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Improving Child Welfare: African Canadian Youth's Postcare Options

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Abstract

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MSW, York University, 2005

BS, York University, 1989

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Thousands of youth exit Ontario's Child Welfare System (CWS) each year and perform poorly after returning to the community. However, understanding African Canadian youths' perspectives about their experiences and needs was problematic because no outcome data was available in the Canadian database. Using a phenomenological design grounded in a constructivist framework, the purpose of this study was to explore the meaning(s) that African Canadian youth ascribed to positive outcomes on exiting the CWS. A purposeful sample included 10 participants (6 females and 4 males, ranging in age from 19-24). The data collection method was face-to-face interviews with hand coding used to transcribe the data. Inductive analysis of themes and member checking ensured the trustworthiness of the interpretations. The 9 resulting themes related to concerns about their stay in care, as well as readiness for exiting CWS successfully: in-care instability (multiple foster homes and changes), unpreparedness for the transition, counselling/lack of counselling, behavioral management, education, maintaining motivation homelessness, shelter living, extended care connections, Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM), and Youth Voice in decision making. These themes represented issues that African Canadian youth believed would improve transitioning from CWS to independent living, particularly in negotiating community connections and resources. Social change can occur when policy makers and stakeholders acknowledge the problems and special needs of these youth by implementing the resources, services, and supportive programs to assure continuity of care and more successful outcomes.

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Dedication

This research study is dedicated to my husband, Lindel McIntosh, sons Jason and Jordan, and my parents Nathan and Anora Sutton. Together these individuals have been a source of enormous strength and inspiration in my journey through this exercise, each in their own way helped me through the various rough spots along the way.

A special thanks needs to be given to my mother. Over the last few months her failing health took a severe toll on her mind; increasingly she would forget our conversations and eventually she lost all touch with what I was doing. However, she had always taught me the importance of education and the value of following my dreams; she also never faltered in her prayers, asking the Lord to guide me with wisdom and understanding in all my endeavors. To each of these fine persons I give my sincere gratitude.

In my mind a dissertation could not have happened without the support, kind words of encouragement, and skills of your friends. For this, I wish to give a special thanks to all my friends.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Each year in Ontario, Canada, thousands of youth exit the Child Welfare System (CWS) and return to their communities to live independently; however, many of the young people are unprepared for the challenges of independent living (Collin, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Courtney, Foster, & Osgood, 2010; Tweddle, 2007). Researchers (e.g., Mendes, Johnson, & Moslehuddin, 2011; Tweddle, 2007) showed that many lacked the necessary skills and support to bridge the gap from a system of dependence to independent living. A significant number of youth neither returned to live with parents or family members nor completed their high school education after leaving CWS (Rutman, Hubbestey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007, Tweddle, 2007). Transitioning youth face myriad of challenges, such as homelessness, unemployment or underemployment, involvement in the criminal justice system, along with attendant mental health issues (Dworsky & Napolitano, 2013; Rutman et al., 2007, Tweddle, 2007).

Challenges often prevent youth from developing and maintaining healthy lifestyles or experiencing positive developmental trajectories, which often result in them becoming burdens to the community and society (Rutman et al.,2007; Tweddle, 2007). The literature had little information about the preparatory skills for independent living the youth received prior to their exit from care (Mendes et al., 2011; Tweddle, 2007). Researchers, both nationally and internationally, raised concerns about the need for continued support for youth during this transitioning period (Collin et al., 2010; Courtney et al. 2010; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Tweddle, 2007).

In January of 2013, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) implemented an action plan- adopted from *My REAL Life Book,* (2013)-intended to support youth transitioning to independent living. This action plan included life skills training, ongoing individual and financial support, supportive parenting and living skills, continued access to education, and an option for youth under the age of 18 to return to care if they experience difficulties after aging out of CWS (MCYS, 2013). These skills, believed to influence positive outcomes for independent living, included such experiences as having a stable home for over 1 year, completed high school, access to postsecondary education, and life and independent living skills training (Tweddle, 2007, p. 11). Similar precursors for positive outcomes are in other studies (Courtney et al., 2009; Mendes et al., 2011). While the goal of the MCYS action plan was to benefit all youth transitioning from CWS (MCYS, 2013), I was unable to find any study with a focus on how African Canadian youth in particular experienced this transition.

Researchers out of Britain and the United States argued that some key factors preventing successful outcomes for ethnic minority youth were identification, marginalization, oppression (Barn, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007), and social exclusion (Stein, 2008). The proposed MCYS Action Plan did not directly address these issues. Hence, it became difficult to see how the challenges faced by the African Canadian youth transitioning from the CWS to independent living would benefit from it. This study may fill this gap by exploring the lived experiences of African Canadian youth living in Ontario. Emphasis was on the meanings that youth ascribed to the aging out

process, positive outcomes of independent living, and tools or mechanisms they would need to support them in achieving these goals.

Background of the Study

Outcomes for African Canadian youth with a history of child welfare involvement living independently in the community remained an increasingly topical issue (Clarke, 2011). The key areas of concern revolved around their inability to successfully adjust to living independently when they aged out of care (Clarke, 2011; Teklu, 2012). Canadian statistics did not have disaggregated data on youth returning to the community (Teklu, 2012; Tweddle, 2007). This statistical gap meant that it was not known how African Canadian youth fared in their transition from care to independent living. However, international studies found that ethnic minority youth's transition experiences were generally far more challenging than for their Caucasian counterparts (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007).

According to Daining and DePanfilis (2007), African American youth in care experienced disparities in the provision of services, as well as disparity when it came to permanency planning. Some consequences of these disparities were that African American youth were more likely than other children to remain in care longer; less likely to experience family reunification or adoption; and after leaving CWS, encountered greater challenges securing education, home stability, and employment, among other issues (Avery, 2011; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007).

While Daining and DePanfilis (2007) found no differences in the incidence of maltreatment by CWS based on race, concerns over disparity occurred in the areas of service provision and permanency planning for African American children.

Disparity might account for why these children remain in care longer than their peers. Other researchers (i.e., Avery, 2011; Barn, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis 2007; Stein, 2008) from the United States and Britain suggested that ethnic minority youth had to contend with discrimination and racial/cultural identity issues. These issues form barriers for these young people to access important community resources, such as, housing and employment, which lead to feelings of social exclusion and marginalization (Avery, 2011; Barn, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis 2007; Stein, 2008).

The inadequacy of services and lack of (culturally specific) permanency planning while in care, combined with the host of discriminatory barriers confronting them on exiting care, may mean that African American youth were not prepared to deal with the challenges ahead of them. Hence, young people failed to complete their education and experienced homelessness and unemployment in greater numbers than their European transition peers (Avery, 2011; Barn, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis 2007; Stein, 2008**).** Data, such as these, were crucial to understanding how the different populations leaving CWS care perceived success in the transition to independent living. However, because Canadian statistics did not provide such disaggregated data, what meaning(s) African Canadian youth ascribed to a successful transition was unknown.

Arguing that Canadian research did not provide disaggregated data on CWS youth in transition was not the same as saying that research in Canada could not inform the

present study. In fact, two Canadian studies were useful. Rutman et al. (2007) detailed youth transition challenges, such as their inability to maintain stable housing, finding employment, completing high school education, and accessing governmental support.

Tweddle (2007) detailed similar challenges facing the transitioning youth, but also went on to cite a study by Silva -Wayne (1995) about how a small group 19 of youth, ranging in age from 16 to 26, successfully transitioned from the CWS in Ontario. In Silva-Wayne study, 19 youth exhibited resilience, despite many adversities, after aging out of care in Ontario. Among the outcomes cited were positive educational attainment, stability in housing, increased self-esteem, positive social relationships, and an improved sense of identity. The successes of the 19 youth in this study were their involvement with positive role models and path finders. The researchers showed that the youth were already resilient. However, the extra support enabled them to move beyond their adversities to achieve positive outcomes.

Similarly, to Tweddle (2007), other researchers argued that social support (i.e., family or extended family, peers, voluntary organizations, religious organizations, etc. were essential factors in African American youth's successful transitional outcomes (Collins et al., 2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Rutman et al., 2016; Wade, 2008). With the right community supports, transitioning youth could build resilience, even when the CWS failed to properly prepare them for the aging out process (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Dolan, 2008). Masten (2008) argued that resilience was "ordinary magic" because it "appears to be a common phenomenon that results from the operation of basic human 'adaptional' systems" (p. 227). Furthermore, resilience is a positive

adaptation in spite of adversities (Bottrell, 2009; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2008, Theron & Malindi, 2010; Ungar, 2013). Resilience is a crucial element in transitioning youths' repertoire of abilities.

A reason why so many young people failed to transition successfully was that they were not equipped with adequate (including culturally specific) postcare preparatory services (Mendes et al., 2011; Tweddle, 2007). In addition, transition youth were expected to transform into adult status once they exited care, even though they had little or no preparation or adjustment skills for community living (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Mendes et al., 2011; Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott, & Tracy, 2010; Osgood, Foster & Courtney, 2010; Shin, 2009).

Whether or not this expectation was true of the CWS or other stakeholders in the Canadian context was hard to say. However, according to the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Society (OACAS, 2011) data, youth in the CWS had only a 44% graduation rate compared to their community peers with an 81% rate. However, the racial/ethnic backgrounds of the youth in statistics remained unknown. But more specifically, not known is what meanings that African Canadian youth ascribed to a successful transition. This gap in the Canadian literature was one the present study sought to help fill. The data gathered from the study would not only encourage further inquiry into the needs of African Canadian youth in transition from the CWS, but also could serve as a basis for recommendations to policy makers and professionals in the field.

Problem Statement

A lack of postcare support exists for African Canadian youth, who have transitioned to the community from the CWS. The specific problems of transitioned youth were well documented in the literature (Collin & Ward, 2011; Dixon, 2008; Osgood et al., 2010; Shin, 2009). Despite the many attempts to address these problems, they remained persistent and unresolved (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Zlotnik, 2009, 2012). These young people lack preparatory skills and support services, leaving them vulnerable to an array of physical and emotional abuses, homelessness, problems with the criminal justice system, and early parenting (Mendes et al.,2011; Osgood et al., 2010; Rutman, 2016; Tweddle, 2007). While knowledge was available about the general population of youth from the CWS struggles after care, the struggles of the African Canadian youth are relatively unknown.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the factors that affected African Canadian youth transitioning from the CWS. The knowledge gained may help to construct programs and target resources, so that these young people may experience more successful outcomes. The OACAS (2013) slated resources, including life skills training and support, said to be beneficial for the successful transition of youth returning to the community. While data are available on transitional failures for the aggregate CWS youth population (Rutman et al., 2007; Tweddle, 2007), those of African Canadian youth in particular required investigation. Examined from the worldview of young people, the primary expectation of this research study was to explore and clarify the meaning(s) that

African Canadian youth attach to the transition process. Reducing the challenges, they face could increase the possibility for successful transition to independent living.

Research Questions

RQ1: What was the meaning of a successful transition of aging out of care for African Canadian youth from foster homes in Ontario?

RQ2: What were the perceptions of African Canadian youth of the traits or characteristics found in who successfully age out of the system?

Nature of the Study

This qualitative study had a phenomenological method designed to explore the lived experiences of African Canadian youth aging out of the CWS. The sample consisted of youth between 18 and 24 at the time of transition. The focus was on their understanding of becoming an adult almost immediately after leaving the CWS, as well as identifying factors that might lead to their successful transition.

The phenomenological design was useful to this study because its focus was on the individuals' descriptions of the phenomenon rather than the researcher's interpretation of these descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). The application of epoche forced me to refrain from making judgments about the perceived phenomena, thereby remaining open to new knowledge (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a group of thoughts or ideas organized to provide focus or guidance to the study (Jabareen, 2009). The basis of this study was a constructivist framework undergirded by resilience, social capital, and youth

empowerment theories. Constructivist philosophy has a focus on the thesis of ontological relativity, defined as multiple ways of understanding the same phenomenon (Patton, 2014). For the constructivist, reality is a construction of the meanings and values individuals ascribed to things (Lincoln & Guba, 1994; Schwandt, 1994).

Individuals make meaning based on particular cultural values and understandings (Furman, Jackson, Downey, & Shears, 2003; Neimeyer, 1993). Patton (2014) asserted that no two individuals can have the same worldview because different individuals ascribe different meanings to the same object. Youth constructed meanings from their experiences living in the CWS. Through the narrative of these experiences, knowledge was developed to create interventions for successful transitioning.

Because a principal objective of this study was to construct categories and concepts relevant to developing a framework for better understanding African Canadian youth experiences, resilience theory became crucial. Resilience theory provided a description of the positive adaptation process of the individual in the face of adversities (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2008). The theory variables include a combination of risk and protective factors (Masten, 2008).

For this study, risk factors related to situations involving historical trauma, poverty, discrimination, among other such negative experiences, as associated with poor outcomes, such as health or behavioral issues (Wexler, DiFuvio, & Burke, 2009). The protective factor refers to prevention strategies the individual can use to enhance coping (Masten, 2006; Wexler et al., 2009). For example, youth could align themselves with a trusted teacher to assist them in weaving through the difficulties of the school system to

better achieve educational goals. The three constituents of the protective factor were the individual, the family, and the community (Wexler et al., 2009). Many researchers (i.e., Bottrell, 2009; Dolan, 2008; Stein, 2008) showed the effectiveness of the protective factor when used as an instrument to guide resources, desired outcomes are achieved.

The theory of social capital has multiple definitions (Stanton-Salazar 2010). According to one definition, social capital consists of relationships among individuals, including their norms, values, beliefs, and cultural practices (Bottrell, 2009; Reynolds, 2009). While elusive in its characteristics (Barn, 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 2010), this theory could be beneficial in understanding and enhancing youth development. With reflective understandings of their cultural norms, networks, and practices, African Canadian youth could find help to make more informed meaning of their experiences transitioning from the CWS to independent living.

Another theory critical to this study was youth empowerment. This theory has an emphasis on a collective effort towards lasting change (Jennings et al., 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 2010; Zimmerman, 2011, 2013). Youth have the power and the opportunity to direct their own path and contribute to decisions pertinent to their lives. For the present research, the linkage of social capital, resilience, and youth empowerment theories occurred through mechanisms as bridging, bonding, buffering, and adaptation (Reynolds, 2009; Tracy, 2009; Weller, 2010).

Bridging refers to linking youth with internal supports, the process encompassed youth's immediate and extended family members. Bonding relates to connecting the youth with external resources, such as school, employers, and mental health resources

(Tracy, 2009). Buffering includes the protective factors through which the youth could alter situations for a better outcome. Adaptation is the measurement of these outcomes (Bottrell, 2009; Masten, 2001; Stein, 2008).

A conceptual framework of resilience, social capital, and youth empowerment theories enabled me to explore possible positive outcomes for African Canadian youth aged out of the CWS. A comprehensive framework of this sort had not been applied previously in understanding African Canadian youth CWS transition experiences, and hence, the aim of this study was to begin building such a framework.

Definition of Terms

African Canadian youth: African descent individuals, as well as the (Caribbean) diaspora who were living in Canada (Clarke, 2012).

Care leaver: The age when youth moved from a CWS (Britain) of stable care to independent living.

Child Welfare System (CWS): A group of governmental agencies developed for the protection of children (OACAS, 2013).

Crown ward: A child or youth parented by the state; as such, the state had the rights and responsibilities of providing care and protection for that child/youth until they turned 18-years-old (OACAS, 2012; In Ontario prior to 2013 the age of leaving the CWS was 16 years.)

Over-representation: An excessive number or disproportionate amount (Fluke et al., 2011).

Postcare support: Resources given to the youth while transitioning to independent living (Tweddle, 2007).

Youth: A young person between the ages of 18-24 and used interchangeably with transitioned youth (18- to 24-years-old; OACAS, 2013).

Youth transition: An age when a youth moved from a CWS of stable care to independent living (OACAS, 2012).

Assumptions

A central tenet of the constructivist view is that human beings, either individually or collectively, make meaning of their experience (Neimeyer, 1993). Youth experiences varied, therefore attaching different meanings to their transitioning processes. The bases of meanings are constructions of beliefs, culture, values, and norms. According to Neimeyer (1993), "Belief systems are socially constructed rather than given, and it can be built differently in different cultures" (p. 222). I assumed was that

1. Participants provided their perspective and worldview.
2. Factors contributing to African Canadian youth unsuccessful transition were drawn from their experiences.
3. The data collected during the interview process might enhance knowledge in the field of child welfare.

Delimitations

The participants were youth of African descent between the ages of 18-24, who transitioned from the CWS within the last 3 years. The youth resided in the Brampton and Toronto areas, were former crown wards, and lived in either a residential group home or

a foster home setting. The goal of this study was to add to current knowledge of the aging out process only information of cultural significance relating to African Canadian youth.

Limitations of the Study

There were three limitations:

1. The study, restricted to two Ontario cities, meant that African Canadian youth in the surrounding provinces experiencing similar challenges were excluded.
2. The study involved only youth who transitioned from CWS at the age of maturity (18-24). Therefore, the experiences of African Canadian youth who ran away from care or signed themselves out of care before the age of 18 years were excluded from this study.
3. Until January 2013, the age of maturity in Ontario was 16 years, an age at which a young person was still considered a child (UN, 2013). Thus, while many were nearing their 18th birthday and living independently, a lack of consent to participate from a parent or legal guardian limited their inclusion in the study.

Significance of the Study

No Canadian scholars had addressed transitional outcomes for African Canadian youth from the CWS. This study provided factors that might lead to successful outcomes for African Canadian youth transitioning from the CWS to independent living. When stakeholders and policy makers understand the factors necessary for young people's successful outcomes, then there could be better preparation in meeting their needs.

At the time of the study, youth who transitioned from the CWS were more likely than other youth (who left their parental homes) to end up undereducated, unemployed, or underemployed, and living below the poverty line (Osgood et al., 2010; Tweddle, 2007). This issue persisted without resolution (Clarke, 2011; Teklu, 2012). Given the lack of research knowledge, it was unclear how African Canadian youth were benefitting from established programs and resources. This study might form the foundation in the Canadian literature upon which other researchers could build.

Summary

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the study, including the background information to the problem. Additionally, research questions, the nature of the study, conceptual framework, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the significance of the study were introduced and discussed. I focused on African Canadian youth transitioning from the CWS who might be at risk for failure in experiencing a successful transition to independent living. Legislative authorities and mental health professionals in the CWS who made decisions affecting the lives of these young people needed to become aware of their psycho social condition after they leave the structured care of the CWS. Using a phenomenological method, participants described their CWS transition experiences without interference from me. A constructivist conceptual framework that incorporates resilience, social capital, and youth empowerment theories were useful in providing an understanding of how successful transitions for the African Canadian youth can occur.

Findings from this study might help inform policy makers and program developers on how to construct programs and information sessions that may assist

African Canadian youth transitioning to independent living. In Chapter 2, I present the literature review, including youth transitioning out of care and the challenges encountered. Because the literature on African Canadian youth is scant in Canadian databases, international databases were useful in understanding the phenomenon under study. In Chapter 3, I outline the methods involved in completing this study. In Chapter 4, I report on the findings from the qualitative research method. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the study, conclusions, and recommendations for further study.

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Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The principal question of this qualitative study concerned the meaning(s) that African Canadian youth ascribed to their experiences while transitioning from CWS to independent community living. A secondary question had to do with the perceptions of African Canadian youth of the traits or characteristics found in those who successfully aged out of the system. These questions were of importance because the majority of the authors reviewed agreed that outcomes for youth with a history of CWS involvement were troubling issues. Researchers both nationally and internationally stated that many of these young people did not transition successfully from CWS to independent community living (Collin & Ward, 2011; Dixon, 2008; Mendes et al.,2012; McCoy et al., 2008 Osgood et al., 2010; Shin, 2009).

At the time of the study in Ontario, youth aged out of CWS care at 16 years (OCAS, 2013). In 2013, the proposed MCYS Action Plan increased the age of maturity from 16 to 18 (MCYS, 2016). But, even age 18 was a challenging age for these transitioning youth (Courtney et al., 2009). For example, education, employment, and housing were high on the list of challenges exiting CWS youth faced (Courtney et al., 2009; Mendes et al., 2011; Rutman et al., 2007). However, while these and other challenges were well known about transitioning youth in general, almost nothing was known about the transition experiences of African Canadian youth. Canadian statistics did not provide disaggregated data on youth who returned to the community (Teklu,

2012; Tweddle, 2007), which meant it was unknown how African Canadian youth fared in their transition from care to independent living. Similarly, the meaning(s) African Canadian youth leaving foster care in Ontario attributed to a successful transition was also unknown.

This chapter includes a detailed exposition of the problems highlighted in the recent literature on youth exiting the CWS to explore how African Canadian youth living in both cities of Toronto and Brampton perceived and managed these problems. Selected domains, which the literature revealed the most affected, follow. These domains were education, employment/ unemployment, teen pregnancy, health challenges, homelessness, ethnic minorities; youth voices, transition support, extended care and maintenance, and governmental programs.

