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Josephine M. Kunkle

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Walden University

2019

Abstract

Mentors and Their Impact on the Transition of Foster Care Youth to Independent Living

by

Josephine M. Kunkle

MS, Hodges University, 2013

BS, Hodges University, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

March 2019

Abstract

The Foster Care Mentoring Act of 2011 directed the Secretary of Health and Human Services to award grants to U.S. states to create programs within public and private community entities to support mentoring foster children. Some states have allocated funding to support agencies that mentor foster care youth who have been emancipated (aged out) from the child foster care system who are without family support and are attempting to become self-sufficient. To date, there is a lack of research on mentors who help foster care graduates preparing to exit the foster care system. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences, feelings, and perspectives of mentors who work with foster care youth who have aged out of the foster care system. The study's theoretical framework was a combination of socio-motivational theory and empowerment theory. Content analysis was used to examine data from in-depth interviews with the 11 professional mentors who participated in this study. Common themes were organized to present participants' experiences and views regarding their careers as mentors, and the services they provide to foster care youth and foster care graduates. All participants viewed their work as essential in helping foster care graduates to become independent and self-sufficient. Implications for positive social change include creating standardized life skills courses for foster youth before they emancipate and changing government policy to ensure funds are allocated for housing while foster care graduates are enrolled in college or a trade school.

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Dedication

This study is my greatest academic achievement. And I could never have accomplished this without the loving support of my beloved husband, James Bryan Kunkle. He is my sounding board, my tear catcher, my encourager and inspiration. With every part of me that can give, in love and grace, I dedicate this work of mine to him.

You believed in me, even when I faltered. Thank you for that. And for everything you are to me, I love you.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables iv

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study 1

Problem Statement 4

Purpose of the Study 5

Research Questions 5

Theoretical Framework 6

Nature of the Study 11

Definitions 12

Assumptions 12

Limitations and Delimitations 13

Significance 13

Summary 15

Chapter 2: Literature Review 16

Literature Search Strategy 17

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts 18

Legislative History of Foster Care in the United States 18

History of Foster Youth Care and Mentorship 24

Current Studies Addressing Foster Care 31

Current Studies on Mentoring Foster Care Alumni 48

Research Methodology Rationale 53

Summary 55

Chapter 3: Research Method 56

Research Design and Rationale 57

Role of the Researcher 59

Methodology 60

Research Population and Sample 60

Research Design and Instrument 62

Data Collection Procedures 63

Research and Interview Questions 64

Data Structure, Coding, and Analysis 66

Qualitative Data Analysis Process 67

Issues of Trustworthiness 67

Ethical Procedures 68

Summary 69

Chapter 4: Results 70

Results 76

Research Questions 76

Summary 94

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations 95

Interpretation of the Findings 97

Interview Findings 97

Conclusions 101
Limitations 102
Implications..103
Recommendations..106
Recommendations for Future Research...108
Conclusion 109
References 110
Appendix A: Interview Protocol 123
Appendix B: Invitation to Participate in the Study 126

List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Information 71

Table 2. Mentoring Methods.. 89

Table 3. How Mentors Perceive Program Funding and Need 91

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

As of 2014, there were an estimated 415,129 children in foster care in the United States (“Foster Care Statistics,” 2016). According to Children’s Rights, a government website that collects data on foster care children, over 22,000 children aged out of or became emancipated from the foster care system in 2014 because they had reached the age of 18; less than 2% of those leaving the child welfare system were in supervised programs to help them establish independence and self-sufficiency (“Aging Out,” 2016). Many young adults leaving foster care do not have mentors who can guide them as they become adults (“Aging Out,” 2016), which makes the transition to adult life difficult for many.

Foster care is a term used by the Code of Federal Regulations to define substitute care for children outside of their homes; this includes, but is not limited to, nonrelative- or relative-provided 24-hour care, group, shelters, preadoptive homes, or residential facilities (“AFCARS Report,” 2006). The terms *emancipating* or *aging out* are child welfare system terms used to describe foster care persons who have turned 18 years of age and are no longer qualified to be placed in a licensed, foster care home, or qualified for foster care services (“Aging Out,” 2016). For individuals aging out of the foster care system who have been emancipated from the child welfare agency and their families, independent living and self-sufficiency are the ultimate goals (Blome, 1997).

However, these goals are challenging for many young adults who have transitioned from foster care. Throughout the history of foster care in the United States, youth who have aged out of the system without a family to turn to or some type of safety

net such as a mentor to help them succeed often experience difficulties and harsh conditions as they navigate the adult world (Jones, 201a). It is common for foster care graduates (FCGs) to find themselves in a crisis—homeless, without money, and nowhere to turn to for help. Many of these young adults are easy targets for predators who lure them into criminal activities such as selling drugs, stealing, and prostitution (Boldiş, 2014; Courtney & Dworskey, 2013; Dima & Bucuta, 2015).

