and accountability in service provision, and aligning policies with a trauma-informed, youth-centered framework. Further research should investigate the outcomes of policy reforms aimed at extending services for youth aging out of foster care, as well as the barriers to implementing such reforms.

Enhance Access to Education, Vocational Training, and Career Preparation

To improve employment outcomes, greater access to scholarships, financial aid, and vocational training should be made available. Programs should incorporate career exploration, soft skills development, and real-world work experience to prepare youth for sustainable careers. Emphasis should be placed on both college and trade school pathways to meet diverse needs and aspirations. Further research should evaluate the effectiveness of vocational training programs and career preparation strategies and explore how they contribute to the long-term economic self-sufficiency of foster care youth.

Collectively, these recommendations aim to foster a more supportive, developmentally appropriate, and equitable system that equips foster care youth with the necessary tools to transition successfully into adulthood. Ongoing research is needed to assess the effectiveness of these recommendations in improving foster care youth outcomes and to ensure that policies and programs evolve to meet the ever-changing needs of this vulnerable population.

Implications

The implications of this research are both practical and policy-oriented, highlighting areas for systemic reform, professional development, and further investigation. The findings emphasize that while some foster care youth acquire self-sufficiency skills through formal training or mentorship, many are left to learn these critical life skills independently, often without adequate support. This lack of consistent preparation contributes to the difficulties they face in adulthood, such as housing

instability, financial insecurity, and weak social support systems. The study underscores the urgent need to implement structured, trauma-informed programs that not only teach practical skills but also foster emotional resilience through strong interpersonal relationships with caregivers and mentors.

For policymakers, the findings suggest that aging-out support must extend beyond simple skill instruction and should be deeply embedded within relational and developmental contexts. This includes designing systems that prioritize cultural compatibility in placements, youth voice in planning, and long-term mentorship that continues post-transition. Agencies and child welfare organizations should integrate feedback from foster care youth themselves in developing policies and services, ensuring that their lived experiences guide reforms.

From a research perspective, these findings highlight the need for further longitudinal studies to explore the long-term impact of early self-sufficiency training and mentorship on outcomes like education, employment, and emotional well-being. Additionally, more research is needed on how caregiver-youth relationships directly influence skill retention and adult functioning, particularly across diverse cultural and socioeconomic groups.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of former foster care youth in acquiring and retaining self-sufficiency skills as they transitioned into adulthood. Through the analysis of three overarching themes and 13 subthemes, participants described key factors that supported or hindered their development, including the timing and delivery of skills

training, the role of interpersonal relationships, particularly with caregivers and mentors, and the structural challenges of the foster care system. Their voices illuminated systemic gaps in support, particularly in transitional planning, mentoring, and the accessibility of practical life skills instruction.

Grounded in Bandura's (1977) SLT, the study reinforces the critical role of modeling, observation, and interpersonal reinforcement in the development of self-sufficiency. Participants consistently pointed to the influence of supportive adults—whether foster parents, staff, mentors, or social workers—as instrumental in shaping their skills and resilience. Conversely, the absence of such relationships often left youth feeling isolated and unprepared. These findings highlight the urgent need for systems and policies that prioritize consistent, trust-based relationships and that offer earlier, more individualized life skills preparation.

The study contributes original insights by centering the perspectives of those with firsthand experience in the child welfare system. It emphasizes the value of youth voice in shaping policy and practice and offers data-driven recommendations for improving service delivery across child welfare programs. While the study was limited by potential researcher bias and constraints related to virtual data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic, the depth of participant reflections offers a compelling call for reform.

Finally, this research calls for a more relational, trauma-informed, and developmentally appropriate approach to supporting foster care youth as they transition into adulthood. By enhancing interpersonal connections, improving transitional planning, and restructuring skills development programs to be more accessible and consistent,

stakeholders can better equip youth for long-term success. Future research should continue to explore the intersection of trauma, attachment, and self-sufficiency skill retention, while elevating the voices of foster care youth in the design and implementation of supportive services.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Hello, Future Study Participant! I am grateful for your anticipated participation in this research study. As discussed, I would conduct this interview to gather data concerning your perceptions of experiences in building self-sufficiency skills as you transition into adulthood. Due to COVID-19 protocols, you can interview through a secure, confidential Zoom link or in person in a private office setting. I will ensure that the interview in this research study is recorded and transcribed. You will receive a transcribed copy of the interview to check for accuracy. I will share the data collected from this interview in my forthcoming dissertation, contributing to the existing body of literature. You would have the right to pause or discontinue the interview at any point. Do you have any questions or comments before you start this process?

In the research study, study participants and I would work in collaboration to de-identify the data at the earliest possible stage to minimize the risk of inappropriate disclosure of personal information. The de-identification process would remove direct identifiers such as names, addresses, or telephone numbers from the raw data and database.

In the research study, students take precautions to avoid disclosing to anyone else, including the instructor, any part of the data that is linkable to a participant's identity.

As part of the research study guidelines, payments, compensation, reimbursement, free services, extra credit, or other gifts will not be a benefit of the project.

Dear Ms. Jane Doe,

I trust this letter finds you in good health and spirits. I am a student in Walden University's PhD in Human Services program. I am contacting you for a significant endeavor related to my capstone research.

For my research study, I am exploring individuals' perceptions of their experiences developing self-sufficiency skills during transitioning from the foster care system to adulthood. I am contacting you to inquire if you would be interested in participating or if you know someone who would be willing to share their valuable experiences.