Search Engines

The purpose of this study was to fill the gap in the current Canadian literature on African Canadian youths' perceptions of the CWS-to-community-living aging out experience. The following databases were useful in identifying studies in Canada on African Canadian youth transitioning out of the CWS: Eric, EBSCOhost, SocioINDEX, PsychINFO, PsycARTICLES, Google Scholar, MEDLINE, ProQuest, sociological abstracts, The Child Welfare Research Portal, Related Dissertations, unpublished manuscripts, Google Scholar, and Thoreau search multiple databases. My intention was to focus my search between the years 2009 and 2014. However, due to limited Canadian literature on the topic, I included three seminal authors important to this study (Kelly & Caputo, 2007; Rutman, 2007; Tweddle, 2007). Keywords and phrases used in searches

were as follows: *child welfare and ethnic minority youth transition; African Canadian youth aging out of care and child welfare; African Canadian young people leaving care; minority child, adolescent youth leaving care, ethnic minority youth transitioning from care; ethnic minority youth transition and poverty; ethnic minority youth transition and homelessness, education, employment; youth transition and education; youth transition and marginalization; youth transition and health;* and *Black youth leaving the CWS.*

Keywords used to make cross references included *health, employment, mental health, addiction and maltreatment, social exclusion, marginalization, racism, oppression,* and *diversity*. Priority was given to Canadian statistics on *ethnicity, race, and ethnic minority youth*. No studies were found that included the topic being addressed in this study. The lack of studies prompted a large proportion of the statistical data cited in this paper to be sourced from the international studies.

Problem Confronting CWS Youth in Transition

According to Mann-Fader (2007), each year approximately 6,000 youth transitioned from the CWS to independent community living in Canada. (Mann-Fader, 2007). While not ready to make the transition, the youth left abruptly, alone, and without support. Many researchers (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Munson, Lee, Miller, Cole, & Nedelu, 2013; Rutman et al., 2007; Tweddle, 2007) concluded that transitioning youth experienced challenges upon leaving CWS care.

Unlike their community peers, CWS youth in transition most often did not have parental support because they could not or do not return to the family (Barn, 2010; Mendes et al., 2012). While on average youth in the community moved from home to

independent living at approximately 25 years of age or older (Arnett, 2000) with the assurance of family support during the transitioning period. The CWS transition youth do so at 16 or 18 years without safety assurances. (Collin et al., 2010; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2008; Osgood et al., 2010; OACAS, 2012; Shin, 2009). Therefore, the community youth have a greater advantage over the youth transitioning from CWS.

Prior to January 2013, Ontario youth left CWS at the age of 16, and their leaving was final (Tweddle, 2007); later, they left at 18 (MCYS, 2013). However, 18- and even 19 year-olds were not yet adequately equipped to face the challenges of independent living. This point will be illustrative in the following examples Courtney et al. (2009) followed a group of care leavers. Most (95.4%) were 19 years or older at the beginning of the study and had a range of negative outcomes, including poor education, low employment rate, and high family disconnection, incarceration, and out-of-wedlock parenting rates.

In another study exploring young people leaving care, Dixon (2008) determined the extent to which care leavers in Britain were prepared for the transition to community life. Care leavers were at an increased risk of developing diet and nutrition (or health) problems and an overall vulnerability to poor lifestyles. Unlike their community peers with the assurance of guaranteed support, these care leavers shouldered adult responsibilities suddenly and often without proper education or guarantee of continuing support from CWS (Courtney et al., 2009; Rutman et al., 2007).

Clarke (2011), in conducting a study on Afro Caribbean service users, highlighted this group's loss of a disconnection from their culture, leading to feelings of guilt and

needs left unmet. This finding was consistent with international studies that ethnic minority youth encountered additional challenges upon their return to the community. Feelings of social exclusion, marginalization, racial discrimination, loss of identity, and oppression were commonplace among former CWS (Avery, 2010; Barn, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Stein, 2008; Weller, 2010).

Although the MCYS (2013) emphasized new legislative processes designed to improve outcomes for youth exiting the CWS, unknown was whether these new resources or services were comprehensive enough to promote the positive and successfully transition of African Canadian youth. Absent from the Canadian literature was data on the experiences of African Canadian youth in transition from the CWS to community living. African Canadian youth were overrepresented in the CWS (Clarke, 2011; Teklu, 2012), but little else was known about their connections or unmet needs. What follows are the selected domains where the challenges were most pronounced on youth developmental outcomes.

Education

Positive educational achievement is an indicator of success for youth transitioning from CWS care to community living (Courtney et al., 2009). However, in the majority of cases, these young people fell short of success, even when the youth themselves held aspirations to further their education (Courtney, 2009; Dworsky, 2008; Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Kirk, Lewis, Nielsen, & Colvin, 2011). For example, youth with a history of CWS involvement graduated at a lower rate than their

counterparts in the general population. Rutman et al. (2007) found that among youth in CWS care, 52% did not graduate as compared to 25% in the general population.

Ferguson and Wolkow (2012) reported that CWS youth who did go on to graduate were nevertheless six times more likely to earn a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, rather than a high school diploma. Kirk et al. (2011) highlighted that state wards' inferior educational performance was not always due to their lack of motivation. Although as many as 80% of youth in state care had aspirations and expectations to achieve a postsecondary education (compared to 70% of the general population), they were still less likely to attend college. In fact, only 10% of the transitioning youth enrolled in postsecondary education and only 4% graduate and would earn a degree (Courtney, 2009; Kirk et al., 2011). Even with tuition paid for them, former foster care youth are more prone to drop out of college than first generation, low-income, tuition, paying students. Day et al. (2011) argued that foster care youth were significantly more likely (34%) than none foster care youth (18%) to drop out of college at the end of the first year. One possible explanation for the higher dropout rate among foster youth was a lack of familial connections to encourage and support them through their educational journey.

Achieving a sufficient education is critical to youths' successful transition from care (Courtney et al., 2010; Day et al., 2010; Sullivan, Jones, & Mathesen, 2009). Youth who achieved their educational goals had better prospects for gainful employment, among other successful outcomes (Day et al., 2011). Failure to achieve education goals could lead to a youth's dependency on social assistance or lifelong struggle in low paying

jobs (Census Canada, 2011; Rutman et al., 2007). Positive educational achievement is necessary for successful youth transition into community living.

The Ontario government recognized this necessity for youth's successful achievement. Since 2005 a number of educational initiatives were developed to support the transitioning youth (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012). However, these initiatives were not geared to youth in care or transitioning youth. Students at risk of not completing their high school education were a category associated with youth in care (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012). Included in these educational initiatives were the following:

The Student Success Program: Launched in 2005, this initiative required all Ontario secondary school boards to appoint a student success leader and a student success teacher to develop tools that could be used to support and engage students identified at risk of not graduating high school (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012). The design of the program was to challenge the board to increase the number of diverse and alternative programs offered. Since the inception of this program, it was said to be successful, as evidenced by the increased in the rate of graduation.

The Crown Wards Education: Launched in 2009, this initiative is a team effort involving the Ministries of Education, Children and Youth Services, staff members and educators from the CWS, and community partners. The objectives of the program were to improve outcomes for youth in care. This initiative included providing tuition grants of up to 4 years for youth to complete their education or skills training (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012). The outcomes of this program have yet to be evaluated.

Educational achievement statistics pertaining to African Canadian youth from the CWS were not available. However, for most African Canadians youth in community schools, education was a source of contention. Some scholars and members of the Black community (Dei, 2008) argued that both the achievement gap and the drop- out rate were high among youth of African descent in the mainstream education system. Statistics on African Canadian students in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), for example, showed a 40% high school dropout rate (Levine-Rasky, 2014). An Africentric school, opened in 2008, supported the educational achievements of African Canadian youth (Dei, 2008; Ekoko, 2008).

Africentric was an identified cultural necessity , focusing on the educational attainment of Black youth (Hampton, 2010; Levine-Rasky, 2014). While the design of these initiatives were to address the youth's education attainment, the lack connections to encourage and support them through their educational journey appeared to be missing. As argued by other researchers (Day et al. 2011, this support and/or connections appeared to be the impetus for their educational achievement.

Employment/Unemployment

Over the last several years, youth unemployment grew to become one of Canada's most troubling concerns, especially in Ontario. In 2013, the unemployment rate for Ontario's youth, aged 15 and 24, ranged from 16% to 17.1%; in Toronto the figure was 18.1%, considered to be the worst in the provincial regions (Leung, 2013). Rutman et al. (2007) found that for over one-third (38%) of young people government assistance was their main source of income, and those employed were mostly working part-time. Of the

participants interviewed at *Time 1* of the Rutman study, 39% reported income of less than $500 per month, 32% earned between $500-$800 per month, and 30% received more than $800 per month. Although by Time 4, 10% reported earning over $1500 per month, by any Canadian measurement standard all these young people would still be living below the poverty line.

Rutman et al. (2007) found consistencies with the Courtney et al. (2009) Midwest study on youth exiting the CWS in three Midwestern states: Wisconsin, Iowa, and Illinois. In this study 92% of the participants held jobs, and 58.2% worked for pay; however, only 40% were fully employed. Similar to the Rutman et al. study, the Midwest study by Courtney et al. (2007) showed that while some youth were finding employment, jobs were concentrated in low paying sectors with wages averaging $7.54 per hour. More pointedly, 90% of the participants earned less than $10,000 per year, and approximately 25% earned less than $5000 per year. These young people were not earning enough money to successfully achieve self-sufficiency. The need for financial resources was one of the leading reasons youth cited for choosing to work rather than completing high school and possibly going on to college or trade school (Day et al., 2011).

Teen Pregnancy

Early parenting and teen pregnancy were salient themes with youth who transitioned from CWS (Tweddle, 2007). Rutman et al. (2007) showed a marked increase in the number of youth pregnancies over the course of a 2.5-year period of their study. The sample consisted of youth ranging in age of 17- to 20-years-old. At Time 1, 14% had

a child; at Time 2 the number had increased to 33%; and by Time 4, a staggering 61% were parents with another four participants expecting their second child.

Some researchers (e.g., Stein, 2008) argued that children of women who spent time in CWS care were 2.5 times more likely to spend time in care themselves. Pregnancy was more prevalent among 16 to 19-year-old care leavers than their community counterparts. In the Rutman et al. (2007) study, by Time 4, 11 of 13 young parents had some involvement with the MCFS, and some had their children taken in care under the temporary care agreement of the CWS.

These authors were not able to quantify the cycle of youth in care [having] children who end up in care because province statistics were not routinely collected on the issue (Rutman et al., 2007) Moreover, while policy makers and frontline staff thought it a common phenomenon of youth in care, the definition of common remained an unquantifiable number. These findings help to support the strong need for post care connections for the transitioning youth.

Health Challenges

In general, youth face numerous physical and mental health challenges. However, these challenges were troublesome for youth living on the streets. While living on the streets is not classified specifically as a health-related issue (Kelly & Caputo, 2007), factors related to street life nevertheless place the youth at higher risk when facing these challenges.

Youth who age out of the CWS may find themselves engaging in risky behaviors simply for the purpose of survival (Kelly & Caputo, 2007). Risky behavior can be best

understood as situations, in which the youth must scrounge and scrape for survival, including worrying about places to sleep and what to eat; issues of drug and alcohol dependency; and struggling with all sorts of physical, sexual, and emotional abuses. Furthermore, young people often became victims of violent crimes. The nature and seriousness of these issues tend to become compounded, leading to physical and mental health problems.

Many youth bring to CWS psychological and emotional trauma and health-related problems, most of which never healed while in care (Kelly & Caputo, 2007. Upon their exit from care to return the community or the streets, most are no better equipped to deal with their self-sufficiency than when they entered care. Youth who had a history of sexual abuse, for example, might fall to prey on the streets because they might not have sufficiently healed or developed the necessary skills to protect themselves against that abuse.

In such cases, many young street people with previously poor health are at an increased risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, substance abuse, and subsequent mental illness. Additionally, they could be at an increased risk for physical ailments, such as diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, and musculoskeletal disorder (Kelly &Caputo, 2007; Kulik, 2011; Nichols, 2013).

Courtney et al., 2009) found that:

- 10% of the participants diagnosed for having a major depressive disorder
- 2% diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

- 15% hospitalized at one time or other for substance abuse or mental health issues.
- 13% received counseling for one or other issue. When adding these health related concerns to the previously discussed issues of poor education, high unemployment, and teen pregnancy, it was not difficult to understand why homelessness and the attendant risks of further victimization and criminalization could become the fate of street youth who exit from care.

Homelessness

The literature highlights homelessness as one of the more problematic issues facing transitioning youth with no immediate solution in sight (Tweddle, 2007; Rutman et al., 2007, Yen, 2009). The term homelessness seemed to carry multiple meanings, depending on who was involved or classified as being homeless (Kelly & Caputo, 2007). For example, Kelly and Caputo (2007) discussed the different terms used to define homelessness. Specifically,

> curb-siders' 'throwaways',' runaways', 'societal rejects', 'missing children', homeless youth', 'street youth', 'street children', 'children of the street,' and 'youth at risk'; each of these terms had multiple meanings. For example, an individual who has been forced out of the home by parents or a guardian could be referred to as a "throwaway" while that same individual could also be identified as a "homeless youth, a youth at risk, or a street youth" (p. 727).

Another area difficult to define was housing status. For example, some youth may stay at a friend's place for a limited time or combine resources and rent accommodation

for short time. Others may stay in emergency shelters, flop houses, or engage in other forms of street living, such as occupying abandoned buildings etc. Nevertheless, homeless youth and street youth were phrases often used interchangeably to mean youth who spent a great deal of time on the streets, lived marginally, and were involved in the street lifestyles because they had no stable home (Kelly & Caputo, 2007).

Regardless of how homelessness was defined, what seemed clear from all the literature that youth exiting CWS care were at a great disadvantage when contrasted to their community peers. One obvious reason for this disadvantage was that youth leaving care often did not return to their communities to live with a parent or other family member, but instead they faced with the reality of finding a place to live on their own (Rutman et al., 2007, Stein, 2008).

Rutman et al. (2007) longitudinal study in the province of British Columbia (BC) provided a strong indication of this reality, difficulties faced by the transitioning youth. Youth participated in four face-to-face interviews scheduled at either six or nine month intervals. The study began with 37 participants, 78% of whom were female and 22% male; 46% of the participants were under the age of majority and 54% over the age of majority (in British Columbia the age of majority is 19 years).

At different times over the period of study Rutman et al. (2007), 16 participants were lost, bringing the total at the close to 21. Almost 90% of participants had not gone to live with parents or other family members after leaving care. Moreover, nearly half experienced homelessness at some point during adolescence. These findings were

consistent with other studies on homelessness among youth transitioning from the CWS to community living.

Homeless youth and children together comprised one of the most rapidly growing populations in Canada (Kulik, Gaetz, Crowe & Ford-Jones, 2011). Among the street youth many identified previous involvement with the Child Welfare System as a predominant reason for their homelessness (Kulik et al., 2011; Nichols, 2013; Springer et al., 2006, Zlotnik, 2009, 2012). Other reasons given by the youth for homelessness included family situations (e.g., a history of sexual, physical and/or emotional abuse), youth and/or parental criminality, and youth and/or parental substance abuse (Kulik et al., 2011).

Many youth who exited the CWS without proper preparation had a propensity for being homeless or spent at least one night on the street (Courtney & Dworsky, 2009; Zlotnik 2009, 2012). Among the homeless youth was an over representation of Black youth (Kulik et al., 2011). Moreover, many young people lost access to resources and supports once they left CWS (Foster, et al., 2010; Kulik et al., 2011). Barn (2010) summarized the challenges facing these young people:

> The effect of placement disruption, geographical upheaval, and absence of stable families or other key individuals in the community have a cumulative impact on care leavers (*sic)*. Negative outcomes such as poor educational attainment, unemployment, homelessness, criminal activity, substance misuse and early parenthood combine to produce in the youth low self-esteem, low levels of

confidence, lack of belongingness or feelings of isolation and marginalization (p.847).

To conclude, in Ontario different figures varied as to the number of youth living on the streets at any given time (Kulik et al., 2011). However, most estimates put the number between 1500 and 2000 (Springer et al., 2006) Many young people become involved in activities, such as panhandling, theft, drug use and/or risky sexual activities simply, because they were on the street. These activities not only compromised youth's mental health, but also made them more susceptible to physical victimization by other street youth, as well as encounters with the police. For Barn (2010), this reality was especially troublesome for the youth transitioning to independent living, as the youth must transition without the assurance of parental or other family guidance and support.

Ethnic Minorities

The literature illuminated deleterious consequences for youth leaving the CWS. These consequences were especially challenging for ethnic minority youth who, most often on leaving care, neither had the support of their parents or community. Additionally, most of the youth had not achieved permanency, such as, adoption or family reunification (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Avery, 2011). Research on African Canadian youth returning to the community was not available in the Canadian literature; however, it is widely said that African Canadian youth are over-represented in the CWS.

According to the research, African Canadian youth and children represent only 8% of the general population, yet, they comprise 65% of the population in the care of the CWS (Clarke, 2011, 2012; Pon & Gosine, 2011; Teklu, 2012). Statistics from the

Ministry of Community and Youth Services showed in 2012, 17,000 of Ontario's 3.1 million children were in the Care of the State, and of that number 8,000 were permanent Crown wards. Additionally, 43% were homeless and 68% of these were from foster care. (Teklu, 2012).

In education, only 44% graduating high school as compared to 81% of their community peers (Nichols, 2013; Teklu, 2012). Given that African Canadian youth represents 65% of the total youth and children in CWS care (Clarke, 2011; Teklu, 2012), these statistics raised serious concerns about African Canadian youth's fate on their return to the community.

Clarke (2011) studied Afro Caribbean service users and found a lack of attention paid to these users' experiences in and out of home care. Structural inequalities, differential treatment, surveillance, criminalization, and discrimination were critical factors contributing to these problems. The result was the youth's disconnection with culture, a sense of loss and guilt as they recalled their experiences with the CWS. The findings were consistent with studies on African American youth who, more so than the general population of youth from care in transition, encountered marginalization, racial discrimination, oppression, and identification issues.

These issues were attributable to social exclusion (Avery, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Stein, 2008; Weller, 2010). Barn (2010) highlighted risk factors that could lead to the youth internalizing racism because they were not equipped with skills to develop a positive racial and ethnic identity.

For minority ethnic young people, separation from family and community result in poor racial and ethnic socialization. In the absence of key role models and stable family and community environment, minority ethnic young people may develop a sense of disconnectedness which can lead to questions of belonging and a lack of sense of location in a racialized society. This process can hamper the young persons' sense of self as well as their ability to deal with situations of racial discrimination. (Barn, 2010, p. 847)

Youth faced with these circumstances had a profound sense of family/ community disconnectedness, leaving them constantly questioning their sense of belonging (Barn, 2010). Like Barn, Teklu (2012) saw a deep sense of loss for children of African descent when removed from their social networks (i.e., their homes, schools, religious institutions, friends, and families).

Castle, Knight, and Watters (2011) explored issues of ethnic identity and outcomes for youth in out-of-home placements. The findings showed a higher incidence of self-esteem related issues and challenges among youth in out of home placements. Additionally, negative implications pertaining, poor ethnic identity and adverse psychological development were also found.

Positive outcomes (e.g., successful educational attainment, high self-esteem, and self-efficacy) were found among youth placed in out of home placement. These factors were associated with a well-developed ethnic identity (Castle et al., 2011).

Youth Voices

Studies focusing specifically on homeless African Canadian youth were very limited; however, studies on ethnic minority youth in general showed that this population believed that racism and discrimination were pervasive elements in our social institutions, as well as suffered much higher levels of criminal victimization. According to Springer et al. 2006, 90% of ethnic minority youth voiced concerns that they were subjects of discrimination, 44% (though more males than females) believed that racism affected their grades in school, and 33% thought that they had been unduly targeted by the police (among ethnic minority populations, African Canadian youth strongly believed that they were most likely to be stopped and arrested by the police).

The absence of disaggregated race-based statistics meant it was not possible to report on the number of African Canada youth from the CWS who became involved, or continue to be involved, in the criminal justice system. However, agreement existed among researchers about African Canadian youth's overrepresentation in the criminal justice system (Teklu, 2012). A view of youth involvement in the criminal justice system was seen in the US Midwest study. In this longitudinal study of 321 former foster care youth, Courtney et al. (2005) found that 34% arrested prior to the study and 17% convicted of a serious crime. Youth since leaving care spent at least one night in a correctional facility.

Still unknown was how African Canadian youth made sense of their experiences of living in and exiting care. Tweddle (2007) suggested the kinds of support Canadian youth in general needed in order for them to be self-sufficient in living independently.

International studies also made program and resource recommendations on the kinds of supports beneficial for youth to become self-reliant (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Mendes et al., 2012; Powers, Greenen, Powers, Pommier-Satya, Turner, Dalton, & Swank, 2012;). Nevertheless, to date very little evidence was available to suggest that these programs could successfully address the challenges that youth in general encountered in living independently of the CWS. For example, a mixed-method study by McCoy et al. (2008) examined why some youth left CWS early when they had an option to remain in CWS until the age of maturity. The responses included:

- Youth left in ways that were not planned and not consistent with the agency plan.
- Most of the older youth who left the system wanted to due to their frustration with the CWS.
- The older youth who have externalizing problems were most likely to leave early.
- Youth who remain in the system were more likely to live on their own in the community, while those who left early were more likely to return to live with family. (p. 7).