Transitioning from childhood to adulthood is stressful for most youth ("Transition to Adulthood," 2016). Leaving the dependence of foster care and becoming emancipated and independent is even more difficult for FCGs, many of whom experience great difficulty transitioning to independence (Jones, 2014a). Empirical evidence suggests FCGs are at a disadvantage when they emancipate from the system as they become legal adults at 18 (Allen & Bissel, 2004). This is true in part because foster care youth are expected to transition to adulthood earlier than their non-foster care counterparts; in addition, this transition occurs at a time when they do not have any formal education or trade to help them succeed as they attempt to support themselves. They lack the emotional support, direction, or financial foundation needed to help them reach a level of independence and financial self-sufficiency (Curran, 2016). In addition, many have physical, developmental, and mental health difficulties and are on the brink of losing support from the state as they age out of the system (Jones, 2014a). Thus, the transition to adulthood is a highly stressful event for many FCGs.

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, referred to as the Chaffee

Amendment, extended the age of emancipation to 21; however, the U.S. federal government has not mandated how monies are appropriated or spent in programs that help to support youth during transition. Many times, the states are simply required to let the government know they are implementing a program and making efforts to help foster care youth, even though there is not a standardized system in place to ensure that young FGC adults have much-needed support (Foster Care Independence Act, 1999). Despite the lack of federal mandates, states have independent living programs set up to assist foster care youth.

Mentoring programs may also be a means of providing the support needed by FCGs. Although some youth aging out of the foster care system find the transition difficult, researchers have suggested that young adults who have mentors trained to intervene and support FCGs do fare better. Greeson, Thomas, Ali, and Wenger (2015) conducted an exploratory study in which they investigated the outcomes of mentoring on 17 older graduates who had been assisted through their emancipation; their study revealed that graduates viewed welfare-based mentoring services to be helpful in the transition to independence. However, while the authors found that graduates remained optimistic about the mentoring relationships, Greeson et al. suggested that there is plenty of room for improvement in these services. The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences, feelings, and perspectives of mentors who work with foster care youth as they prepare to emancipate from the U.S. foster care system and become independent. This chapter includes detail on the research problem; discussions of the potential implications for positive change; the purpose of the study; the research questions; an

overview and rationale for the methodology; key definitions; and the assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and significance of the study. The chapter concludes with a summary of key points.

Problem Statement

More than 20,000 youth in the United States emancipated out of child care each year in the last decade (2000 - 2010), and statistics show that many of them are not equipped to live independently because they lack resources such as social support, education, and funding to succeed on their own (Foster Care Statistics, 2015). The federal government has taken steps to help this marginalized population by allocating funds to each state. Programs are individually created by counties, which are given a considerable amount of leeway in the services they offer. According to Allen and Bissel (2004), federal laws have been a major influence on foster care and welfare policy for more than 40 years, but there is a need to revisit how effective the programs created to improve the lives of foster children are, and how they can be improved upon. Many foster youths continue to struggle, sometimes because they are either unaware there are mentoring programs available or because they discover that none are available to them. Their realizations raise questions about the availability and effectiveness of mentoring programs and how they serve foster care youths who are ready to emancipate from the system. Mentors who work within these programs are a crucial factor in helping youths who are aging out of the system without family or other supportive systems.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences, feelings, and perspectives of mentors who work with foster care youth as they prepare to emancipate from the U.S. foster care system and become independent. In order to better understand how mentors create positive social change by rescuing a marginalized population which was proven to be at risk, this study focused on the qualitative experiences of mentors in south Florida already working with young adults preparing to exit the child welfare system.

Research Questions

In their interviews, the mentors who participated in the study described their roles as mentors. Their perspective was needed because their professional work within agencies is to monitor and mentor youth preparing to graduate from the foster care system and become self-supporting. The interviews addressed the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What is the job or mission of the mentor?

RQ2: How does a mentor define his or her role and responsibilities?

RQ3: How does a mentor affect the outcomes of foster care graduates seeking to become independent?

RQ4: How does mentorship support and encourage a foster care graduate to continue and/or complete a college degree or trade school diploma?

RQ5: How does a mentor view current mentoring programs and their effectiveness?