Participation in this study involves completing an Informed Consent statement (which I would promptly email you) and participating in an interview conducted via Zoom or in a private office. The anticipated interview time would be 45 minutes to an hour in duration. There would be ongoing contact to ensure that the data collected during your interview is accurate.

If you are interested or have any inquiries, please contact me.

Thank you for considering this opportunity, and I appreciate your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

[Your Full Name]
[Your Contact Information]
[Your Institutional Affiliation (if applicable)]

I will email this Informed Consent to future interviewees:

Dear [Interviewee's Name],

I hope this message finds you well. My name is [Your Name], and I am a doctoral candidate currently undertaking a research study as part of my doctoral capstone. I am inviting you to participate in an interview that would contribute valuable insights to my research.

I request your permission to conduct an audio-recorded interview to last approximately 45 minutes to an hour. The information gathered during the interviews, including both the recordings and transcripts, would be integral to the analysis conducted for this study. Upon completion of the research study, copies of the interview recording(s) and transcript will be available to you upon request.

Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. If you choose to participate now, please know that you retain the right to change your decision at any point during the process. Your comfort and autonomy in this research endeavor are of utmost importance.

If you have any questions or concerns or need further clarification before deciding to participate, please feel free to contact me at [Your Contact Information]. I am more than happy to address any queries you may have.

Thank you for considering participation in this research study. I appreciate your unique perspective and willingness to contribute to this research study.

Warm regards,

[Your Full Name]
[Your Contact Information]
[Your Institutional Affiliation (if applicable)]

In this research study, participating in this interview would not entail any risks beyond those encountered in typical daily life. As a study participant, it is noteworthy that there would be no direct benefits.

Privacy: Upon request from the interviewee, I will share interview recordings and full transcripts with the interviewee. I will share redacted transcripts, ensuring the removal of identifying information, with authorized university faculty for use in analysis.

Contacts and Questions: In this research study, if you wish to discuss your rights as an interviewee privately, you may contact Dr. Leilani Endicott, the Walden University representative, at (612) 312-1210. Please do not hesitate to share any questions or concerns you might have.

If you agree to the interview as described above, kindly reply to this email with the statement “I consent.”

I appreciate your willingness to participate in this research study.

Best regards,

[Your Full Name]
[Your Contact Information]
[Your Institutional Affiliation (if applicable)]

Research Question: How do former foster care youth perceive self-sufficiency after aging out of the Foster Care system?

Background and Introductory Questions

1. Please share with me the reason(s) why you entered the foster care system.

2. Could you tell me how many placements you were in, including the type of placement (e.g., family foster home, emergency shelter)?
3. What were some similarities in the behavior management systems in the placement(s)?
4. What were some differences in the behavior management systems in the placement(s)?
5. What would you change if you had the power to change one thing related to the behavior management system?

Experience with the Foster Care System Questions

1. How would you describe your experiences in the foster care system?
2. How would you describe the connections (peer, staff, case manager, foster parent) you made while in the foster care system?
3. Currently, in what ways do you think the foster care system would have affected your life?
4. What would be the one thing that you would change about the foster care system if you had the power?

Self-Sufficiency and Transitional Support Questions

1. At what age were you first introduced to self-sufficiency training in the foster care system, and why?
2. What skills towards self-sufficiency do you think you developed while in the foster care system?
3. How do you think the connections (peer, staff, case manager, foster parent) you made while in the foster care system affected your skills building towards self-sufficiency?
4. Who would you identify, if any, as the most influential person who positively affected your building and retention of self-sufficiency skills?
5. What are some things you wished you would have learned while in the foster care system to assist you in your self-sufficiency when you aged out?

6. What could the decision-makers (legislature, courts, state/federal agencies) do to assist youth aging out of the foster care system and transitioning into adulthood?

I want to thank you for your participation in this study. Do you have anything else to share? Any questions or observations? The study participants would receive my card with contact information after the interview.

The content in this section will provide the study design and platform, informed consent and IRB authorization, participation selection, and interview process for this research study.

This research study would use in-person or virtual interviews utilizing the Zoom video conferencing platform (Archibald et al., 2019; Falter et al., 2022). I would utilize the Zoom platform because of the capabilities for private, secure, recorded, and transcribed interviews. The qualitative design chosen for this study is generic, as deemed appropriate, to explore the fundamental nature of how former foster care youth perceive self-sufficiency during the transition from foster care to adulthood. According to Kahlke (2014), a generic qualitative design encompasses studies that do not strictly adhere to one established methodology, allowing researchers to explore the boundaries of established methodologies. This approach would be relevant to understanding better how youth become self-sufficient through the retention of longer-term skill-building post-transition into adulthood.

A procedure would include obtaining informed consent validation and authorization from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before the commencement of any formal parts of the study.

For this research study, participants would be former foster care youth (males and females) who have aged out of the foster care system. The participants' selections would be from state-funded and non-profit agencies providing transitional support in Kansas. Participants would be at least 18 years old and have resided in a residential/congregate care facility during foster care experience.

In the procedures, semi-formal individual interviews would be conducted with the participants in a private office setting. The recorded interviews would be through video

with a backup audio recorder to capture interview data. The duration of the semi-formal interviews would be 45 minutes to an hour. The open-ended interview questions would allow follow-up questions to extract additional data if needed.