McCoy et al. (2008) went on to discuss the many service improvements and options aimed at further addressing the needs of older youth leaving care, including the question of independent living programs that may be needed to prepare youth for the complexities of life upon their return to live with their family of origin. This study was important because the youth had opportunities to detail factors about their successes and

failures, as well as, what they felt would be important in supporting their development into adulthood.

A good example of this kind of initiative capturing the voices of the youth was *My Real Life Book* (2011) from a Ministry Action Plan (MAP) evolved. This initiative was a combined effort involving both in-care youth and youth who transitioned from care. The Action Plan adopted some of the book's recommendations, organized in a short term (1-3 years), medium term (4-6 years), and long term (7-10 years) spans. Detailed below were some of the recommendations implemented by the MCYS to improve the lives of the transitioning youth

Transition Support

Under the short term recommendations, the age of the -ECM- extended to 25, in phases, and with rules in place to ensure that the youth could not be terminated if they meet the ECM contractual requirements MCYS (2013) outlined below:

- Phase 1, the ministry extended eligibility for ECM to all youth from care until age 23 and to those enrolled in post-secondary education or training until age 25;
- Phase 2, eligibility for ECM to all youth from care until age 25.
- Emotional supports should have significant plans in place upon leaving care, including goals and plans, as well as the means to access relevant community resources before they leave care.
- As part of the transition process, and with the support of their Children's Aid Society workers and caregivers, youth would have the following:

1. Receive a package that included all of their necessary personal documents: social insurance number, birth certificate, health card and photo identification (driver's license, passport, or government issued identification);
2. Have their immigration status resolved by their Children's Aid Society before age 18, so that they can access employment, education, and health care;
3. Identify housing options and develop a plan for stable housing;(see Appendix G) for further details on these short term recommendations.

Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM) Contract

ECM legislation enacted in 1985 allowed youth to remain in care until the age of 21. A later amendment to the legislation increased the age from 21 to 25 (MCYS, 2013) to allow youth to complete their education before leaving care. Based on studies done in the US, youth who remained in care long enough to complete their education did well upon their return to the community (Courtney et al., 2009).

The Midwest study by Courtney (2009) drew samples from three states (i.e., Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois). The sample consisted of 732 youths, longitudinally studied in three waves. The first wave was in 2002-03 when the youth were 17 and 18 and still in care; the second at age 19 after the youth were out of care, with 82% interviewed; the last wave was in 2006-07 with 81% interviewed at age 21. Pertinent to this study was the different stages at which youth aged out of care in the different states (in Wisconsin and Iowa a youth usually ages out of care at 18, in Illinois the age is 21), since the findings showed a direct link between youth who remained in CWS longer and the successful completion of education. In Illinois, for example, youth were 4 times more

likely to attend college and 3.5 times more likely to have completed the first year of college when they remained in CWS longer than if they left at the age of maturity Furthermore, the ECM showed strong relations to positive earnings and delays in pregnancy for youth, outcomes not positively associated with Independent Living programs (Flynn & Tessier, 2011).

Given that youth who remained in care longer and complete their education had the propensity for better outcomes, Flynn and Tessier (2011) conducted a cross-sectional study exploring factors predictive of negative outcomes to the ECM contract. A sample drawn from the database of Ontario Looking after Children Project (OnLAC) consisted of 418 participants. OnLAC was an international organization, which began in 2006 within the Child Welfare agencies. Its objective was to promote positive outcomes for children and youth in care of the OACAS (Flynn & Tessier, 2011). The two research questions included:

1. What were some important educational outcomes experienced by 18-20-year-old youth on ECM?
2. What were some support and risk factors that predicted successful educational outcomes in ECM? (Flynn & Tessier, 2011, p.2499)

These two questions were to investigate factors that might lead to negative outcomes for youth remaining in care longer under the ECM program. Promotive factors referred to assets, resources, adaptive, and protective factors that could prevent youth not having positive outcomes in the ECM program (p.2499). The study also involved two other key areas: (a) educational outcomes of former youth in care, the highest level of

education attained, and the highest aspired level of education, and (b) the youth NEET and non-NEET rate (where NEET referred to not in education, employment or training) (Flynn & Tessier, 2011, p. 2499). Hypothesized were four factors to promote positive outcomes:

- Females would be associated with better educational outcomes.
- Older students would have better educational outcomes by virtue of having more time.
- Youth with greater number of developmental assets (relationships, skills, developmental opportunities and family, peers etc., would lead to better educational outcomes.
- The greater the number of self-care skills in taking care of oneself, would be helpful in the transitional process. (p. 2499).

The results were that favorable educational outcomes predicted with greater number of developmental assets and factors (i.e., health related disability, cognitive impairment, and drug, alcohol and tobacco use) that could pose risks to educational outcomes for former foster home youth (Flynn & Tessier, 2011). While the ethnicity of the sample was unknown, African Canadians were not achieving positive outcomes in education CWS (Teklu, 2012).

Governmental Programs in the US

Studies in the US showed Congress implemented the following programs to support the education and training of in-care and former-care youth, yet gap in achievement still persisted. For example:

- **The Education Training Voucher (ETV) (2002)** added to the **Foster Care Independence Act** addressed the post-secondary educational needs for the current and former foster youth. The State could use their ETV funds to provide both current in care, and former youth from care funds up to a maximum of $5000 per year for post-secondary training and education. Youth participating in this program at age 21 could remain until they are 23, providing they are progressing satisfactorily (Day et al., 2011).

- **The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008** instituted to promote education stability and expand eligibility for the ETV program enabled States to claim Title IV-E federal reimbursement and expenditures on behalf of eligible until their youth's 21 birthday (Day et al., 2011).

- **The College Cost Reduction Act (2009)** allowed students as young as age 13 or older to claim independent status when applying for federal financial aid (Day et al., 2011). While these programs and resources were in place, researchers argued that a significant gap remained in the foster youth educational achievements A lack of connection could be one reason why foster youth dropped out school; specifically, the reason was attributed to the absence of caring adults to whom they could turn to when faced with the daily stressors of college work and college (Day et al., 2011).

Additionally, the literature showed that programs developed and implemented internationally had not fixed the problem. For example, in the US, in 1986, Congress passed the **Title IV-E Independent Living Initiative, Pub.L.No.99-72** legislation. The purpose of the initiative was to ensure funds were available to the States to assist transitioning youth in skills preparation for independent living. However, reports showed that even with independent living programs persistent challenges facing the transitioning youth remained (Avery, 2011; Collins & Ward, 2011; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013).

Similar results was also seen with the **PL-106-169**, better known as the **John H. Chafee Foster Care Independent Program (CFCIP)**. This initiative was to offer post-care youth a range of flexible programs and skills in their preparation for adulthood and independent living (Avery, 2011). But studies showed that while the quality of services varied from State to State-evaluation of Independent Living (IL) programs nevertheless showed only a small number of measurable effects on any outcome. In fact, no significant positive relationships appeared between youth accessing the IL and improved skill in the critical areas of employment, education and homelessness. Evaluation on youth outcomes while participating in the ECM program in Toronto was not available at the time of this report.

Concise Summary of Major Themes in the Literature

The various difficulties experienced by youth-in-general leaving CWS care and returning to community life were the focus not only of local and national studies, but also countless international studies. According to the surveyed literature, these studies approached the phenomenon from every known/accepted methodological standpoint,

meaning that a variety of different assumptions have gone into (and as many different conclusions drawn from) the phenomenon. But if one conclusion resonated, the majority of the transitioning youth consistently experienced poor outcomes with three recurring themes in the literature accounting for this conclusion.

Theme 1:The first concern raised by the vast majority of the researchers was that *transitioning youth in general lacked the individual skills and self-confidence required for successful independent living* (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Dixon, 2008; Mendes.et al., 2011, 2012; McCoy et al, 2008; Osgood, et al., 2010; Shin, 2009; Stein, 2008;Tweddle, 2007: Rutman et al., 2016).While some CWS transition youth who at 16-19 years old achieved positive developmental outcomes, such as moving on from high school to college or obtaining their driver's license, most youth didn't achieve these outcomes until much later, if they do at all. In fact, when we consider that on average today youth don't leave the family home until their mid-twenties (Arnett, 2000), it becomes harder to even imagine how at risk youth (who in many cases, up until 2013 in Ontario, were barely 16 when they left CWS) can be expected to have the skills and confidence to take on the adult responsibilities that come with the transition to independent living (Greeson, Garcia, Kim, Thompson, & Courtney,.2015; Mendes et al. ,2011; Shin, 2009; Osgood et al, 2010; Stein, 2008).

Theme 2: The second major theme in the literature is closely related to the first was *the absence of or deficiencies in community support systems*. We know, for example, that some youth leave care (whether terminated or voluntarily) and return to their communities believing they are ready for independent living (McCoy et al., 2008). Many

young people went back to the family home, where they had parents and/or older siblings to help guide and support them; however, many did not (Rutman et al., 2007).

While returning to the family home does not guarantee the youth success in all areas of the transition, the literature clearly shows that those young people who did not do so (and also likely did not have other community networks) often to found themselves falling deeper into the at risk category (Dixon, 2008; Mendes et al., 2011; McCoy et al., 2008; Osgood, et al., 2010; Rutman, 2016; Shin, 2009; Stein, 2008).

Theme 3*:* The third prominent theme in the literature was *the high levels of youth unemployment or underemployment.* This problem, however, was not a youth or even a community derived problem, but rather a result of ineffective government policy. The ECM contract was one strategy offered to youth by the MCYS. This strategy was offered in an attempt to address this concern, since it was shown that youth who remained in care longer stood a better chance of obtaining an education, which in turn opened up avenues to a brighter future. i.e. employment (Courtney et al., 2009; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Flynn, & Tessier, 2009). The participation rate of African Canadian youth in the ECM contractual agreement could not be found in the literature, However, their African Canadian peers in the community have the toughest struggle in high school with a high 40% dropout rate (Dei, 2008; Ekoko, 2008;).

The alternatives for African Canadian youth who decline the ECM contract were also unclear at this point in time. The current study was important because it provided data on specific challenges African Canadian transition youth experience *as* they understood them. Such data can only improve on the current literature, not only by

showing what factors youth believe to be beneficial to their developmental trajectories, but also about what they saw as impeding their development.

What Is Known About CWS Youth in Transition

Studies showed that a large proportion of youth who aged out of the CWS and lived independently in the community faced many challenges. A large proportion of young people were homeless, lacking in education, having early pregnancies, engaging in risky behaviors (including drug abuse and sexual activity for food or money), and on the welfare system/social assistance for financial support. The basis of leaving CWS care was less on their chronological age and more on their perceived abilities to sustain themselves independently (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Mendes et al.2011, 2012; Osgood, et al., 2010; Rutman et al.,2007,2016; Shin, 2009).

Further, the principal reason for increasing the age of maturity from 16 to 18 years was that a majority of youth failed to transition successfully from the CWS to independent living (Mendes et al., 2011; MCYS, 2013; Tweddle, 2007). But from a social work perspective even at the age of 18 youth living independently without supports was challenging. This challenge was why some youth had an opportunity to remain in care until 25 years old did so, via the ECM contractual agreement. The principal argument for youth remaining in care longer was that doing so increased their likelihood of completing their education, which in turn enhanced their chance to secure gainful employment (Courtney et al., 2010; Day et al., 2010; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Flynn, & Tessier, 2009; Sullivan, Jones & Mathesen, 2009).

Although the CWS youth populations faced these adversities upon exiting care, for ethnic minority youth the situation became magnified. This magnification was so because not only did minority youth received disparity in permanency planning and services planning (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007) while in the CWS, but also they had to contend with discrimination and social marginalization, which further negatively affected their (sense of) self-identity (Avery, 2010; Barn,2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Stein, 2008). This disparity meant that minority youth had a higher probability than their peers to encounter homelessness, non-completion of education, involvement in crime, risky sexual behaviors, unemployment, and mental health issues (Barn, 2010; Stein, 2008).

In Ontario, for example, African Canadian youth were disproportionately represented in the CWS. Indeed, these young people comprised only 8% of the general population, yet they represented 65% in the care of the CWS (Clarke, 2011, 2012; Pon & Gosine, 2011; Teklu, 2012). These numbers cannot bode well for African Canadian youth. According to Stein (2008), social exclusion has come to mean both marginalization and material disadvantage. Marginalization referred to differential treatment of a person or group because of associated characteristics, such as, ethnicity gender, age and the like Stein (2008) argument, supported by a large body of international research, included the Daining and DePanfilis (2007) study, which showed that racial discrimination and oppression faced by minority youth were central barriers to employment and community resources. Thus, ethnic/and minority youth transitioning from the CWS often found themselves faced with identity related to their heritage issues

(Avery, 2010) which they must address in addition to all the other issues previously discussed after leaving care (Avery, 2010; Barns, 2010).

Because Canada did not provide disaggregated data on CWS transition populations, (Clarke, 2011, 2012; Teklu, 2012), it remained unknown how the African Canadian youth population in particular negotiated the transition process All was really known was this population of youth leaving care was disadvantaged and disproportionately at risk when compared to their Caucasian transitioning peers (Avery, 2011; Barn, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Mendes et al., 2011;2012; Stein, 2008).

What is Not Known about CWS Youth in Transition

The literature review did not account for how ethnic minority youth, particularly African Canadian youth, conceptualized their transitional outcomes. From a social worker perspective, I knew neither the effects of counseling, healing and psychotherapy, nor whether the continuation of these services meant anything to young people (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Even at the age of 18 youth living independently without accessible supports could find it challenging achieving their aspirations and goals (Courtney et al, 2009; Kirk et al., 2011). However, their ecological connections and positive social networks were not apparent once they transitioned to independent community living. Similarly, what meanings did African Canadian youth ascribe to positive or successful outcomes (Clarke, 2011, 2012)? The current study was an attempt to fill this gap in the Canadian literature. An understanding of these factors from the perspective of these young people could lead to their successful transition to independent living and be of benefit to society as a whole.

Conceptual Framework

With little research existed specifically addressing the lived experiences of African Canadian youth, the conceptual framework needed to have the capacity of explaining the numerous developmental challenges faced by the different population exiting care. More specifically, what meaning*s* did the different youth populations ascribe to their transition experiences? How did these young people perceive the aging-out process in relation to successful independent-living outcomes? Because the youth were the ones actually situated in this relation, they necessarily became the best ones positioned to properly answer this question.

In light of this exclusion, a social constructivist framework aided me to bring meaning to the results. What made this framework best suited to the study was the recognition that individual human beings inevitably constructed reality from what they knew or believed [viz., from what they already experienced] (Furman et al.2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1994; Patton, 2014; Schwandt, 1994).

The research was as follows: What meanings did African Canadian youth ascribe to a successful outcome in their transition from the Child Welfare Services (CWS) to independent community living, as understood from the youth's own set of experiences or worldview? With this question in mind, I selected three theories as the conceptual framework for this study: Social Capital, Youth Empowerment, and Resilience theories.

According to the literature, each of these three theories had been useful in previous studies, either as a single theory or in one or other combination form, to develop ways to better understand and support youth in coping with their day-to-day lives

(Bottrell, 2009; Dolan, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2010). For example, resilience theory and social capital theory were useful to analyze how girls living in a housing project pooled their resources and support networks to cope with their disadvantaged circumstances (Bottrell, 2009). Social capital and youth empowerment theories illuminated the ways in which youth accessed and applied resources pertaining to their educational advancement (Stanton-Salazar, 2010). Social capital in combination with social support and resilience theories address adolescent coping daily stressors while living in the community (Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007).

Because these theories each contain its own broad subset of concepts (or heuristic factors), in order to make their inquiries manageable researchers will generally pick and choose complementary (or opposing) concepts/factors to build their positions. However, a conceptual framework combining the resilience, social capital and youth empowerment theories on African Canadian youth success in aging out from the CWS were not available in my literature review. The following section provides a synthesis of the primary writings by the key theorists.

Social Capital Theory

The definition of *s*ocial capital varied from researcher to researcher ((Stanton-Salazar 2010). More specifically, researchers placed an emphasis on different factors or elements of the theory in developing their positions. The definition by Gordon and Jordan (1999) seemed well-suited to the present study: "[S]ocial capital consists of norms, networks, cultural practices and links through which people conduct formal or informal interactions at all times" (p. 242).

The three principal contributors to the development of social capital theory were Bourdieu (1997), Coleman (1990), and Putnam (2000). Bourdieu's approach emphasized the elements of social class, economic status and cultural attachment (Barn, 2010; Reynolds, 2009). More precisely, Bourdieu's focus was on the interrelationship between "social capital and the wider structural division of equality caused by factors such as race, class, and gender "(Barn, 2010, p. 836).

According to Gauntlett (2011), Bourdieu defined social capital as:

> [T]he sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. (p. 119**)**

In other words, Bourdieu was concerned with resources and connections of the individual and how the individual connected to these resources (Gauntlett, 2011). Given the range of issues facing the transitioning youth, Bourdieu's work provided an understanding of how disenfranchised individuals could improve their social capital through organizing and using various kinds of capital.

Coleman asserted that individuals used families and communities as social capital to best represent their resources (Reynolds, 2009). In this sense, the social networks beyond the immediate family included kin and neighbors within the community. In Putnam (2000) the key elements of social capital were norms, moral obligations and social values, with particular emphasis on the idea of placing trust in social networks, especially voluntary associations.

Putnam's central thesis was that, for trust to become a valued social construct there must be in place "[a well] functioning economic system and a high level of political integration", which result from a region's successful accumulations of social capital. In other words, for Putman "trust, reciprocity, and civic engagement" (Reynolds, 2009, p.751). Together they create a context in which the bonding and bridging were key elements (Reynolds, 2009; Siisiäinen, 2003; Weller, 2010). In this context, bonding refers to connections within the youth's internal networks [i.e., family members while bridging refers to connections to external resources of social/community organizations and resources] (Weller, 2010). As Siisiäinen (2003) summarized, "The emphasis in modern societies on consensus is based on interconnected networks of trust among citizens, families, voluntary organizations, religious denominations, civic associations and the likes" (p. 2).

In summary, social capital theory was important because it began with the premise that individuals were already enmeshed in their ecological/communal support systems, such as family relations (including extended family), peer networks, religious organizations, and community organizations (Barn, 2010; Reynolds, 2009; Weller, 2010). But more particularly, in order for the social actors to achieve certain desired goals they must first develop a reflective understanding of the usefulness of the ecological supports available to them. In this context, social capital theory functioned to determine the depth of understanding that transitioning of African Canadian youth about the importance and usefulness of the ecological supports available both, internally and externally.

Youth Empowerment Theory

A number of authors (e.g., Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Stanton-Salazar 2010; Zimmerman, 2011) provided a version of youth empowerment theory to support the development of healthy, positive youth outcomes. For example, Stanton-Salazar (2010) defined youth empowerment as "the active participatory process of gaining resources [and] competencies needed to increase control over one's life and accomplish important life goals" (p.16). In short, empowerment was a method by which individuals gained control over their own lives.

Empowerment becomes involved both processes and outcomes (Perkin & Zimmerman, 1995), in that individuals engaged in meaningful activities aimed at producing definite and desired change. Becoming empowered was usually the result of working in a safe and supportive environment and by being allowed to contribute meaningfully to one's to organizational and community life. But perhaps the most critical to transitioning youth's social and psychological development was need for positive role models interaction (i.e., familial or natural mentor).

A natural mentor is someone, not a family member, but an adult from the community or from the youth's social network who provides support and guidance to the youth (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Greeson, 2013). The fostered relationship enables a youth in developing positive thinking and healthy behavioral skills necessary for their development (Christian &Peterson, 2011). For the transitional youth, then, the key to becoming empowered was first to understand the necessity of forging connections or

links to the various social capitals existing in their communities (Stanton-Salazar 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2011).

Stanton-Salazar (2010) likewise introduced the concept of institutional agent in the empowerment process. This agent, like the adult mentor positioned in the youth's social network and for whom the youth held in high regard. The institutional agent negotiated on the youth's behalf and intervened on matters pertaining to the youth's well-being. As a practice, the institutional agents modeled empowerment to the youth, since they were drawing on their own social capital for assistance.

Christian and Peterson (2011), as well as Zimmerman (2011), also honed in on this point showing that when social support existed from family, peers, or school environments, the likelihood of positive self-esteem increased. In this respect, youth transitioning from care could benefit immensely from a sense of empowerment. Kirk and Day (2011), as well as Barn (2010), argued that these young people generally experienced a variety of issues, including low self-esteem, up-rootedness, loss of family members, being disadvantaged and racial discrimination.

To summarize, what made empowerment theory important to the study was its clear suggestion that even the most seriously disadvantaged youth could influence policy decisions being made on their behalf. They needed an opportunity to participate meaningfully in decisions affecting the course of their future lives.

Resilience Theory

The theory of resilience included a positive view of an individual's adaptation in the face of adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2006; Wexler, DiFuvio

& Burke, 2009). The theory emerged from ecology was often posited in terms of a risk/vulnerable factor and a protective factor (Masten & Coatsworth, 2001; 2007; Wexler et al., 2009). A risk factor included identification of the issues of historical trauma (i.e., poverty, discrimination, unemployment, marginalization, etc.), circumstances usually associated with undesired outcomes [e.g., behavioral and health problems, or other issues related to psychopathology] (Wexler et al., 2009).