Theoretical Framework

The United States has a lengthy history of attempting to safeguard children who are in foster care from the moment they enter the system to the age of adulthood, which is somewhere between the ages of 18 to 21, depending upon the state ("Aging Out," 2016). Congressional history shows a timeline of how child protection acts have been formed through necessity. Although the child welfare system has stabilized to a certain point, and laws and acts are now in place to rescue and support children who are misplaced or in danger, the system still has much room for improvement, according to experts. Recently, the spotlight has focused on helping young adults graduate from the system and attempt to become independent and self-sufficient (Dima & Bucuta, 2015; Jones, 2014b; Kaplan, Skolnik, & Turnbull, 2009). Through a series of child care acts, the federal government has established an appropriations system for allocating money to the states. Each state is given the freedom to develop foster care programs and foster care graduate programs designed to rescue and support endangered youth (House Ways and Means, 2012). Because each state is in charge of designing its own independent living programs, county programs overseen by the states vary in the help given to FCGs, if any ("50 State
Chartbook," 2016).

Mentoring plays such a crucial part in the government's role of helping foster care graduates acquire the necessary resources that enable them to become self-sufficient. Mentoring research literature in the past has focused on five theoretical orientations: parental acceptance-rejection, attachment, adult development, host provocation, and

social support. Together, these orientations blend into Rhodes' sociomotivational theory regarding mentoring youth who are neglected, disabled, abused, are juvenile offenders, or academically at risk, and many foster care children fit into at least one or more of these categories. (Britner, Balcazar, Blechman, Blinn-Pike, & Larose, 2006).

Transitioning from foster care into independence as an emancipated adult is both a developmental and social process for young adults. It is a frightening and awkward time for many. Jones (2014a) described it this way:

> Former foster youth have faced much adversity, which places them at risk in their attempts to adjust to life after foster care. This adversity includes the trauma of abuse in the family of origin, removal from the home, and the experience of multiple living arrangements while in care. Youths' social networks, the potential reservoirs of social support that might help youth cope with adversity, may be harmed by the process of being in care. . . .[and] family, peer, and neighborhood supports may be disrupted by the process of removal from home . . . These risks have resulted in many foster youths leaving care with physical, mental, and developmental difficulties. (p. 82)

In addition, according to James, Landsverk, and Slyman (2004), numerous changes in schools may make it difficult to develop new sources of social support. As a result, youth who have been in foster care have difficulty adapting to adulthood. Mentoring programs for foster care seek to help youth overcome difficulties that are commonplace to foster care youth. Such programs can help FCGs to succeed in navigating their way through educational pursuits with the goal of independence and self-sufficiency in mind.

Empowerment of foster care youth is a necessary component in mentoring and providing supportive programs to youth attempting to navigate pathways to liberated adulthood. Kaplan et al. (2009) described the importance of empowerment as an interventive part of the mentoring process that provides educational achievement, employment service, housing, and court appointed services:

> The more than 500,000 children in foster care in the United States face formidable challenges. Emotional trauma attendant to foster care, including separation from one's family of origin, frequent foster home and school changes, and the ending of care at 18 can contribute to youth in care feeling disempowered regarding their current and future life conditions. Empowerment is generally agreed to be a process that facilitates increased influence over one's life circumstances, influence in the community in which one lives, and greater awareness of the demands of one's environment and skills for negotiating these demands (p.65).

Empowerment occurs across the lifespan and ideally increases as physical and cognitive capacities develop, self-concept consolidates, and self-confidence grows. Empowerment, for youth in foster care, is compromised by the dependency inherent in being in state custody and by the contemporary societal context in which normative dependency on parental support stretches far beyond age 18. After leaving foster care, young adults continue to remain disproportionately dependent on federal human services and programs that address homelessness, mental health challenges, and chemical dependency (Kaplan, Skolnik, & Turnbull, 2009).

Mentoring offers the FCGs empowerment. In its mission statement, Mentoring System Involved Youth (2016) urged that mentoring programs be designed to recognize the unique challenges foster care youth experience such as biological family issues, emotional or mental stability, developmental issues, education, and employment. Because foster care children now age out of the system between the ages of 18 and 21, depending upon the individual state policy, foster care mentoring programs must meet their needs by helping youth with their transition into independent adulthood ("Mentoring Youth," 2016). A mentoring program focused on foster care children can strive to further the strength-based assets of foster care youth by boosting self-esteem and by helping these young adults to explore new possibilities as they seek to become independent. Key components of effective mentoring programs include building rapport between the mentor and the foster care youth, as well as empowering them culturally to succeed as they explore potential careers and educational pathways ("Mentoring Youth," 2016). Mentors strive to meet the ever changing and varied needs of the young adults they are charged with helping.