The protective factor referred to strategies and/or resources individuals employ to enhance their coping efforts and overcome adversities. Such examples of included: calling on family, peers, mentors and other social/community networks (Wexler et al., 2009, Theron & Malindi, 2010, Ungar, 2013, Masten, 2008). Individual can be resilient only if they experienced recent or past threat that significantly hampered their developmental outcomes (Masten & Garmezy, 1985; Masten 2008). Overcoming adversity showed competence (Bottrell, 2009; Masten, 2008).

From the literature, resilience theory was highly suited to any design with a focus on understanding and helping youth better manage themselves while aging-out of the CWS. The theory had variety of practical ways to make the experience more positive. In other words, youth who developed resilience to transitional adversities found better success in independent living than youth who did not. (Ungar, 2013)

Masten (2008) argued that resilience theory supported the inquiry of individuals who beat the odds and survived the transition process, despite the adverse circumstances they encountered along the way. Individuals displaying resilience problem solved by pooling resources as necessary in order to get out of difficult situations. A good example

of how pooling resources promoted resilience might be to examine how youths coped with homelessness. Some youth may have a place to stay for a limited time, such as when they "crash" with a friend; or a group of them would combine resources to rent an accommodation. However, when homelessness couples with unemployment and/or education deficit, a youth's ability to cope gets weakened.

How might the youth cope with this new situation? Well, it appears that youth who had successfully solved their homelessness problem (even if only temporarily) were now better equipped to tackle the added stress of unemployment or education deficit. Tweddle (2007) highlighted a small number of youth who defied the odds and achieved successful outcomes in terms of education, employment and self-esteem, to name a few. A successful outcome in this case did not necessarily mean that the youth completed their education or found gainful employment. Rather, resilience was already evident in the youth's self-esteem/improved sense of identity gained from creating housing stability. In other words, youth were able to pool from their resources, their assets. (Theron, Malindi 2010, Masten, 2008, Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Returning to the concept of protective factors, several authors (Garmezy, 1985, Masten, 2008, Zimmerman, Stoddard, Eisman, Caldwell, Aiyer & Miller, 2013) found these factors were in three categories: (a) the individual, (b) the family, and (c) the environment. Insofar as an individual was concerned, protective factors included high self-esteem, self-control, good problem solving and coping skills. Family would include parents or at least one other supportive family member. Community would involve a good peer network, connections with employment agents, connection to an unrelated

individual/mentor, and affiliation with a religious organization (Stein, 2008; Zimmerman, Stoddard, Eisman, Caldwell, Aiyer & Miller, 2013; Rutman et al, 2016).

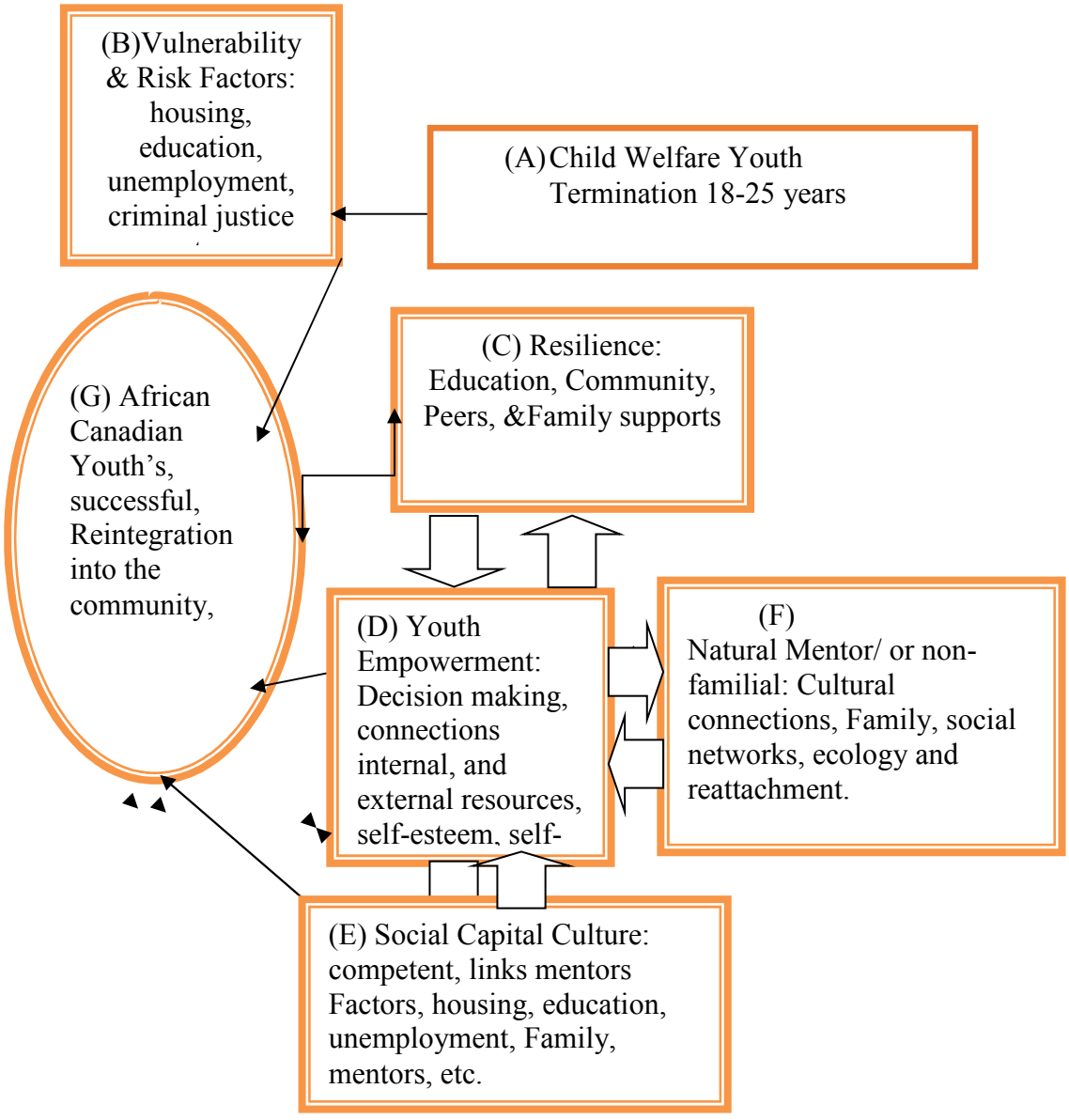
The mentoring relationship was useful to youth in coping with exposure to risk (Zimmerman et al., 2013). Mentoring also had a protective effect against negative friends and school issues, in that they could provide positive guidance. For the African Canadian youth exiting the child welfare system, these factors/connections provided support for effective growth and development.

To summarize, the triadic conceptual framework consisting of complementary concepts/factors from the theories of social capital, resilience and youth empowerment developed to fill this gap. The framework involved creating continuous links to more effective connections to family, peer networks, available resources, organizations and the community. Together these links/connections would enhance the transitioning youth's skills, and knowledge while assuring positive community reconnections and power of self-determination.

Figure 1 below is a diagrammatic view of the connections among the theories in the framework and their relation to youth's successful transition to community living. Box (A) represents the CWS organization and its policy of youth termination between the ages of 18-25 years. Box (B) shows some of the major risk factors that youth face when they exit from care. Boxes (C), (D) and (E) are the theories proposed for the study, with each highlighting some of its major variables. Box (F) indicates a person from a particular youth's social-cultural network that is chosen by the youth but not necessarily from within the youth's immediate support systems. The arrows are the intricate

connections and interactions between and amongst the various theoretical constructs; the potential for these interactions to promote positive developmental outcomes is captured in Circle (G).

***Figure 1*. Developmental Outcomes**



Rationale for Selection of the Concepts

Searches of the literature found 54 studies on youth aging out of CWS and at a disadvantage when compared to their community counterparts. However, no studies appeared in the Canadian literature search to address the question of positive outcomes of African Canadian youth exiting care. Of the 54 studies, the two were most beneficial were the Daining and DePanfilis (2007) and the Barn studies (2010).

Daining and DePanfilis (2007) employed a self-administered interview method, done with the use of a computer, inquiring on youth's self-sufficiency. The result showed that resilience "across multiple domains of functioning are essential to self-sufficiency particularly for African American youth. Barn (2010) examined racial identity and the complexity of identity issues facing minority youth separated at birth from their biological parents and subsequently parented by the State.

A significant finding in this study was that after leaving care the majority of youth had little contact with their family of birth (Barn, 2010). These two studies shed light on the gap in our knowledge of what happens to the African Canadian youth transitioning from the CWS. We might also include here the Clark (2011) and Teklu (2012) studies, which focused on the question of what factors lead youth to achieving positive transitional outcomes.

Over the years several researchers discussed meaningful ways in which changes can be effective. One way is to recognize what may be seen or envisioned as good for one group, may not necessarily be for another group. Therefore, it is crucial for change to start at the location of the youth, where *location* refers to the combination youth's ability,

age, culture and understanding (Umaña-Taylor, Quintana, Lee, Cross, Rivas-Drake, Schwartz, & Seaton, 2014).

From the literature review it was unclear about youth's understanding of ECM requirements, or what the options were available for youth functioning outside of the ECM. Additionally, the ECM contains time- and criteria-specific elements contingent on the behavior and performance of the youth. Furthermore, the ECM contract expired at age 25 years. In the end, it was not understood what factor cultural or otherwise were in place to support the needs of the African Canadian youth in transition.

As explained by Courtney, Hook and Lee (2011) the approach of "a one-size fits all" often did not meet the needs of the vulnerable population served. Unknown was what meaning African Canadian youth ascribed to positive outcomes, as well as, what resources and services would positively enhance their developmental trajectories. Gaining an understanding of how the transition from care to independent living impacted the African Canadian youth constituted the rationale for pursuing the study. In light of these factors the selected concepts were selected.

Concepts in Other Studies

Pinkerton and Dolan (2007) found positive outcomes when the theories of resilience and social capital theories used the concept of adolescence coping. This conceptual framework included culturally specific factors, so that youth dealing with racism, marginalization, and cultural identity dilemmas could identify these as stressors, thereby mitigating their effects. Social capital theory tapped into the resources and provided support within the individual's ecologies. These resources and supports

included a network of people with whom youth can connect, such as immediate and extended family members, peers, as well as significant others that the young people did not necessarily know. For example, a youth believing that racism was a contributing factor in being denied a job now has a network of individuals with whom to discuss the issue, rather than feeling he/she has to face this setback alone.

A discussion of this kind would help the youth to identify barriers (both the external and internal) that might have impeded their success, an identification which is itself empowering for the youth. In other words, utilizing gains from their social capitals promoted greater resilience to stressors, and this resiliency, in turn, functions to strengthen the youth's abilities to tap into his or her social capital networks, thereby enhanced the potential for positive future developmental outcomes, in turn, will extend knowledge.

Reviewed and Synthesized Studies Related to the Research Questions

A key argument in the literature was after aging out of Child Welfare Services ethnic minority youth encountered greater disadvantage than their Caucasian counterparts (Avery, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Stein, 2008). Many international studies found that ethnic minority youth faced greater challenges in most aspects of their developmental trajectories (e.g., Barn, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Stein, 2008). The literature didn't provide any reason to believe that African Canadian (or other Canadian ethnic minority) youth were not similarly affected.

Among the significant challenges noted, the areas of education deficit, underemployment, homelessness and involvement in the criminal activities stood out

(Stein, 2008, Teklu, 2012; Tweddle, 2007). Compared to their Caucasian peers leaving care, the. African Canadian youths' position seemed more compounded, because of factors associated with the racial/ethnic identity (Avery, 2010; Barn, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Over-representation of African Canadian youth in the CWS, duly recognized (Clarke, 2012; Teklu, 2012; Roundtable discussion, 2009) was a recognized factor in the youth transition and developmental trajectories (Barn, 2010; Stein, 2008).

To this extent programs and resources have been instituted to fix the problem so that the youth will no longer be at-risk (Bottrell, 2009). However, this fixing the issue denied the recognitions that much of the problem is institutionally structured (Bottrell, 2009). Needless to say, the issue is now quite topical within the Black community (Teklu, 2012).

For transitioning youth, a MCYS Blue Print Action Plan was implemented in January of 2013. Under this plan young people had the option to remain in care longer to gain more skills, particularly in education, and as seen in the Midwest study (Courtney et al., 2009). However, as pointed out in the McCoy et al. (2008) study, some youth who had the option to remain in care, did not do so. As well, Courtney et al. (2011) discussed that the one size fits all may not work for all vulnerable populations. Hence, the recommendation was for the CWS to examine their policies and procedures, making it more attractive for youth to stay in care while having that option.

Culture-specific support played an integral role in the successful transition of youth leaving CWS (Anghel, 2011). Studies on ethnic minority youth transition from the CWS to independent living did exist, but mostly in international studies (Anyon, 2010;

Avery, 2011; Barn, 2010; D'Andrade & Osterling, 2013; Weller, 2010). Few studies were available in Canada on ethnic minority populations. Thus, almost nothing was known about how African Canadian youth experienced the transition. Nevertheless, the international studies did show that even with increased programs and funding, positive outcomes for transitioning ethnic minority youth remained persistent (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Munson, Lee, Miller, Cole, & Nedelu,2013).

While Canadian literature was sparse on youth transitioning from CWS to independent living, what makes these questions meaningful to an exploration of African Canadian youth aging out of care? Two fundamental reasons were the basis for the study.

First, the approach allowed me to observe directly changes of character in the subject [s] under study (in this case African Canadian youth) in as natural a setting as possible. That is, in interacting with these young people in face-to-face interviews, I was best positioned to capture immediate changes in dispositions, such as facial expressions, body movements, tones of voice, etc. Such changes allowed direct access to the youth's emotional states as they gave an interpretation of their experiences in response, precise to questions posed by the researcher (Creswell, 2013).

Second, the constructivist-phenomenological design was useful because it was a constant reminder to me that my dispositions (i.e. ideas, motivations, feelings, etc.) were to be set aside or bracketed during the process of interaction with the subject[s]. This bracketing, or epoche, assured that the data collected during the interactive process represented the closest reflection as could be had on the subject[s] mental states. This study might fill this gap by helping youth to form supportive and sustainable connections,

so that they would be better able to link with resources and supports to enhance their developmental trajectories.

Summary

The preceding discussions formulated from the literature three aspects of the study:

1. The theoretical foundation of the conceptual framework chosen for this study,
2. How this conceptual framework might be employed by researchers in the previous studies?
3. Justifications or rationales for why this researcher believed the chosen framework was best suited for study. Specifically, what meanings did African Canadian ascribe to the phenomenon of transitioning from CWS to living independently?

The study combined elements of social capital, youth empowerment, and resilience theories constructed a framework for identifying the meaning (s) African Canadian youth ascribed to their CWS aging out process. A confirmation of this combination of theories was not found in the literature. However, many researchers strongly suggested that any two theories could effectively combine to explore the difficulties youth faced (Bottrell, 2009; Dolan, 2008).

It became reasonable to conclude that with training the youth could mobilize their knowledge of the environment (or social capital) in the shaping of their developmental trajectories. This process was the essence of youth empowerment theory. Furthermore,

African Canadian young people were typically grouped with other ethnic minority youth (Kulik, Gaetz, Crowe & Ford-Jones, 2011; Nichols, 2013). The grouping occurred even when examining localized instances of homelessness, unemployment, education, the three most traumatic experiences of transition. Indeed, the failure rate of transition youth in these three major areas was widely documented as extremely troubling to educators and policy makers. Particularly the absence of youth voices seldom included in policy and program development.

A good way to gain an understanding of a phenomenon was for those who lived it to explain/describe their experiences (Patton, 2014). Thus, the selected conceptual framework was ideal for exploring the meanings ascribed to the transition from CWS to independent living. This study might fill this gap by helping youth to form secure and sustainable connections so that they would be better able to link with resources and supports that might enhance their developmental trajectories.

Chapter 3 includes a detailed description of the methodological processes informing the study, including the nature of the inquiry, the research sample, data collection and analyzation processes, trustworthiness and required ethical principles.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

The main objective of this qualitative study was to find out what meaning (s) African Canadian youth ascribed to their experiences while transitioning from the CWS to independent community living. This chapter presents a variety of established methodological principles relating to conducting qualitative research. Included in, but not limited to this presentation, is the research design, selected population, sample size, instrumentation, analysis, and ethical issues.

The phenomenological design was appropriate for exploring the meaning(s) that individuals ascribe to events in their lives. Using this design, researchers suspended their judgments, so as not to interfere with the process of allowing the research subjects' worldview to be revealed (Moustakas, 1994). This approach was absent in studies of CWS youth transitioning to independent community life. However, the absence of such an approach to transitioning to community living has been highly problematic for the transitioning youth in general, (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Rutman et al., 2007, 2016; Tweddle, 2007).

This absence of this approach was of increased significance as it pertained to ethnic minorities, specifically, African Canadian youth. This population is most at risk among CWS transitioning youth (Clarke, 2011; Teklu 2012), even though the specific reason is unknown. I address this matter later by providing stakeholders with a better understanding of the mechanisms leading to African Canadian youths' success in the

transition. What follows is a thematic outline of the methodology for exploring the lived experience of African Canadian youth and factors that might lead to positive outcomes

Research Questions

RQ l: What was the meaning of a successful transition of aging out of care for African Canadian youth from foster homes in Ontario?

RQ 2: What did African Canadian youth perceive as traits or characteristics found in youth who successfully age out of the system?

Central Phenomenon of the Study

The phenomenon under consideration was the inability of African Canadian youth to transition from CWS care to successful independent community living. The Canadian literature had a paucity of information on the travails of youth exiting care (Clarke, 2011; 2012; Rutman, 2007; Tweddle, 2007). Researchers did not know what meaning they ascribed to a successful transition. International literature showed ethnic minority youth faced greater challenges in independent living. For example, they had a greater disparity in education, homelessness, unemployment, and underemployment (Avery, 2011; Barn, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Other results included teenage pregnancy and early parenting as an issue related to the lack of preparatory skills for independent living (Anyon, 2010).

Ethnic minority youth were further disadvantaged by race, ethnicity, and cultural identity. Consequently, they faced marginalization, discrimination, oppression (Barn, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007), and social exclusion (Stein, 2008). At the time of this study, no scholar focused on how African Canadian youth gave meaning to their lived

experiences of aging out of care. This area required further study. This purpose of this qualitative study was to explore what meaning African Canadian youth ascribed to a positive transition to living independently in the community.

Qualitative study

This study follows the qualitative research tradition by employing exploratory methods designed to understand subjects under study in their natural settings. The analysis of data was by inductive methods, allowing me to draw general principles from instances of a given phenomenon. The inductive method was an interpretation of data received from the bottom up [i.e., from the specific to the general] (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Conclusions drawn from a properly conducted qualitative study with human subjects are mostly from three data collection methods: (a) open-ended and in-depth interviews, (b) written documents, and (c) direct observation (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2014). During in-depth interviews, participants provided their perspectives in their natural setting, where the researcher could immediately observe and assess the subject's behavior while collecting informative data (Creswell, 2013).

The naturalistic interpretive design combined three paradigms: epistemology, ontology, and methodology. Epistemology is the study of knowledge and the ways in which inquirers justify what they come to know (Creswell, 2014). Epistemology is related to ontology, defined in general terms as the philosophical study of reality (Patton, 2014). Ontologists ask questions about what really exists. Methodology refers to the practices or procedures the inquirer employs to obtain knowledge of the phenomenon being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Maxwell, 2013).

Qualitative researchers operate under different epistemological assumptions. Some believed that observing a phenomenon in its context is the best way to understand it. Others become immersed in the phenomenon and move in its natural setting to study the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2014). Similarly, qualitative researchers had different operational ontological assumptions. The basis of qualitative inquiry is constructivist ontology and involves multiple realities of the phenomenon.

Phenomenological Design Rationale

After the idea came to me to conduct a study on how African Canadian youth made meaning of their transitional experience from the CWS to community living, I examined the traditional quantitative and qualitative methods. I went through dozens of articles and research designs to find the methodology best suited to answer my research questions. The quantitative method is a test of theories objectively by examining relationships between variables. Variables measured with the use of instruments provide the data from which to draw conclusions with statistical measurements (Creswell, 2013). This method did not support exploration of the unique lived experiences of the individuals, and I excluded it from consideration.

In a qualitative study, the phenomenological design enables a researcher to identify the meanings people ascribe to their experiences from their own world view. Significant to this design is the phenomenological reduction, a scientific method of inquiry to allow a researcher to withhold judgments about the issues under study to gain knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). This bracketing or withholding of judgement is important as the researcher is able to interpret what the participant says and does, while

understanding without preconceived thoughts interfering with the interpretation (Creswell, 2013).

While I examined other approaches for the study, most notably the grounded theory design, the phenomenological design presented greater advantages. For example, with the grounded theory design, a researcher builds a theory from the ground up by using only the data collected from study participants (Charmaz, 2008; Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). The results are useful to develop the theory, to explain the phenomenon, as well as provide a structure for further studies (Creswell, 2013).

Researchers conducting similar studies on CWS youth transition and using a large number of participants, found it necessary to constantly modify their data collection (Rutman et al., 2007). Although the grounded theory was a considered design for this study, the concerns, along with time and financial resource constraints, placed this design beyond my capability. The phenomenological design was my choice because I was interested in gaining knowledge and understanding of individuals' lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014).

Role of the Researcher

According to Patton (2014), heuristic inquiry brings to the forefront both the personal experience and the insights of the researcher. Additionally, within the larger framework of the phenomenological heuristic, it requires that a researcher, as a co participant, be involved in discovering the phenomenon and in sharing the meaning of the participant's experience (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). Qualitative research is

interpretative research (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative researcher assumes the role of *bricoleur* (/bricklayer), that is to say, a jack of all trades (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2) with an intimate understanding of the various elements of job. I used tools of my own development, and/or whatever other material was available at hand.

With respect to the study, I, as the bricoleur, was the key instrument, for at the end of the day, my charge was to make proper sense of the data that really mattered. I used a variety of methods in the data collecting and analyzing processes. However, a researcher combines his or her roles of observer, listener, prompter, and empathizer. Ultimately the goal was to determine the value and credibility of the work undertaken (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Patton 2014).

Knowledge and Expertise of the Researcher

I am a social worker with over 25 years of counseling experience gained primarily through working with youth in various capacities. This on-the-job experience, complemented with a master in social work (MSW) degree. The resulting learning process exposed me to a host of (often competing) worldviews. This experience allowed me to become proficient in interviewing and data collection techniques. My skills in the field of social work and my formal training honed my communicative abilities, so that I easily adapt to most situations requiring effective questioning, listening, and problem solving techniques. These skills were transferable and essential for the required rich data collection and in-depth analyses.

Population

The population studied included the following:

- African Canadian youth between the ages of 18- and 24-years-old
- Voluntarily shared experiences as wards of the OACAS
- Terminated or voluntarily left CWS/OACAS care at the age of majority.

Criterion on Participant Selection

The concept of purposeful sampling selection informed my study (Patton, 2014). This sampling method was the choice in this study for the following reasons:

- It allowed me to select participants who would better inform the study.
- The selection went well with the snowball sample effect or "word of mouth" concept because participants could be referred by a personal or professional associate who knew the participants' lived experience and believed that they could contribute meaningfully to the study (Creswell, 2012, p. 125; Patton, 2014)

Sampling Selection/Strategy

A letter of solicitation went to community partners asking them to distribute/post flyers on their public bulletin boards. Such community partners included public libraries and Black community churches and recreational centers. At these sites potential participants could view study information and contact me directly**.** The letter also included all formal procedures regarding the participants' rights and options. I also actively recruited participants through my youth-worker-networking communities in both the Toronto and Peel Regions as my back-up plan. After permission was granted by the internal review board (IRB; 001-612-312-1210) overseeing this study, I began the recruitment.

Sample Size and Selection

The sample size of this study was 10 participants, recruited from a purposeful sampling selection. While the sample size varies in phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2014), Patton (2014) suggested that a sample size is much dependent on the overall scope of the inquiry (i.e., on what it is the researcher believes is absolutely necessary). Miles and Huberman (1994) cautioned that a large sample size can become unmanageable, especially for new researchers.

Relationship between Sample Size and Saturation

In a review of Ph.D. students' studies on sample size and saturation, Mason (2010) concluded that no significant correlations existed between size and saturation. New data collected to add size do not necessarily present new knowledge or shed further light on the matter being investigated. Mason advised, however, that close adherence to approaches congruent with qualitative studies was the best practice.

For this study, the sample consisted of 10 African Canadian youth (from the City of Toronto and/or Peel Region) who aged out of CWS during the last 3 years. The number 10, though arbitrary, accommodated all of the views expressed in the preceding two paragraphs, but perhaps especially in light of the Miles and Huberman (1994) caution on the potential unmanageability of the collected data. Data collection is the seminal component of any study. As Moustakas (1994) pointed out, in the phenomenological design, the participant interview can often be a lengthy affair, as it is a casual interactive process including open-ended questions and comments.

A minimum level of self-identification was needed for study participants, including personal contact information and requisite information from Walden University and the IRB responsible for overseeing the research project. My goal was to maximize the accuracy and transparency of the information provided to participants and professional associates involved in this study.

Research Procedures

After receiving IRB approval, the research procedures were as follows:

- Once potential study participants became identified, they would contact me directly.
- An interview, either face-to-face or by telephone was scheduled with the prospective participant's eligibility for the study. If the prospective participant was unable to meet or was uncomfortable with either interview option, then he or she received a final option to provide study data in a written form.
- Once all pre-study eligibility criteria were met, the potential participant and I reviewed the Consent Form requirements and their rights, responsibilities, and options as stated therein.
- The prospective participant's Consent Form agreement authorized me to forward the form to the university's IRB committee for final approval on the prospect's eligibility to participate in the study.
- Only upon the approval of the IRB was a participant able to engage in this study.

Data Collection

The method of data collection occurred through face-to-face interviews, a traditional and preferred method (Creswell, 2012). Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes each, for a total of 10 hours of interviewing and dialogue time with the participants. The data collection process involved audio taping and a note taking pad, tools widely known to be effective. A follow-up procedure established with the participants, where necessary, was to seek clarifications or to collect further data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis and interpretation are the essential processes within the qualitative paradigm. All interviews, transcribed manually and hand-coded, ensured the accuracy of the data analysis. I contacted participants by the telephone number(s) they provided, and they received a copy of their own transcription for revision and to make changes where necessary. They were no changes made by the participants.

I followed a series of steps in coding, content analysis reviewing, and organizing. I used color coding to highlight major themes throughout the entire transcription process. The raw data, analyzed inductively from the bottom up, was a method used until the data were saturated. I worked back and forth between the coding and raw data until themes emerged. This procedure involved continuously checking my field notes and audio recordings. Maxwell (2013) stated that no recipe exists for coding; thus, researchers develop their own methods.

Credibility (Internal Validity)

Trustworthiness has four components that are the equivalent of internal and external validity (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1994; Patton, 2014). They are credibility, which is internal validity; transferability, which is external validity; dependability, which is the reliability; and conformability, which is objectivity (Patton, 2014). The goal of the qualitative researcher is to produce measureable work, acceptable by the scientific community. I used member checking to ensure the credibility of the study. Member checking is the process whereby the researcher takes back parts of the finished report, such as the interpretation, themes, or the case analysis of the participants to discuss findings in order to ascertain the accuracy of the study (Creswell, 2013).

Ethical Procedures

All ethical procedures were in accordance with the policies and procedures as outlined by the University's research practice. While the Ethical Review Board (IRB) was responsible for ensuring that research practices met the required standards, ultimately I was responsible to ensure protection of the participants and their data. The participants' protection was critical in qualitative studies. Few ethical principles needed consideration in order to protect participations. Deception was one form of unethical practice, which the researcher must avoid (Sareandakos, 2012). Deception can take the form of not telling the participants that they are being audio taped. Additionally, deceit can occur whereby the researcher refuses to disclose the actual reason or reasons for the research investigation. The best practice is full disclosure and transparency throughout the study.

Researcher biases also were an important issue to mention. Keeping in mind the

above jack of all trades (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) self-designation, the issue of research credibility becomes instrumental to the process. In this study, then, I was the only direct or immediate contact with the data gathered for analyses. This meant I maintained the highest possible degree of objectivity, which could only be accomplished through a constant mindfulness of my own biases (Maxwell, 2013).

Protecting the participants in a research study involved guaranteeing anonymity. In this study, participants selected a pseudonym to protect their identity and information. They had my identification and contact information to verify the purpose of the study and ensure its credibility. As well, they received a full disclosure of the study with an opportunity to verify transcriptions of data to validate its credibility.

Another major concern for a qualitative researcher was to protect the participants from harm. Working within these concerns, I ensured that I conducted a socially responsible research, I maintained adherence to the ethical principles as outlined by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and guidelines for Protecting Human Research Participants (PHRP). I did not collect data from participants personally known to me, and I adhered to all policies and procedures, including the Tri-Council policy on "Ethical Conduct for Research involving Humans" (Tri-Council Policy, 2010).

While the decision of how much is to be paid is an ethical one, the going rate, as seen in studies advertised in the local papers, ranges from $20-30.00 per visit with the participant. As a student with a limited budget, $20.00 per visit appeared to be reasonable. Over the past year the transportation cost of travelling to and from the City of Toronto to the city of Brampton increased considerably, therefore providing the youth

with a transportation incentive of $20.00 to and from the designated interview location was justified as a means of decreasing the financial burden on the youth and to encourage participation.

The telephone contact of the crisis agency (Mobile Crisis of Peel) was available to all participants to receive immediate support at all times during the interview process or immediately after the interview should a participant become unduly stressed. Mobile Crisis of Peel provides free 24-hour crisis support to individuals either over telephone or in person at an address /location convenient for the individual.

Working within the guidelines of the ethical principles of the Ontario College Social Worker and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW), the participant has the right to self-determination. The participants determined what and how much information they wanted to share (OCSWSSW, 2013). The storage and protection of participant data were also important. The data collected from the participants was protected through the implementations the following procedures:

- Backup copies of the computer files.
- Preservation of a master copy of the transcribed data.
- A file system designed to identify and locate the study's information established.

Summary

In chapter 3, the theoretical method of inquiry and the study design were outlined. This sample consisted of African Canadian youth who aged out of the Child Welfare System and returned to living independently in the community, yet were not adjusting

well. The purpose of the study was to understand what African Canadian youth ascribed to positive outcomes, and what factors would hinder or promote positive outcomes. There were no studies found on the focus of this study, African Canadian youth transitioning from the CWS and what factor(s) they ascribed to successful outcomes in living independently of the CWS.

A phenomenological heuristic design was the means to explore and describe African Canadian youth's lived experiences as they understood these experiences. The phenomenological heuristic was the most suitable method for this study, as I suspended what was known about the phenomenon, and listened to the stories being told through the lenses of the participants. In Chapter 4, I discussed the findings and analysis of the data.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain knowledge and understanding of the meaning(s) that African Canadian youth in Ontario ascribed to their lived experiences as they transition from CWS to independent community living at the age of maturity. The study was guided by two primary research questions:

RQ1: What was the meaning of a successful transition of aging out of care for African Canadian youth from foster homes in Ontario?

RQ2: What did African Canadian youth perceive as traits or characteristics found in youth who successfully age out of the system?

The study consisted of a sample size 10 youth who were of African Canadian descent aged out of CWS within the last 3 years and living independently in the community. Data collected through face-to-face interviews with the participants, each lasted approximately 1 hour. None of the participants were known to me. The data analysis procedures were consistent with the Moustakas (1994) modified version of Stevick -Colaizzi - Keen -phenomenological method of data analysis.

This chapter begins with a demographic summary of the sample, followed by the study's data collection, data analysis of methods, evidence of trustworthiness statement, composite textual description of participants' responses, composite structural description of participants' responses and interpretive analysis, and a concluding summary.

Demographic Summary

This study consisted of a sample size of 10 participants, ranged in age from 19- to 24-years-old. The sample consisted of four (40%) males and six (60%) females, with all self-identifying as African Canadian (i.e., of African and/or Caribbean descent living in Canada; Clarke, 2012). All participants confirmed that they transitioned from the CWS to community living within the last 3 years and were currently residing in either the Region of Peel or the City of Toronto, Ontario. All participants reported that they had lived in either group homes or foster homes or both during their time in the CWS.

At the time of the study, two (20%) were living independently, seven (70%) were either living in a shelter or staying with a friend, and one (10%) was living with family members. In the area of education, one (10%) indicated that he had completed a Grade9 education, and nine (90%) indicated that they had dropped out of school. However, seven (70%) indicated that they were currently involved in some kind of educational program fulfilling the mandatory requirements of the shelter's living arrangements. The remaining two (20%) were planning to return to school in the near future. Other pertinent information such as financial support was unclear from their responses.

Data Collection Process

Participant recruitment for this study followed the purposeful sample snowball sampling selection concept. Initially flyers (see Appendix E) were posted on bulletin boards at various public locations such as public bulletin boards at several malls and recreational centers within the Peel Region and the Greater Toronto areas. I also handed out flyers at the community centers and places where Black youth frequent with the

hopes of ensuring participant response. Potential participants were instructed to contact me from the phone number listed on the flyer.

Through this process of recruiting, six responses were received from potential participants; of this six, two failed to meet the inclusion/eligibility criteria (see Appendix B) where full details of the inclusion criteria are outlined. The potential participants were advised accordingly. Interviews were scheduled with the other four potential participants based on dates and times convenient for them. However, none of the participants honored this commitment. Several follow-up attempts to contact the four were made (using phone numbers that they provided) but all went unanswered.

Using my back-up plan, copies of the flyer went to colleagues in the social work field who were in regular contact with youth who met the study's inclusion/eligibility criteria. My colleagues handed out the flyer to youth whom they thought might inform the study. Through this process of recruiting (over a 2-week period), 15 potential participants contacted me. All potential participants were screened, and 10 met the inclusion criteria and had interviews, thus fulfilling the study's requirement.

The interviews began with face-to-face meeting with each participant at a location and time convenient to him or her. Four participants were interviewed at a public library, two at a coffee shop, and the remaining four at a local gymnasium. Prior to each interview, I explained the study requirements and the Informed Consent procedure (See Appendix B), and all participants read and confirmed that they understood completely the voluntary nature of their participation in the study.

All interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participant. I used a

handheld audio recorder, as well as a note pad where I wrote notes as necessary. The interviews fell within the projected 45- to 60-minute time frame, and no follow-up meetings were necessary for further data collection. While none of the participants either voiced concerns or showed signs of discomfort during the interview, all received the name and phone number of the Mobile Response Team as a precautionary measure against post interview stress.

Additionally, all participants received a $20 honorarium as compensation for their time and/or transportation. Following each interview, I transcribed all data collected from participants. I made a copy of the master recording, in which I stored on my personal computer with a private password access assigned for security purposes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As a further security measure, each participant's data were filed under individual code names.

Data Analysis Process

Seventy-eight pages of transcripts consisted of 200 statements. Statements condensed into nine thematic clusters related to RQ1: What was the meaning of a successful transition of aging out of care for African Canadian youth from foster homes in Ontario. Thematic clusters related to RQ2 included the following: What did African Canadian youth perceive of traits or characteristics found in youth who successfully age out of the system? I followed the modified Stevick- Colaizzi- Keen method of analysis described by Moustakas (1994). See Appendix A for methods involved.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Member checking was the means to determine the accuracy of my interpretations of the collected data, accomplished through follow-up interviews with seven of the 10 participants at a location determined by them. Participants received a transcribed and coded copy of their interview for revision purposes; my interpretations were read to them, and all confirmed that they were accurate. The other three participants could not be located. This confirmation, in turn, led to the collective meaning(s) of participants' lived experiences formed by me for the purposes of this study.

Comprehensive Overview of Participants' Verbatim Descriptions

In this section, I present clustered outlines of participants' responses to the two study questions, each introduced by a summary. An overlap existed among responses, in particular, the first two clusters. Although it was possible to combine these two response clusters, I felt that in the interest of analytic clarity to come later in the paper, it would be better to maintain two distinct themes. The study involved 10 participants, and in the interest of consistency, the participants were the same as youth (18-to 24-years-old) throughout this document. This section will begin with a brief introduction of the participants.

Participants' Introduction

Before getting into the details of the interviews, I will provide brief background information on the 10 participants included in this study.

P1 was a 19-year-old man, not entirely sure of the initial cause (s) of his involvement with the CWS. From his recollection of events he believed that someone at

the school made a complaint to the CWS, which resulted in his apprehension and being taken away from his mother. He also reported that after spending 4 years in CWS care, now at age 16, he was discharged to the family home.

P2 was a 21-year-old woman discharged from the CWS to home at age 18. She spent approximately 8 years "on and off" in care. Her involvement with CWS was due to a parent child conflict. For the first 4 years, her stay in the CWS was not stable, as her mother still had a fair amount of involvement in her care, but spent the next 4 in a group home, which she liked. At age 18 she was discharged to the family home.

P3 was a 24 old male involved with the CWS at age 14 when his aunt, his primary caregiver, was no longer able to parent him due to her illness. He was discharged from CWS at age 21, after 7 years of living in a foster home.

P4 was a 19 woman, who spent approximately 4 years in the CWS because of abuse she suffered at the hands of a family member. At age 16 she was discharged from CWS to independent living.

P5 was a 21year old woman, who could not recall the exact age of her initial involvement with the CWS. She recounted that maltreatment at home (which she claimed was reported to the authorities by a member of the public) was the reason for her going into CWS care. She was discharged at age 17 to independent living.

P6 was a 19-year-old female, discharged from CWS at 16. She reported a long history of family CWS involvement, which was the cause of her involvement with the CWS. She wanted to leave the CWS and was discharged at age 16 to independent living.

P7 was a 20-years-old female and terminated from CWS at age 17. Like P2 above, the cause of her involvement with the CWS was a parent child conflict.

P8 reported a long history of involvement with CWS. Her mother had passed away, and she became a ward of the state at an early age. At the time of the interview, she reported her age as 20-years-old.

P9 was a 20-year old male, reported a parent child conflict. He admitted that his mother could not control his behavior, resulting in his CWS involvement. He was discharged back to home at 16, but unfortunately the conflictual relationship with and his mother resurfaced, leading him to independent living.

P10 was a 21-year-old young man, initial CWS contact was for parental neglect. Discharged at age 17, he went directly to live in a youth shelter.

All participants entered the CWS due to parental inability/failure to provide important and necessary care to them.

Research Question 1

Homelessness/Shelter Living

Although the primary need voiced by the participants was to have a trustworthy family member or near equivalent in the community, their first real challenge upon entering the community was finding housing. Researchers discussed the consequences of consistent housing disruption on the youth transitioning from care, particularly when stable family was absent (Mendes et al., 2011; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Stein, 200). Barn (2010) listed the extent of possible consequences of such disruption, which included "poor educational outcomes, unemployment, involvement in criminal activities,

substance use and misuse, poor self-esteem and low levels of confidence" (p. 847). Youth voiced the potential for meeting up with these consequences, even by youth who believed that they were ready to face the community.

One conclusion drawn from the interviews and field notes, which tended to support RQ1, was that past negative experiences with homelessness were internalized by the youth. For a successful transition to occur for African Canadian youth, adequate preparation for stable housing needed to be addressed/ determined before their exit from care. Here were four accounts of their experiences as provided by young people:

> P2: Like I said, I thought when I moved out I could handle it, but I had to go back in the group home.
>
> P3: I guess if you want to call being in the shelter homeless, well, yes, I have been homeless. It was very painful. It is painful. After I left care, I ended up in the shelter. As I said before, the shelter life was a very different bad experience for me. I was exposed to stuff that I was not aware of. I have no stability since leaving the foster home. I have been in shelters; my things are stolen; it's just like the group home. I believe things would have been better for me, if my mother was alive. Now I just have to work harder to reach somewhere in life.
>
> P4: Challenges of the shelter was difficult for me [mostly] the challenges are [with] the rules. I did not want to follow any rules. I was really messed up because everywhere you go, you have rules… The living conditions were bad, lots of people sleeping in one area. Their stuff gets stolen, every day you have to fend for yourself. You easily become a drug addict, as there [are] many different forms of

drugs with easy access. I left the shelter as soon as I realized that it was not for me. I rented a room and worked with [an] agency daily to pay my rent. I learned that this was important. I guess now [that] I am older I am more settled; I am living with my family now and I am no longer homeless. I am now fighting to get my kids back.

P6: I have never been homeless. I went in the shelter because I was abused by my partner; however as soon as he left my place, I went back home. Living in the shelter was to me not the best place; it is overcrowded and bad influence you can get involved with if you are not careful … like stolen stuff, drugs, addiction, sex you know. But that was not my thing; I did not get caught up in that.

The temptations toward risky behavior and activity increased or even became inevitable on existing care. Therefore, consistent with Research Question 1, if the youth successfully transitioned into community life, provisions for postcare and resources needed to be included in their discharge planning.

In-Care Housing Instability

Although this study was primarily concerned with postcare housing instability, the fact that a number of the youth felt it important to state their experiences while in care made it important to mention a couple of the participants' reports. These reports not only provided added clarity on the youths' perspectives on the homeless experience, but also further supported the strength of the research question of what meaning African Canadian youth attributed to a successful transition from care.

The reports were also worthwhile to note because of the implications they hold for CWS administrative staff. Many researchers (Barn, 2010; Courtney et al., 2010; Stott, 2012) noted the negative impact that in-care instability could have on the transition process into community life. Planning for African Canadian youth needed to include education and coaching on how best to secure housing if they are to transition successfully to community life.

Here are five of the youths' accounts:

P2: In the foster home I was always getting moved around a lot. I lived with mostly black youth, and I always have to play tough because I did not want to be beaten …You see, most [of the residents] were older than I was. It takes me a while to find a place in the community…I was always moving up and down just like in Care.

P4: At first I began living in a group home and from there I went to a foster home, and they said they could not control me. Then I was sent to [another] group home. I went back and forth [between] group and foster homes. So basically it was like a dog pound, they catch me and send me back. I was moved like a stray dog in care; today I am still like a stray dog, running all over the place. My worker believed what the group home and foster people tell them [about me].

P5: At first when I came in care I wanted to leave … I was told that a foster home was a bad place for kids to go, and I would try to make my problems at home go away by pretending that everything was ok, so they would send me back home. But that did not happen; instead I was moved all over the place because of

problems with [my] foster mother. Today, I can only find a place for a short time and then I have to move again it's just like living in care.

P6: I was always in trouble with the law and was always on medication, and I never fit in the foster home, so the CAS worker kept on placing and doing replacement of foster homes. This is the same thing happening today, it is in me to move all over the place" if it had not been for my family.

P8: I spent a long time in care, and they kept moving me around, me and my brother. They kept moving us around from foster home to foster home. I was moved to more than 5 foster homes, they kept moving me around.

Because in-care instability had an impact on the youth, the family or similarly close community connections were vital to their successful transitioning. The next cluster will address the youth's unpreparedness for the various transition challenges they faced.

Unpreparedness for the Challenges of Independent Living

Prior to January 2013, Ontario youth left CWS at the age of 16, and their leaving was final (United Tweddle, 2007). Today they leave at 18 (MCYS, 2013). However, the literature showed that 18- and even 19-year-olds are not yet sufficiently prepared to face the challenges of independent living (Courtney et al., 2009).

In the excerpts below the participants discussed their experiences, in living independently, their fears, regrets, and challenges.

P3: There were so many things going through my mind at the time knowing that I had to leave; it was daunting. I thought about getting in touch with my birth parents … for some kind of protection. It was quite difficult knowing what to do. I

was not given instructions. I did not have any skills or training as to what to do; the first thing that came to mind was how do I get in touch with these people who I really did not know, as I was brought here by an aunt. I felt so comfortable in the foster home I had not thought about other family members because my foster parents treated me like their own.

P4: I guess I reached age of maturity. I was terminated at 16 years old. My worker came and told me that I had to leave because there is nothing more the society can offer me. I did not have a plan of care; the decision was already made … I had … (multiple) kids, and I was told to leave. I was so frightened and scared. I was, trust me…

P7: When I left care at 17 years, I knew I could manage on my own. I did not know how to cook, or even manage my money really well; you know, social skills, how to get along with people, how to behave properly. I don't know if you can understand what I mean it not just about cooking and cleaning skills. As a young woman, you need more life skills training and exposure to these skills What to do, what not to do in situations. I really was scared.

P9: Now I am thinking differently and saying if CAS was my parents, why [did] they make me leave at 16? I got no skills they should have stopped me; they could have given me more information. I had no idea of the rules of leaving care. Most of my friends just left at 16 when the judge said it was ok, so they ran AWOL.

From these accounts it clear that the youth held serious reservations, indeed fear, about their prospects of having a decent life in post-CWS.

The Extended Care and Maintenance program

The ECM is a policy and procedure instituted by the MCYS, which by default seemed not to be flexible enough accommodate the varied difficulties encountered by African Canadian youth. A key eligibility condition is that CWS youth must be registered in post-secondary or equivalent skills training (MCYS, 2013), however, a large number of African Canadian youth were not achieving success in education generally (Hampton, 2010; Levine-Rasky, 2014).

Although the participant reports cited that they did not explicitly associate proper education with successful transitioning to community living, the lack of familial support (or other equivalent guidance) in the community only served to magnify the challenges they faced. In the following reports the youth told about other options they needed to be available to them:

> P2: I really did not have any difficulties in school; I love school but I was terminated at 17. The ECM program maybe … would benefit youth who want to be in care longer and could benefit from it. I believe it should not be all they have because not every youth is going to want to stay in care longer to receive and education.
>
> P3: In care, the highest grade I achieved was 12. By the time I left care I had begun to attend college. This contributed to my foster parents who helped me and I had to make an effort to achieve. I left care at 21. I love drawing and wanted to become an architect, but I had to leave care.

> P4: In care I did not attend school; I was too busy running away. I did not even finish grade 9…I would leave the group home or foster home for school but I did not go, [instead] me and my friends would hang out at the mall. The workers at the group home or my foster parents did not care if I go to school or not … they say school was for me to get an education and if I don't care [then] they don't care either … and even if I had foster parents helping me I needed the skills to know how to manage it, you know, I had no directions.

The participants were discharged prior to the amended ECM contract, instituted in January of 2013.The Ministry extends eligibility for ECM to all youth from care until age 23 and those enrolled in post-secondary education or training until age 25. I could not find an evaluation of this contract. However, participants would still be excluded from participation as they did not meet the eligibility criteria. One youth, who perhaps would have been eligible at age 21 completed grade 12 and would have met the eligibility criteria if he registered in a training school. This issue again speaks to the plan of care: What was his goal on completion of high school? What was the dialogue between the foster parent/worker about the future of this youth?

Positive educational achievement is a major indicator of success for youth transitioning from CWS care to community living (Courtney et al., 2006). However, in the majority of cases youth from care were not successful, even when the youth themselves had aspirations to further their education (Kirk et al., 2011; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Courtney, 2009; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee & Raap, 2010; Dworsky,

2008). For example, youth with a history of CWS involvement graduated at a significantly lower rate than their counterparts in the general population.

In the Rutman et al. (2007) study among youth in CWS 52% did not graduate, as compared to 25% in the general population. Ferguson and Wolkow (2012) found that CWS youth who do go on to graduate were six times more likely to earn a GED than a high school diploma, even with paid tuition available, former foster care youth were more likely to drop out of college than first generation low income tuition-paying students. Day et al. (2011) argued that foster care youth (34%) were significantly more likely than non-foster care youth (18%) to drop out of college at the end of the first year. According to these authors, one possible explanation for the higher dropout rate was a lack of strong familial connections to encourage and support them through their educational journey (Day et al., 2011). In the next section study participants express their views on counseling as they experienced it while in the CWS.

Counseling Needs

Participants reported they either received counseling or found it unhelpful in addressing their specific concerns and needs, or they never received any counseling at all. In fact, 60% blamed their case workers for not suggesting counseling to them in the first place; 30% said they either went to walk-in counseling or the counseling they got was not enough, and (10%) didn't believe they were ready for counselling when it was recommended. In the reviewed literature, evidence was not available to confirm the extent to which youth blamed their workers for not suggesting counseling to them. However, confirmation existed that youth often do bring to the CWS complex

psychological scars that may never heal while in care (Barn,2010, Kelly & Caputo, 2007), From the variety of participant experiences, the counseling function of the CWS was in many ways highly unsettling for them. As well be, a number of those youth who did receive counseling believed that their particular/individual fears and complex needs were left unaddressed.

> P1: I left care three years ago when I was 16 years old. When I left I was not better off than when I went in. I should be staying for counseling to deal with what's bothering me. Maybe counseling is included in the education; I would rather they tell me that or help me to connect to these resources. They say that the ECM program is a contract so still if I don't follow the contract I would be out.
>
> P2: I believe that since my worker saw that I was having difficulties with other problems in my life … what would better prepare me for transition may be some counseling to deal with my childhood issues. What concerned me most when I was in the shelter is the moving from place to place. Like I said, I thought when I moved out I could handle it; but I had to go back in the group home, so the counseling and their help in preparing for what's out there would have helped a lot.
>
> P4: Sure they give me protection from home but no other help. If they had helped me, certain mistakes I made in life I would not have made … I was still a child, I needed a lot more, you know, someone just to sit and talk to me… help me to open up, to find out what was going on … I was. [Uprooted] and I had that to deal with, but they did not offer to connect me. I tried to run away to a family

member… but they come and get me. It takes me three minutes to pack my bag and run and 5 minutes for them to do the paper work and bring me back in care again until I was 16 years, then I should just go find my family members on my own.

P6: I needed skills in knowing how to deal with my problem of blaming myself and my sadness, but they were seeing behavior and eventually I got kicked out … If I had gotten counseling to deal with the stuff that was bothering me, maybe I would have been prepared to learn skills that I would need to survive when I am out of care. I really did not do anything to help myself either; I had no goal or vision.

P7: I asked for counseling because I was dealing with a lot. I went to some drop in counseling [but] I believe the counselor did not get what I was saying; I feel she was too young to understand me. Seriously, we [young people] in care go through a lot. you know everything is set one way. you know, and that's what you must follow, and if you [do] something different then you are not following rules.

P8: It would have helped if I had a better worker who cared about me. I felt I needed that connection … I was only 17 years, pregnant and scared.

P9: The counseling would have helped … Sit down with the people, see what their strengths are; that would have helped. More getting to know the people would have helped.

P10: Well as I told you I feel the shelter was a little too much help for me. but I guess I did not get the right help I had a nervous breakdown after leaving care.

It seems as though these accounts supported the idea that for a successful transition to occur provision for post-care counselling was necessary. Then youth could have an opportunity to work through pre-CWS issues, as well as those developed while in CWS. In the next section the youth discuss the importance of having their voices included in the decisions made on their behalf.

Youth Voices in Decision-making Processes

The perceived CWS Administrative ineffectiveness was highlighted in this area, as participants discussed inconsistencies experienced in staff disciplinary practices. The ECM is a contractual agreement between the youth and the CWS, which allowed youth to remain in care longer if they remained faithful to the contractual obligations (Tessier & Flynn, 2009). Although some youth claimed that they were unaware of their ECM contract obligations or expectations and others claimed that these were not properly explained to them.

Such comments made by P4: revealed: “In care I did not attend school; I was too busy running away.” Many accounts of the African Canada post-care youth came to view their difficult circumstances as partly resulting from their own shortcomings. However, they saw a successful transition to independent community living as necessarily entailing the opportunity to have their own creative input and judgment in the shaping of their post-care plan. This opportunity they claimed was denied them.

For young people, an important component in successful transitioning to community living needed to include an opportunity to have their voices heard by the CWS prior to exiting care. This need was especially salient since they did not have family

or other reliable connections to support them. The perceived need for this opportunity was very clear in the following reports:

> P1: When I was leaving care the decision was made for me; I did not have any choice in the matter. Today, I don't really want to live on the streets again; I have choices in decisions that are important to me.
>
> P2: I feel because CAS decides for the youth what is best for them, that [this] is not right. I believe that youth should know what they want. CAS says that they are at the age of maturity and is an adult; I don't know which kid can behave independently after leaving in care. Everything is done for you but not the things that you need to do and know for yourself. I think better planning … [would be to] give the youth the opportunity to decide what is best for them out there, and help the youth to [do] it; whether it is programs or support. use what the youth say is best for them.
>
> P3: What I'm really saying is the CAS has … made life easy for me to a point… at a specific age…because I followed all the rules; but teaching me the skills in getting these resources or linking to these resources would have been better. Because once their hand-out stopped and I had to do it on my own I was lost. I think of the saying 'give a man a fish and he is fed for a day, but teach him how to fish and I believe the saying [is] he is fed forever.
>
> P7: I believe CAS needs to look beyond our behavior and treat everyone as [an] individual, talk to the youth and develop good plans of care. They need to look at the cultural background of the individual and work with the individual, ask

questions and help the youth to set goals because they are our parents and that's what good parents would do. As a youth, I would need more support, not just throw me out there and expect me to survive; support me, help me with resources. And because we [black youth] have a more difficult time, act as the go between for me to resources.

From these excerpts, it was clear that the young people were suggesting that there must be opportunities for them to engage in conversations that are meaningful to their current situations. Additionally, it was also clear that support was needed around the broader issues such as unemployment; homelessness must be addressed prior to the transition.

Research Question 2

Motivation to 'Survive'/Perseverance

In this section the youth discussed their determination to make productive and decent lives for themselves despite the challenges they faced while living in the community. Indirect responses to RQ1 and RQ2 highlighted their own vision of how they were going to create a brighter future for themselves.

P1: a 19 -year old man, at 16 years was discharged to home. However, within a couple of weeks at home he realized that a disconnect existed between himself and his family. This disconnection was too severe to be repaired with his limited skills and lack of other supports, thus he left home to live in the shelter**.**

P1: I am motivated to work, to get up and go to work daily to pay my rent. I want to become a fashion designer, but right now I have to figure how to go back to

school, while earning an income. But most of all I am motivated by knowing that I have hope of changing my life around. I have people in the community that I'm connected to now [that] I find on my own, and they are helping me.

P2: I want to work hard so that my children will not have the same experience and this is my decision. I would not want to see my kids in care. Now that I have some more experience and have realized what I could have done differently, it is my choice in going to counseling which will help me now.

P3: As a member of society my motivation is to succeed … I have a goal in mind … to put myself in a position where I can earn, where I can contribute to society. I want to become an architect and I was (am) motivated to go to university.

P4: I want to be a contributing member of society; I want to succeed. I want an education, I want to go to university, and I am going to achieve this goal. These are all the choices that I can make.

P6: I am motivated to achieve my ultimate goal to go back to school and finish my education.

P7: Now I have two children raising on my own. It is difficult, you know, but watching them grow is my motivation; I am trying my best so that they don't end up in care. I am a good mother.

While the accounts of the lived experiences could render most people helpless, the determination to move forward despite the challenges revealed resilience that only needed recognition and support from the appropriate community agents.

Reflections on Behavior Modification/Self-empowerment

For this final theme of Reflections on behavior modification/Self-empowerment all ten participants' verbatim text are presented. The youth continued to highlight the specific changes they intended to implement in their efforts toward successful community life.

Similar to the previous accounts, the participants rather than venture comments on what they perceive of traits or characteristics found in youth who successfully age out of the system, participants chose to focus on the types of behavior modification (/behavior management efforts) they believe would best help them to meet their day to day challenges. Participants either presented a goal that they hoped to achieve, or suggested a specific path they would like to take to better themselves. Moreover, the accounts tended to substantiate their call to have their voices heard—to be directly involved—in their own post-care planning:

> P1: Today I don't really want to live on the streets again. I have seen other youth who are still struggling but I am a little older today. and still learning. I am learning the services right now and sadly it is coming when I am older, but it feels that I am on my own forever. What I could do to make things better? Perhaps stop depending on CAS so much; I was not thinking that they will not be my parents forever, you know, like what happens in normal family; you do (don't) have a cut-off age.
>
> P2: At age 18 I was terminated from care. There was a plan of care [but] the worker told there was no improvement in my behavior since coming in care and

[that] I could apply for Ontario Works to get some money monthly. But I had to leave care. I asked her how long I had before I must leave. she told me I have the choice to move home and behave myself or find a community place (room or shelter) but the wait list was long for youth housing. I decided to move home. I feel that all my life I did not contribute to society. I did not want to follow the crowd.

P4: My concern was [that] I was a failure, I blamed myself a lot; here I came to Canada to help my mother and instead I did not behave myself. How am I going to fix this? Certainly by having (multiple) children is not going to fix it.

P5: Traits? Characteristics? We cannot compare ourselves to others, because I don't know what help they have received, or who helped them or what goal they had in mind. I know that I have the will to survive, and I keep reminding myself of that daily. I am now willing to take whatever help I can get to turn my life around.

P6: As youth we make mistakes but we have to survive no matter what … I needed skills in knowing how to deal with my problem of blaming myself and my sadness, but they [CWS staff] were seeing behavior and eventually I got kicked out. I don't want to make the same mistakes again; I am going to get the support to turn my life around.

P7: I thought about behaving myself. The kids here [new group home] were different—like … white girls—and they were not giving the same trouble like the

kids at my other home. That thought worries me a lot too because I blamed myself that it could be because of my behavior.

P8: It is what you are willing to do is not to make the same mistakes; it is the help you are willing to accept. I now set goals which I want to achieve; one is to finish school.

P9: my fears were, basically, [that] if I cannot change I am on my own. I really had to relearn stuff in order to fit in to my family again. CAS brought me to this point, there were many challenges; I now have a voice in all my decision making. Now I was thinking differently, and was saying if CAS was my parents, why did they make me leave at 16? They should have stopped me; they could have given me more information. I had no idea of the rules of leaving care … My goal is to become a child and youth worker and this is one goal I am going to achieve to help kids in care.

P10: Right now it is tough to get in the field, I have 5 credits, (but) I can't pick up a job I really have to get back to school. The shelter really helped with school. They were giving me the opportunity to go to school.no one is going to hold your hands you have to do it on your own. I am ambitious.

These experiences strongly validated the need for questioning what meaning (s) African Canadian youth attributed to a successful transition from CWS care to independent community living. An urgent need for more adequate and timely postcare planning is a requirement for these young people. Their transition success needed a forum where their voices were heard. In the next section the Composite Textual and Composite

Structural will be discussed.

Composite Textual and Composite Structural Description.

All participants expressed a degree of uncertainty at the prospect of independent living at the time of termination from CWS care. A common theme was fear, (50%) stated that they were fearful because they had no immediate connections in their respective communities. P3, for example, reported:

> I felt very alone, extremely alone. I did not have any family or friends; I just did not know where to go. It is like a strange world out there.

Similarly, all participants expressed a degree of ambivalence about their [un]preparedness in terms of self-management skills and social acumen required for navigating the transition from care. P7: When I left care at 17 years … I did not know how to cook, or even manage my money really well; you know, social skills, how to get along with people, how to behave properly; I don't know if you can understand what I mean.

This sense uncertainty was true even for those who said they had a plan in place for the transition, as well as those who felt they could take care of themselves despite not having the required life-skills. All, but one of the participants, admitted to some measure of homelessness post-CWS care. The lone exception was:

> P6: I have never been homeless, despite also saying I went in the shelter because.

Instability with housing while in CWS care was likewise of significant note for virtually all study participants, such as expressed by P2: In the foster home I was

always getting moved around a lot, and P8: I spent a long time in care and they kept moving me around, me and my brother.

Formal education was somewhat of a mixed bag of sentiments. Only one participant, P3, claimed to have completed grade 12. Most of the others admitted to dropping out at one or other stage along the way. At one end of this spectrum was Pl: who said "I did not finish school because I kept getting suspensions", and P4In care I did not attend school; I was too busy running away. At the other end was

P9: In care I was in grade 10; I did not complete when they kicked me out.

Incidentally, some participants cited the ECM contract as a hindrance to their ability and/or willingness to comply with CWS discipline, which many saw as inherently designed to exclude them from exercising their judgment/preferences.

P2: for example, noted I feel because CAS decides for the youth what is best for them, that [this] is not right; and,

P7: Somewhat more insightfully, I believe CAS needs to look beyond [our] behavior and treat everyone as [an] individual, talk to the youth and develop good plan(s) of care.

The participants' ease of access to (or lack of) counseling, as well as counseling effectiveness, were attributable to the ECM contract requirements. Ambiguity/ uncertainty often occurred insofar as whether the reporting of concerns would prove beneficial to them. Interpreted otherwise, many saw inconsistencies (as with education and rule-following above) in CWS counseling staff's ability to understand their specific

concerns, their own perceptions (of staff's ineffectiveness) might be to blame. Two responses served to highlight this problematic issue:

> P2: was more direct in stating "I believe that since my worker saw that I was having difficulties with other problems in my life … what would better prepare me for transition may be some counseling to deal with my childhood issues".
>
> However, P6: was more representative of the group:
>
> I needed skills in knowing how to deal with my problem of blaming myself and my sadness, but they were seeing behavior and eventually I got kicked out … If I had gotten counseling … maybe, I would have been prepared to learn skills that I would need to survive when I am out of care. I really did not do anything to help myself either; I had no goal or vision.

The second question guiding the study (RQ 2) was What Did African Canadian youth perceive as traits or characteristics of youth who have successfully transitioned? Participant responses overlapped with RQ1 What was the meaning of a successful transition of aging out of care for African Canadian youth from foster homes in Ontario? Specifically,

P10: I found living in the shelters was a little rough which is where I got the nervous breakdown and P3 finding homelessness to be very painful. Both of these participants saw available and stable housing as a basic condition that must first be in place before leaving care; because apart from having that sense of autonomy and control over their life (i.e., a place to call home) stable housing would provide them with the security from which to venture out into the community and seek other goals. Similarly, an

individual, adequately equipped with self-care management resources and potential community supports, was automatically better positioned for a successful transition to the community.

The lack of these resources and potential community supports left P3, for example, with a deep feeling of aloneness; likewise, P1 and P4 who both expressed being scared and fearful of being exposed to unknown and potentially adverse conditions, and more pointedly P1, P9, and P10 who openly admitted experiencing abuses in all forms (including physically, sexually, and emotionally), which resulted in large part because they exited care without any self-management skills.

Participants also responded to RQ2 by focusing on future goals and achievements. Here are two response clusters to the question: on **'motivation'** to succeed.

> P1: I am motivated to work, to get up and go to work daily to pay my rent. I want to become a fashion designer, but right now I have to figure how to go back to school. while earning an income.
>
> P4: I want an education, I want to go to university, and I am going to achieve this goal.
>
> P7: Now I am raising two children on my own. It is difficult, you know, but watching them grow is my motivation; I am trying my best so that they don't end up in care. I am a good mother. On **'behavior modification[s]'** needed to better assure success, they reported:
>
> P4: My concern was [that] I was a failure, I blamed myself a lot. How am I going to fix this? Certainly not by having (multiple) children.

P9: My fears were, basically, [that] if I cannot change I am on my own. I really had to relearn stuff in order to fit into my family again. CAS brought me to this point … I now have a voice in all my decision making. "Now I was thinking differently … My goal is to become a child and youth worker and this is one goal I am going to achieve to help kids in care. This is my decision.

P10: I feel that you should be taught the skills not for people to be doing things for you, then again that was my experience group home. When I left the group home I move a lot. From my experience, I really bounced around a lot. Now I am better, I am doing things for myself.

Thus, while 70% of the participants were motivated or had some positive vision about their present and/or future success living independently in the community (with or without community connections), none had a concrete plan about their individual goals of living independently.

Composite Structural Description of Participant Views

The Composite Structural Description was a reflection of participants' reported lived experiences, thematized, and synthesized to form one reflected common meaning shared by the entire group. All participants either stated or clearly implied a strong belief that family and/or close community connections were central for successful transitioning to independent living upon exiting CWS care. For youth transitioning from CWS care, the need for, or the fear of not having, potential resource connections within their communities, was the pivotal/central factor in whether or not they transition successfully to independent living.

Regardless of the specific question, the youth's responses invariably suggested that having a significant connection readily accessible to them in the community upon discharge from care was of the main importance. It was also clear that they believed that this connection could be a family member, a counselor, a mentor, a friend, a concerned adult, and even a former foster parent.

What follows is a brief analysis of the more salient participant responses, in light of the pertinent literature reviewed for this study. The aim is to understand how and why post-CWS care African Canadian youth had so much faith in their (perceived) importance of community connections. In the next section I will give an overview of both the literature and the data collected.

Overview of Reviewed Literature and Participant Data

The literature was generally in agreement that a vast majority of Ontario's postcare youth encountered myriad hardships in the transition to 'successful' independent community living. Among the more commonly cited and persistent of these hardships were issues of transience and/or outright homelessness, unemployment and/or underemployment, educational deficit, unmanageable early parenthood, chronic drug and alcohol involvement, physical emotional and abuse of all stripes, and recurrent run-ins with the criminal justice system (CJS).

In virtually all the reviewed texts a common conclusion accounting for these difficulties at disproportionately higher rates than their community peers, was that when they left care, most did not have a community and/or family connection. This disconnectedness was a disturbing realization for the youth (Barn, 2010; Cunningham &

Diversi, 2013; Mendes et al., 2011; Munson, Lee, Miller, Cole, & Nedelu, 2013; Osgood et al., 2010; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Shin, 2009).

This conclusion is well accepted in the Canadian research literature and internationally. However, unlike many other countries Canada did not produce disaggregated statistics. Specifically, Canadian studies on CWS youth-in-transition did not account for how the individual ethno-cultural populations experienced the various hardships mentioned above. In light of this gap this analysis focused on discovering whether, and to what extent: the reviewed literature, and the information collected from the youth recruited and participated in this study can inform each other, such that, conclusions drawn upon synthesis of the two, can be useful enough to generate further research interest in the area.

RQ1: Community Connection/Disconnection:

The main purpose of the study was to try and sketch a foundation for future studies in order to fill this gap in the Canadian literature. The results may provide a better understanding of how African Canadian youth viewed their experience(s) of the transition process from dependent care to independent living. African Canadian youth within the Province's CWS left care at disproportionately higher rates than other population youth in the CWS system. African Canadian youth and children represented only 8% of the general population, yet comprised 65% of the population in CWS care (CAS Round Table Discussion, 2009; Clarke, 2011; Pon & Gosine, 2011; Teklu, 2012). In the textual descriptions created from the interview transcripts, participants either explicitly or strongly stated that being scared was the uppermost emotion they

experienced in their transition experience from care to independent community living. Two examples highlighted this point well. The first statement came from P1, “I am too young to be living independently. I am alone and I cannot return to care; I felt scared after leaving care.”

The second statement was offered by P5,

> My main concern is being on my own. I did not want to be like my mother. My mother told me that she hates me. So I had to make the best out of life. I was really scared that I was going to be like my mother.

Why do these transitioning youth feel such fear on discharge from CWS care? The responses were both varied and complex. All that can be accurately gleaned was that seven of the participants uttered at some point, “Back then I was so messed up” or “Things were really messed up for a while” or “My family was a mess.” I don’t have the skills to get a job” or I need someone to talk for me”. Many explanations in the literature accounted for why youth who have exited CWS tended to encounter the forms and variety of negative existential challenges expressed by these participants upon re-entry to the community

These explanations commonly included feelings of social exclusion, racial discrimination, loss of identity and oppression. (Avery, 2010; Barn, 2010; Weller, 2010; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Stein, 2008). Clearly, after spending extended periods away from the community post care youth often suffer a sense and degree of disconnectedness that their non-care peers do not experience. (Arnett, 2000; Barn, 2010; Berzin, 2008). How do the transitioning youth begin cope with this disconnectedness?

The first necessary step would be to try to recreate their lost connections to their community. The first or easiest place to start was with family members, mentors and friends (Barn, 2010; Rutman, 2016; Wade, 2008; Stein, 2008).

P3 I did not have any family or friends; I just did not know where to go.

P6: it was hard for me …when I had to find the same family members who were not good enough when I was younger and had to relive the pain that I brought to care.

P1: The only *real* source of support is like someone to guide you, someone who you could call upon … Yes, my brothers and sisters were there, but they were also young. I had other family members, but they are also looking out for themselves. I could not go back in care; I have to start thinking survival.

In each of these cases the youth felt the need to first connect to close, available family or friends to help guide them through their difficult transition process. Because Canada's CWS transition youth were often over the age of 16, they would be treated as adults once in the general community. Indeed, youth themselves wanted to be treated as adults. So long as the youth did not physically display signs of mental instability (i.e., of needing help), it became easy for the transition youth to fall outside the range of everyone's radar.

For this reason, Clarke (2011) highlighted the lack of attention paid to Afro Caribbean service users experiences in out of home care. The results were that these families encountered surveillance, differential, discrimination, structural inequalities and criminalization. While not concerned with transitioning youth, a sharp view of one

African Canadian sub-group was their transition experience disconnected them from the culture and produced feelings of loss and guilt, as they recalled their experiences with the CWS. This study was consistent with studies on African American youth who also encountered marginalization, racial discrimination, oppression, and identification issues (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Avery, 2011).

Barn (2010) highlighted the risk factors that may lead to the transition youth's internalization of racism because they had not developed a positive racial and ethnic identity on their own. Factors, such as placement disruption, geographical upheaval, and the absence of stable families or other key individuals in the community, had a cumulative impact on care leavers. Negative outcomes, such as poor educational attainment, unemployment, homelessness, criminal activity, substance misuse and early parenthood, combined to produce low self-esteem and confidence, a lack of belongingness or feelings of isolation and marginalization. Youth faced with these realities had a profound sense of family and community loss, leaving them constantly questioning their grasp on being and belonging.

Moreover, youth who aged out of the CWS were at risk not only of being trampled by societal pressures, but also finding themselves engaging in risky behaviors, simply for the purpose of survival (Kelly & Caputo, 2007). Risky behavior involved those the youth used to must scrounge and scrape for survival. This behavior stemmed from worrying about practical issues (e.g., where to sleep, what to eat, issues of drug and alcohol dependency), while struggling with physical, sexual and emotional abuses. These issues placed youth in a position to become victims of violent crimes. The seriousness of

these issues tended to become compounded, leading to severe physical and mental health problems. In conclusion, transition youth did not face different challenges than those that their community peers faced. What was different, most community peers had safety net of their family to call on, when needed (Arnett, 2000; Barn, 2010; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2008; Mendes et al., 2012)

The transitioned youth had a harder time negotiating their way through their challenges. The extra effort required was on a scale of challenge that their general-population peers could only imagine. For the transition youth routine matters like finding housing and employment and maintaining decent grades in school all begin to feel overwhelming. While such negotiations were more difficult for transition youth, generally, for ethnic minority youth these challenges seemed insurmountable.

Among the challenging experiences youth in response to RQ1 What is the meaning of a successful transition of aging out of care for African Canadian youth from foster homes in Ontario, was a need for family or comparably close community connections. The RQ 2: was what did African Canadian youth perceive of traits or characteristics found in youth who successfully age out of the system? When discussing factors, such as stable housing, adequate education, counselling and preparation thus, an overlap in responses appeared. Additionally, participants spoke of their own efforts and motivations to overcome their challenges. Their version included the courses they needed to change and/or behaviors to modify in order to better their socio-economic position. Both responses produced the most essential goal to successfully transitioning was

immediate and reliable access to community connections. Foremost was family, although any connections they felt they could trust would be a welcome beginning for them.

Summary

This chapter was a detailed outline of the study's methodology and findings. Included in the discussion was the study's data collection process, data analysis process, evidence of trustworthiness statement, participant demographic summary, comprehensive overview of participants' verbatim texts, composite textual description and composite structural description. The data highlighted some of the more difficult challenges , and where applicable I contrasted these challenges with the literature. Summarily, most of the their difficulties included a general lack of independent-living skills, feelings of loss, and fear, and disconnectedness from their communities, which coincided with data from the reviewed literature. Chapter 5 includes the discussions, conclusions and recommendations drawn from the study to answer the two research questions.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The primary purpose of this research study was to determine what resources and supports would better aid African Canadian youth in their transition from the CWS to successful independent community living. The research sites were two Ontario cities, the City of Toronto and Peel Region. Ten African Canadian youth, aged 18-24, were the sample recruited via the purposeful sample selection method.

Data from participants was through face-face interviews, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, for a total of 10 hours of interviewing and dialogue time with the participants. The data collection process involved audio taping and note taking. I transcribed each participant's data manually. Then I hand-coded each transcript, I subsequently analyzed inductively. Member checking ensured the credibility of the findings. A phenomenological design has a focus on the unit of analysis and participants' descriptions of their experiences rather than on the researcher's interpretation(s) of those descriptions (Moustakas, 1994).

The results helpful in constructing programs that better serve African Canadian youth experiencing difficulties in the transition process. The discussions that follow include interpretation of findings, implications for social change, limitations of the study, recommendations for action, and conclusion.

Interpretation of Findings

This study developed in view of two questions: RQ1: What was the meaning of a successful transition of aging out of care for African Canadian youth from foster homes

in Ontario? And RQ2: What did African Canadian youth perceive as traits or characteristics in young people who successfully age out of the system? The findings as discussed in Chapter 4 showed the common meaning derived from the experiences were the need for family or close community connections.

Responses from the first question were the same for the second question.: In viewing the themes as most essential to African Canadian youth for successful transitioning from CWS to independent living, the results showed (a) for the most part, they did so unsuccessfully, (b) the principal reason for their unsuccessful transitioning was their failure to negotiate important community connections and resources, and (c) the overarching reason for this failure was being insufficiently prepared by CWS. These results confirmed findings of international researchers who found that ethnic minority youth experienced greater challenges during the CWS transition process than did general population youth.

This difference in experience reflected that ethnic minority youth contended not only with their lack of immediate community connections but also a host of other issues that other youth did not commonly experience (e.g., racial discrimination, marginalization and social oppression; Barn, 2010, Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Stein, 2008). Foremost among the difficulties reported were in the following four areas: homelessness/housing, education, counselling, and voices in the decision making on their post care independent living. These four areas will be discussed in the next section beginning with homelessness/housing.

Homelessness/Housing

Instability was the primary area of difficulty confronting the youth, with 70% reporting that they went directly into youth shelters upon discharge from CWS, 20% went to the family home, and 10% went to a specified home for teens. The 20% who went to family homes also reported that within 2 weeks of being home, they returned to a youth shelter to live. All 90% reported receiving little or no guidance once in the shelters.

The moving from CWS (where the youth were ill-prepared for the transition) to youth shelters (where they found no guidance) appeared to be a natural recipe for later/continued transience. Indeed, 80% of participants reported experiencing periods of street living including crashing at a friend's place or rotating between shelters. Another 10% remained stable in the shelter until housing was found. Of the 80% who encountered housing instability, 60% acknowledged behavioral issues as a likely factor and identified conflict with peers and staff as the primary reason. Another 20% cited insufficient/ deficient independent living skills as the reason for their instability.

An issue closely related to their homelessness/instability was their involvement in the Criminal Justice System (CJS). Some 30% had involvement in the CJS after leaving care, with the predominant reported cause being the use of unconventional means panhandling and other crimes (i.e., drug use/abuse, etc.) to gain access to needed resources. Another 10% reported experiencing racism in their post care difficulties (in finding shelter, employment, and other resources). The youth did not elaborate on how racism was a factor. However, the pervasiveness of racism (and other discriminatory practices) in social institutions most likely affects the youth. These reports confirmed findings of previous studies that youth leaving care without proper resources have a

higher propensity for homelessness (Courtney& Dworsky, 2009; Kulik et al., 2011; Wade, 2008; Zlotnik, 2009). Youth involvement occurred with the CJS after leaving the CWS.

Education

From the interview data, 90% reported that they dropped out of school and did not have a high school diploma at the time of their discharge from CWS. The youth living in shelters stated that they attended school to fulfill the shelter's residency requirements. Others living independently stated that their intention was to return to school, but had no immediate plans for returning to school. Such findings were consistent with the Day et al. (2011) study. Specifically, a lack of strong familial connections to encourage and support the youth people through their educational journey is often the cause of high dropout rates.

The most general population of African Canadian youth do not achieve success in the educational system (Hampton, 2010; Levine-Rasky, 2014). However, few if any addressed the situation with education and African Canadian youth from the CWS. However, according to Springer et al. (2006) studies on ethnic minority youth showed them experiencing much higher levels of criminal victimization, as well as perceiving racism and discrimination to be pervasive elements in our social institutions.

Springer et al. (2006) found that 90% of ethnic minority youth voiced concerns of their being targets of discriminated, 44% (though more males than females) believed that racism affected their grades in school, and 33% that they had been unduly targeted by the police. Coincidentally, among ethnic minority populations, African Canadian youth

believed that they were most likely to be stopped and arrested by the police.

Counseling

The results showed that 60% of the youth stated they did not receive any form of counseling while in care. All reported feeling fear when informed about leaving care. Another 30% in some way or the other blamed those fears on the CWS. These fears consequently translated into a lack of skills to cope with challenges of community life. These challenges included, but were not limited to, physical, emotional, and sexual abuses.

Some (40%) reported that due to their lack of skills to cope they turned to temporary solutions (e.g., drugs, alcohol, and abusive relationships) to get relief. Another 30% blamed their low self-esteem issues on the lack of counseling with10% blaming their health and mental health challenges/frequent hospitalizations on the lack of counseling. All 60% attributed their challenges to the lack of counseling, from which they understood they would gain effective coping strategies.

These findings confirmed those of other researchers who found youth often brought to the CWS complex psychological scars never healed while in care. Upon their return to the community, they were no better equipped than when they went into CWS. Thus, these issues returned with them to the community, sometimes with grave implications/consequences (Bender et. al, 2014; Coates, & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Havlicek, Garcia, & Smith, 2013).

Voices in Decision Making on Their Postcare Independent Living

Some 90% of the participants thought that they did not have a voice in their termination process. Of that group, 60% stated they did not have a plan of care. Another 30% stated that they were aware of the impending termination, but felt alone when the time came to leave. Youth's own voices/input need to be considered because of their importance in discussions relating to potential post-CWS care, community connections, and resource supports. The findings were consistent with other researchers who discussed youth leaving care.

Anghel (2011), for example, argued that ending care was a critical moment in the youth's life. At this time, they were overcome with feelings of stress, confusion, anger, grief, etc. These young people responded not only coping with the change, but the loss of the association that goes with the change. Another 40% of the youth said that they could not "can't wait for their 16th birthday to be discharged from care," which is consistent with Nichols (2013) argument. However, it appears that once the reality of being discharged came, the transitioning youth could not but feel all of the negative emotions.

The findings were that despite the predominance of these difficulties 10% did report successes, including finding and maintaining stable housing and attending school. These successes were credited to external/community social support. The successes further mean that given some urging and timely support such youth could begin to shape new lives once out of CWS care.

Ontario did not have developed any particular programs targeted to transitioning youth in general. However, the literature showed that a form of independent living program existed within the CWS for the transitioning youth general (Ontario Child

Welfare Report, 2010). However, limited information about the program or resources was available (These programs often did not have much success in addressing the needs of the transitioning youth). Two prime examples from the US were the 1986 Title 1V- E independent living program and the 1999 John H. Chafee program. The John H Chafee program replaced the Title 1V -E independent living program. Yet no measurable outcomes of success were found for the transitioned youth, (Avery, 2011).

In Ontario one program partially addressed the youth's transition problems, the ECM. This Ministry policy allowed youth to remain in CWS long enough to complete their high school education. According to my findings, however, this policy is contractual between the youth and CWS with specific criteria. Clearly, African Canadian youth were by (criteria requirement) default excluded from participating in this program. In order to participate they must be involved in education or equivalent training.

The problem here was that African Canadian youth neither achieved their high school education, nor became involved in any form of training program. Some 40 % claimed that they were either unaware or unsure/unclear of the program's purposes. Needless to say, whether due to misunderstanding or to lack of knowledge, none of these 40% of participants believed this program was (or could have been) helpful to them, even with the 2013 amended ECM program policy.

The objective of the second research question was for the youth to identify the traits or characteristics of those who successfully transitioned. An individual who was adequately equipped with self-care management skills/resources and potential community supports was automatically better positioned for a successful transition to the community.

The participants gave ample cause to be hopeful when they discussed their motivation to move forward and willingness to change their behaviors.

From the research literature and study findings, the CWS continued to practice the traditional method of discharge, a method not capable of addressing the diverse needs of its youth populations. Here I am referring not only to reports of CWS staffers' lack of cultural sensitivity, but also their apparent deficits in preparing youth for dealing with education, housing, employment, as well as their physical and mental health issues.

For African Canadian youth this situation was largely due to CWS administrators' lack of knowledge/awareness of the inter-relatedness of these issues. As such, these administrators could not properly assess the full impact on this population of transitioning youth. CWS needed to focus on understanding and giving consideration to these multiple realities (Patton, 2014) of this diverse population of youth in CWS. These considerations included their ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic distinctiveness, as well as their health and mental health issues.

Such rethinking of CWS discharge practices would require taking a more holistic approach incorporating the youth, their families, and their communities working together with CWS. Barn (2010) argued that Caribbean young people were more likely to have contact with their birth family than other groups, which was significant in this new approach. However, this frequency of contact did not mean that these young people were likely to live with their birth families.

Thus, youth's families and community partners/connections became integral considerations to this new thinking. In fact, many researchers showed the important roles

that belonging and connectedness placed in the lives of young people as they moved to independent living (Stein, 2008). Moreover, feelings of belonging and connectedness would enable youth to develop a sense of self-assuredness and security needed to being directed to their own paths. The conceptual framework for this study was a support for CWS rethinking its programs.

***Figure 2*. Post Care Connections**

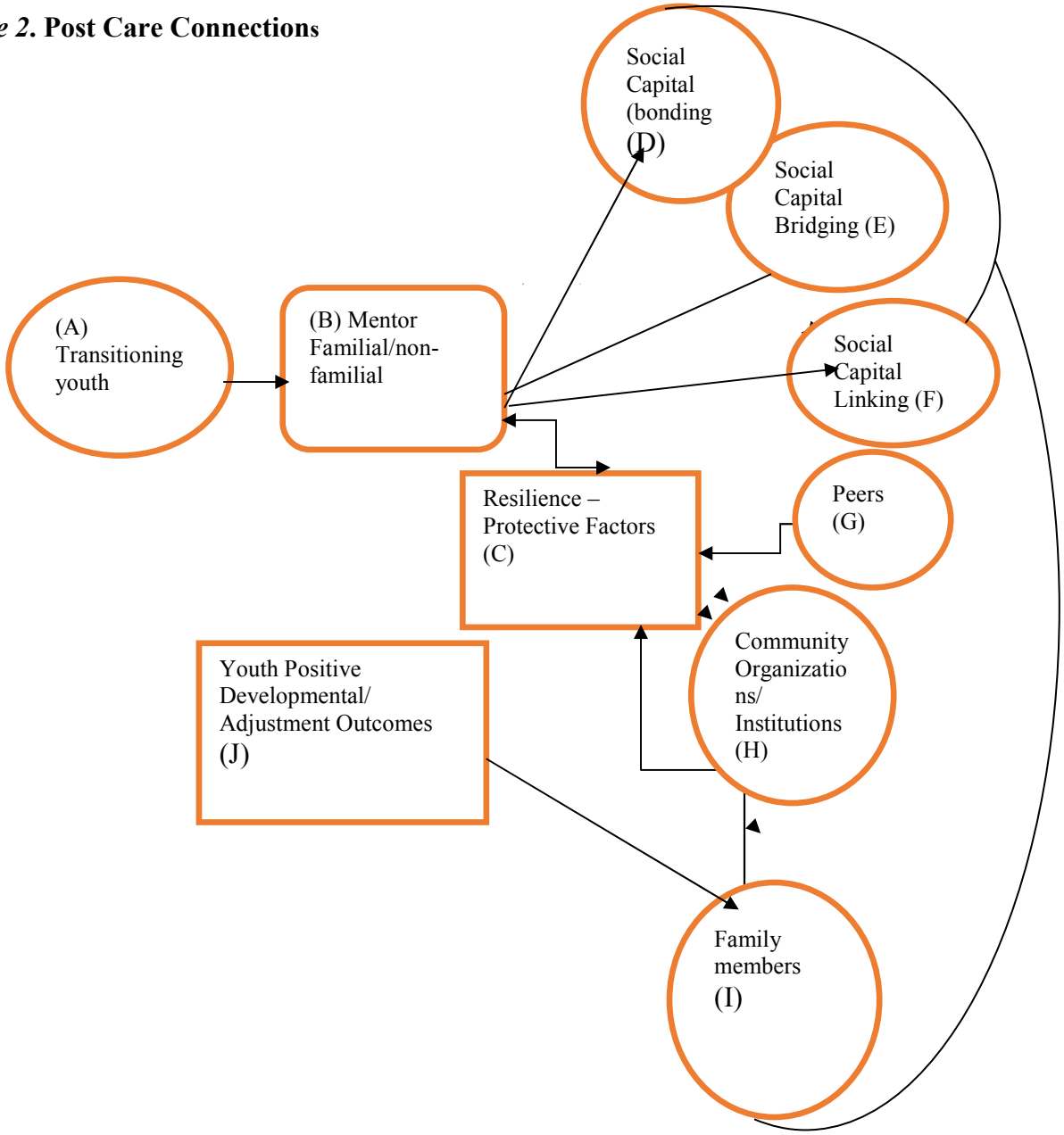


Figure 2 is a diagrammatic view of how can these factors of belonging and connectedness might be best achieved, that is, by forming/developing for the youth continuous links to family, peer networks, available resources, and community organizations. Protective factors enhanced the coping skills of at risk individuals (Zimmerman et al., 2013). In box (A) the transitioning youth is featured; in box (B) the mentor helps the youths build connections and strengthens their social support network. Boxes (C), (D), (E) represent social capital to enhance the bonding, bridging, and linking processes, and which the youth would use to access the supports and resources seen in boxes (F), (G), (H), —peers, family, institutions and community (school, finance, housing)

All through the transitioning process the mentor would work with the youths to strengthen their interpersonal components (self-perceptions, self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-control). The youths thus learn, grow and develop new skills. These life training skills would increase financial support, housing, education, cultural and identities issues and are important factors for successful developmental outcomes (Mendes et al., 2012; Tweddle, 2007). Successfully using those links/connections would enhance the youth's outcome skills and knowledge (box J), while assuring positive community reconnections and the power of self-determination, all of which will, in turn, help to initiate positive social change.

Implications for Social Change

This study was significant because its primary aim was to identify factors that would lead to a successful transition for African Canadian Youth from the CWS care to independent community life. Little to no research literature addressing the realities of this specific population of transitioning youth was available at the time of the study. Insofar as the study's implications for social change, the major finding was that with the aid of accessible community connections and resources African Canadian youth could better negotiate the transition process.

These connections and resources would address the difficult issues/deficits regarding housing, education, counseling, and adequate pre-CWS-exit preparation. With 90% of African Canadian youth not returning to the community with a high school diploma presented knowledge/awareness of these difficulties. African Canadian youth specifically could provide CWS insiders and social policy makers a better sense on how to address the transition needs of this population.

Youth's own voices/input needs to be considered in discussions relating to potential post-CWS care community connections and resource supports. This finding provided an avenue for the MYCS and other stakeholders to restructure policy to incorporate training and skills development, specifically geared to influence positive outcomes for African Canadian youth transitioning from care. Social change occurs with decreases in the youth homelessness, involvement in the Criminal Justice System, and an increase in youth's participation in education and social skills training. Programs, resources, and skills training should begin while youth are in CWS care and continue

throughout the transition process. Services phase-out occurs after consolidation of collaboration, networking, and linking with community partners.

Limitations of the study

The study had three limitations as presented in Chapter 1.

1. The study focus was limited to African Canadian youth who transitioned from CWS within the last 3 years.
2. The study was confined to youth between the ages 18 and 24 (youth who either ran away from care or signed themselves out of care before the age of 18 were not included in this study). Until January 2013, the age of maturity in Ontario was 16, an age at which a young person was still considered a child (UN, 2013). Thus, while many of young people neared their 18th birthday and lived independently, a lack of parental consent prevented them from consideration for this study.
3. The study was limited to two Ontario cities—Brampton (Peel Region) and Toronto, Ontario (which meant that African Canadian youth in the surrounding areas experiencing similar challenges were excluded.

A number of concerns fell outside the scope of this study despite their evident importance to a more thorough understanding of the difficulties facing the population studied. These concerns included, but were not limited to early parenting and health related issues [arising mostly from homelessness, substance use/misuse, and unsafe sexual behavior] (Kelly & Caputo, 2007, Midwest study 2009). A lack of disaggregated data also prevented understanding of the communities' role in assisting transitioning

African Canadian youth. Further study is needed to gain a broader understanding of the lived experiences of the youth involved.

With the absence of disaggregated data, this study could not confirm that African Canadian youth were over-represented in the CWS (Clarke, 2011 Teklu, 2012). Similarly, this study could not confirm whether African Canadian youth were treated differently from the rest of the in-care youth population. Also the economic implications of CWS-transitioned youth in society and the adverse impact to society were also outside the scope of this study. Further investigation is needed in these sensitive areas.

Recommendations

The major finding from this study was that CWS-transitioning African Canadian youth perceived family and/or other close connections as best able to support their efforts at successful reintegration into the community. Although the youth's successful connection to preferred community agents did not necessarily guarantee successful reintegration, however, their verbatim texts expressed wide consensus on their [self] - motivation to improve their social position. Clearly, they would be ready to accept support from alternative community agents (a teacher, pastor, friend) willing to guide them in their future growth and development.

Since the Peel Children Aid Society (PCAS) agency committed a variety of resources to connect African Canadian youths to their communities, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Have an evaluation of the PCAS resources (none could be found at the time of this study). Depending on the outcome(s) of this evaluation, invite any/all

interested community agents to become a part of the youth's plan of care. If this initiative can prove successful then other CASs in the region (and Toronto) may be motivated to do likewise, thereby expanding the youths' network of available supports.

2. Transition youth wanted their voices heard in decisions that directly affected their transition outcomes. A second recommendation would be to invite the youth to be a part of the process. Being part of such a collaborative effort would not only help lift their sense of self-esteem and thereby help reverse their loss of identity, but the agents with whom they now get to keep company may influence them in other critical directions, such as trying to complete their high school education.
3. Virtually, all the youth (with the exception of (P7) testified that they lacked independent living skills, which most literature confirmed the case with CWS transition populations. Thus, a training facilitated by the foster parents and guest speakers conjointly should take place at weekly house meetings Each week's focus should be on a different skill set (e.g.,budgeting, culinary, parenting, to name the few highlighted by study participants). Since most community agencies already have such programs in place for young adults, providing a link to these training programs for the transition youth's plan of care would be beneficial.
4. While education is the ultimate key to transitioning youth's future success, oftentimes other more pressing life-challenges tended to take precedent over

educational goals. African Canadian youth did not achieve optimally in the public school system. The Africentric School opened in 2008 in Toronto with a mandate to address this serious shortcoming. Thus, the youth need to have information on both streams (public and Africentric), so that they can make informed decisions on where they believe their educational needs/goals will be best met.

5. Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) ECM program/policy appeared inflexible and not sufficient to accommodate the varied difficulties encountered by African Canadian youth. African Canadian youth were not earning the school grades to meet the eligibility of the ECM. Therefore, recommended was that16-24 year olds not attending school have a choice of apprenticeship, instead of outright termination. While collaboration appeared happening in the Peel Region(e.g., networking with community partners in the health and social welfare areas) other areas could also be considered, such as apprenticeships in the auto mechanic industry.

   This alternative was a realistic approach, especially in light of participants' testimonies that they didn'tt like school. Thus, youth couldchoose to be connected to a preferred business or other community organization, where they could learn skills and appropriate behaviors modeled to them. Such an initiative could be used as training, thereby enhancing the African Canadian youth's chances of meeting the ECM eligibility criteria. All of these options could be a goal developed in the youth's plan of care.

6. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, homelessness/transience was the major difficulty for the youth, as it seemed to be the cornerstone of all the other concerns. Recommended would be for CAS to get to know these community partners and foster collaborative relationships with them. The collaborative partners would serve two purposes: the youth would (a) live in a family atmosphere with responsibility and accountability and (b) not live in a communal atmosphere, such as the youth shelters, where the group-/foster home culture continues to prevail. The local governments could also play an integral role by giving tax breaks for maintenance and repairs to landlords for upkeep of their property.

Conclusion

This study was the first to explore issues, affecting African Canadian youth's transition outcomes from the CWS) care to independent community living. Over the years a consistent struggle had been to address the challenges of youth who have transitioned from the CWS to the community. However, never before had there been an attempt to study the CWS population and its component diversity. Numerous programs developed and redeveloped with the aim of bettering this system, while study after study kept identifying internal problems. The present study on the African Canadian segment of the CWS population, but more specifically, on 18-24 year olds transitioned within the last three years, found that a great majority left care of the CWS unprepared to deal with the transitional challenges meeting them.

Among the most consistent and severe challenges reported by the youth included:

(a) the inability to reintegrate into their birth families, often leading to homelessness and/or extended periods of transience, (b) unemployment and underemployment, and (c) unfulfilled educational requirements. These deficits then compounded into unmanageable fear, stress and loss of identity, leading to other concerns, including early parenting, drug and/or alcohol misuse, petty crime involvement out of the necessity for sleep and food, and their eventual involvement in the Criminal Justice System.

In the literature, these issues were omnipresent in the daily lives of CWS-transitioned African Canadian youth. Assuming that the investigative methodology designed for the study was successful in accurately identifying and representing the concerns of these youth, it is my hope that further study along similar lines can continue to evaluate their needs and find solutions.

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Appendix A: Data Analysis Methods

The following steps were involved:

- Step 1: All transcriptions and field notes had an initial reading to familiarize self with the data;
- Step 2: The data read again in its entirety for clarity and understanding and to ensure familiarity. Equal time spent on each of the participant's transcriptions identifying sentences and phrases concerning the meaning(s) of participants lived experiences of aging out of the Child Welfare Services (CWS) (Moustakas, 1994).
- Step 3: An Individual Textual Description developed from the meanings included what that each ascribed to their lived experiences. Included were themes, sentences, phrases, verbatim descriptions and grammatically imprecise iterations that were all left in its original form.
- Step 4: The Individual Textual Description was further condensed as analogous phrases or sentences emerged. These phrases and sentences grouped into themes that developed the nine Composite Textual Descriptions. This action was accomplished by deleting repetitions and merging similar meanings. (Square brackets and ellipses were used extensively in refining the final product). The nine thematic clusters are Homelessness, Shelter living, In-Care instability, Unpreparedness for the transition, Counselling/lack of Counselling, Education, Extended Care and |Maintenance (ECM) Youth Voices/Decision making, Motivation, and Behavior Management.

Step 5: The nine composites were then double-checked to ensure an optimal approximation of participants' responses. The entire group experienced all themes.

- Step 6: The process of imaginative variation was used to form a Composite Structural Description of the participants' experience to answer the research questions. A Composite Structural Description is the researcher's thematic grouping of the entire participant group's textual descriptions including meaning and essence, as I interpret them, integrated to form the meaning of the phenomenon that reflected the group as a whole.

Appendix B: Key Informant Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study of African Canadian youth, 18-24 years old, who have transitioned the Child Welfare System and are now living independently in the community. The researcher is inviting transitioned youth from the City of Toronto and Peel Region to participate in the study. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part. This study is being conducted by a researcher named Irene McIntosh, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to explore in-depth-experiences of African Canadian youth who have transitioned from the CWS to community living. The knowledge gained will help to construct programs and target resources so that young people may experience more successful outcomes.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked:

- To sign this informed consent form to acknowledge your eligibility to participate in this study.
- To participate in a face-to-face interview that is audio recorded and is expected to last for about 45- 60 minutes
- Meet the researcher at a public location (i.e., Century Gardens Recreational Centre in Brampton)

- To participate in a follow-up audio recorded second interview if additional information is needed to clarify the information collected in the first interview. The duration of this second interview is expected to be approximately 30 minutes

- Your relationship with the researcher will not be negatively impacted in any way by declining or discontinuing your participation; you are able to leave the study at any time without having to state the reason.

- Member checking, to help determine the accuracy of my research findings, a theme such as, the cultural description may be returned to you for your confirmation of my accuracy.

Here are some sample questions.

1. How long would you say you spent in CAS care?

2. Tell me about your experiences after leaving care

3. How do you currently support yourself?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. I will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one in the City of Toronto or the City Brampton communities will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. Even if you decide to participate the study now, you can still change your mind at any time during the study.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

While this type of study would not pose a risk to your physical safety or wellbeing, Participants may experience some emotional discomforts (that go beyond their normal daily living, such as reliving a childhood trauma). Such experiences can be very stressful and for which the individual may require immediate support after the interview.

Should you become unduly stressed at any time during the interview process, or immediately after the interview, you may contact Mobile Crisis of Peel (MCOP) at (905) 278-9036 to speak with a Crisis Worker, who will provide support to you either over telephone or in person at an address/location convenient for you. MCOP is mandated is to provide immediate telephone support, or quick response from a mobile crisis team, 24 hours per day 7 days per week. The agency also has linkages to services such as hospitalization, mental health and other community services and resources as deemed necessary (MCOP, 2015).

Given the limited knowledge in the literature that addresses the impact of how African Canadian youth give meaning to their lived experiences of aging out of care, sharing your knowledge and experience in this research would be of significant benefit to future youth transitioning from the Child Welfare. More specifically, this new knowledge will help policy makers, and stakeholders target areas for improvement.

Payment:

They will be a $20.00 honorarium given to youth towards the transportation cost for travelling to the designated location.

Privacy:

All information collected from you will be kept confidential, except in the case where the researcher is mandated by law to report. For example, cases of abuse or criminal activities that you may be engaged. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by assigning all participants a code that will only be known to the researcher. Additionally, the data collected from you will be immediately transcribed from the recorder and downloaded to a flash drive that will be locked and sorted. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via [redacted]. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is [redacted] Walden University's approval number for this study is [redacted] and it expires on August 10, 2016. The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant _____

Date of consent _____

Participant's Signature _____

Researcher's Signature _____

Appendix C: Participant Screening

Are you an African Canadian youth?

- Between the ages of 18-24 years old?
- Transitioned from the CWS within the last three years.
- Reside in the Province of Ontario?
- Former Crown Wards who have lived in either a residential group home or a foster home setting?
- This study is seeking to shed light on African Canadian youth transition experience from the Child Welfare System to community living (in Toronto and Peel region).

If you are interested in participating in this research, please call Ms. McIntosh at [redacted] obtain more information about this valuable confidential study.

Appendix D: Participant Interview Questions

Study population:

- Youth who transitioned from the Child Welfare System in Ontario after reaching the age of maturity?
- How long would you say you spent in CAS care?
- How old were when you were brought into care?
- What was your experience of living in care?
- What were the circumstances under which you had you leave?
- Where did you go after leaving care?
- Perception and Knowledge of leaving Care (probing questions)
- What were your thoughts about leaving care at your age?
- What concerns did you have and how were these concerns realized?
- How were informed that you were going to be leaving care?
- What do think would have happened if these concerns were taken into consideration?
- What would you say are some of the difficulties you faced in post care?
- What would have helped you to better prepare for this transition (program or services) to independent living if you were to achieve success in the transition?
- What motivates you to go on?

School

- While in care, what is the highest grade achieved?

- What was the most difficult time for you in school?
- Are you aware of the Extended Care and Maintenance Program, allowing you to remain in care longer?
- Have you participated in this program?
- Please explain what were some benefits and drawbacks of this program?

Stability and homelessness

- Have you ever experienced homelessness?
- What would you say were the circumstances for the homelessness?
- What are some of the challenges?
- Are you still homeless? Can you describe your circumstances?
- How are you supporting yourself financially?
- What would you say would promote or hamper your participation in such a program?

Closing questions

- What would say your strengths are?
- How would you describe a successful transition?
- What skills and abilities would you say you have that have been helpful so far?
- What would say about youth who transitioned successfully despite of these challenges?
- Would you say there are specific characteristics, traits, you would have to have to transition?

Appendix E: Seeking Research Participant Flyer

African Canadian Youth Transitioned to the Community from Child Welfare Services (CWS)

- Are you an African Canadian youth between the ages of 18-24?
- Transitioned from the CWS within the last three years
- Reside in Ontario?
- Former Crown Wards who have lived in either a residential group home or a foster home setting?

What's involved*?*

The study involves meeting with the researcher at a convenient, public location such as, the Recreational Centre, for the interview that will be audio recorded.

- You will speak to the researcher about your lived experiences since leaving care.
- This interview is expected to last approximately 45-60 minutes.
- You may be invited to a second interview to clarify information provided in the first interview.
- You will receive a $20.00 honorarium towards the transportation cost of travelling to the designated location.

What's the benefit?

This study is seeking to shed light on African Canadian youth transition from the Child Welfare System in Ontario to community living. Your shared knowledge may aid in improving practices for future African Canadian youth transition.

Contact Information

If you are interested in participating in this research, please call **Ms. McIntosh** at [redacted] to obtain more information about this valuable confidential study.

Appendix F: Community Partner Co-operation Letter

[Date]

[Agency]

[Address]

[City, Province]

[Postal Code]

[Dear Manager's name]:

My name is Irene McIntosh, and I am a student at Walden University. I am registered in the Human Services program with a Specialization in Clinical Social Work. I am conducting a research for the fulfillment of my degree titled: African Canadian youth's post care options from the Child Welfare System (CWS).

I am conducting a study on African Canadian youths' (between the ages of 18 and 24) who are former wards of the Children's Aid Society (CAS) in the City of Toronto and the Region of Peel. More specifically, my study is interested in youth who have aged out of the CAS within the last 3 years and who are willing to share their lived experiences of their transition into community living.

I am writing to ask you to post the attached flyer on your bulletin board for potential participants' view and to contact me. The youth can contact me at [redacted] for a telephone interview to determine their eligibility for the study.

Respectfully,

Irene McIntosh, MSW, RSW

Appendix G: MCYS Proposed Transition Support

Section 3 of Proposed Transition Support Plan

- Create a plan for health needs (physicals, prescriptions, etc.).
- Be connected with caregivers, extended family members, friends, and community members who are willing and prepared to act as support people (such as by participating in transition conferences with youth to help plan their next steps;) and be connected to and supported by the local Children's Aid Society (CAS) and other community resources, including health care providers in the communities where they choose to live after they leave care.
- Coverage from age 18 to age 25:
- Coverage should include a program that provides basic counselling, legal advice, and connections to outside service providers. Youth from care have the option to be connected to youth in transition workers;
- Youth-in-transition workers are available to help youth find employment supports, housing, educational opportunities and community resources when they leave care;
- Youth from care have access to information about services that meet their specific needs (e.g. LGBTQ, faith and cultural identity) available to them in the communities where they live;

- Is very important that CAS personnel work with youth to explore housing options before they leave care, including connecting them with supportive or transitional housing;
- CAS work with community agencies, municipalities and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing if required, to give priority access to social housing and transitional housing to youth from care;
- CAS personnel assist youth in getting placed on the social housing waiting list, if appropriate and desired;
- CAS explore partnering with housing agencies to provide transitional housing for youth in and from care;
- Transitional housing (to) be available for more than one year (Blueprint for Fundamental Change to Ontario's Child Welfare System. Final Report of the Youth Leaving Care Working Group, January 2013, p.14).
- Under the short term recommendations, the age of the Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM) extends to 25, in phases, and with rules in place to ensure that the youth cannot be terminated if they are meeting the ECM contractual requirements MCYS (2013) outlined below:
- Phase 1, the ministry extends eligibility for ECM to all youth from care until age 23 and to those enrolled in post-secondary education or training until age 25;
- Phase 2, eligibility for ECM to all youth from care until age 25.

- Emotional supports -should have significant plans in place upon leaving care, including having goals and plans, as well as the means to access relevant community resources before they leave care.
- As part of the transition process, and with the support of their children's aid society workers and caregivers, youth would:
- Receive a package that includes all of their necessary personal documents: social insurance number, birth certificate, health card and photo identification (driver's license, passport, or government issued identification);
- Have their immigration status resolved by their Children's Aid Society before age 18 so that they can access employment, education, and health care;
- Identify housing options and develop a plan for stable housing;
- Create a plan for health needs (physicals, prescriptions, etc.);
- Be connected with caregivers, extended family members, friends, and community members who are willing and prepared to act as support people (such as by participating in transition conferences with youth to help plan their next steps;) and be connected to and supported by the local Children's Aid Society (CAS) and other community resources, including health care providers in the communities where they choose to live after they leave care.
- Coverage from age 18 to age 25:
- Coverage should include a program that provides basic counselling, legal advice, and connections to outside service providers. Youth from care have the option to be connected to youth in transition workers;

- Youth-in-transition workers are available to help youth find employment supports, housing, educational opportunities and community resources when they leave care;
- Youth from care have access to information about services that meet their specific needs (e.g. LGBTQ, faith and cultural identity) available to them in the communities where they live;
- Is very important that CAS personnel work with youth to explore housing options before they leave care, including connecting them with supportive or transitional housing;
- CAS work with community agencies, municipalities and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing if required, to give priority access to social housing and transitional housing to youth from care;
- CAS personnel assist youth in getting placed on the social housing waiting list, if appropriate and desired;
- CAS explore partnering with housing agencies to provide transitional housing for youth in and from care;

Transitional housing (to) be available for more than one year (Blueprint for Fundamental Change to Ontario's Child Welfare System. Final Report of the Youth Leaving Care Working.