Mentoring has changed lives, as shown by the Center for Fostering Success. Its practitioners examined recent studies focused on successful foster care graduates; researchers affiliated with the Center noted the dismal statistics of recent reports and realized that FCGs were not faring well (Ndiaye, 2015). Therefore, policy makers, educators, and funders must strive to understand what effective supports can be made available for foster care youth and how they can be helped to realize their potential. During 2011 and 2012, researchers at the Center for Fostering Success began a

mentoring program that showed great promise (Ndiaye, 2015). Under this program, foster care graduate success stories—referring to those youth who had acquired an associate or bachelor's degree by age 24—had risen. When compared to the national statistic of a 6% success rate, the Center's Back on Track program had a 53% success rate, strongly implying that mentoring programs make a difference in the lives of young foster care adults (Ndiaye, 2015).

Considering how difficult transition for foster care youth can be, agencies must go beyond meeting the basic needs of financially supporting such youth. In part, child welfare agencies must take steps to ensure that graduates are empowered by helping them to transition from being in foster care to being able to access and manage their lives regarding education, health, housing, and employment. The mentor who is trained to help this process of empowerment is a critical key to helping foster care graduates navigate their paths to independence.

Youth Empowerment Solutions Yes! is a program developed by the Youth Empowered Solutions Organization; this program was designed as a three-pronged approach to empower youth to succeed and achieve—development of individual skills, critical awareness of self, and decision-making regarding opportunities for change. On the surface, this framework seemingly focuses on positive social change for the benefit of all. However, the underlying resource of this model is the empowerment theory of helping young people to realize how capable they are of making a difference, both in their own lives and in the lives of the community around them. With guidance, structure, and support, the individual is encouraged to grow and change the community and their

own environment by becoming active problem solvers and decision makers (Yes Youth, 2014). Zimmerman summarized the theory: “Empowerment theory connects individual well-being with the larger social and political environment and suggests that people need opportunities to become active in community decision making in order to improve their lives, organizations, and communities” (p. 2).

A mentor relationship is often the first and sometimes only step in a foster care graduate’s life that can help raise individual consciousness regarding the youth’s path to adulthood. Through the model of self-empowerment, mentors seek to help foster care youth self-actualize, make decisions about their future, and take steps to set and achieve goals in living and academics that help them to become self-sufficient (Salazar, Jones, Emerson, & Mucha, 2016; Seefeldt, Engstrom, & Gardiner, 2016; Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016).

Nature of the Study

This qualitative research study employed a qualitative phenomenological design using in-depth interviews with mentors who were working with foster care youth getting ready to age out of or emancipate from the child welfare foster care system during the time period when the research took place. This study explored the feelings, perspectives, and experiences of mentors who help foster care youth succeed in becoming selfsupporting and independent. This researcher examined the supportive role of the mentor in order to gain a greater understanding about what the mentor views to be supportive and beneficial for FCGs. Interview protocol was specifically developed for

the inquiry of this investigative study to help this researcher understand the perceived role of the mentors being interviewed for this research.

Definitions

Child welfare system: The U.S. federal welfare system that rescues and protects children from physical abuse and neglect ("Glossary," 2016).

Emancipation: A description of when the young adult in foster care is preparing to leave the child welfare system and become an adult, between the ages of 18 and 21, depending upon each state ("Glossary," 2016).

Foster care: A government program that oversees states and licensing requirements to rescue children from abusive and critically neglectful homes ("Glossary," 2016).

Foster care graduate: Someone who has emancipated out of foster care and is beginning life as an independent adult ("Glossary," 2016).

Foster care youth: Young people who are currently in the child welfare system ("Glossary," 2016).

Transition: The process of moving from foster care to being self-sufficient ("Glossary," 2016).

Assumptions

It was assumed that all participants would respond to the interview questions honestly and that they would be forthright in relaying their views and experiences. The view of each participant was personal, and this researcher expected to find differing views and experiences and realities. There was also the assumption that during the

interviews patterns and theories would emerge that would help to explain the phenomenon being studied. It was also assumed that the mentors who were chosen as participants were social workers who were trained to help young people emancipate from foster care into adulthood. This researcher assumed that these mentors would be resources of academic and living support for graduates, and that there was an established or set of established programs in place, in the state chosen for this research, for a safety net of protection for young people who need help and guidance. It was acknowledged that a researcher needs to be conscious of researcher bias and to take steps outlined in this study to reduce any predisposition.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was designed to acquire 10 to 15 interviews with foster care mentors living in and actively working with foster care graduates in the state chosen for the dissertation. A limitation of this study was the reliability of the researcher to conduct interviews and to interpret the information gleaned from the interview questions and to present the information the participants presented regarding their experiences. The instrument was an open-ended question interview; and the study was limited to the experiences of the 10 to 15 mentors who participate within this specific area and in this single state. The findings of this study were not be meant to exemplify mentors throughout the U. S. and they were not be meant to generalize the mentor experience.

Significance

Avery (2011) supported the idea that transitioning from foster care to independence can be extremely difficult for many foster care graduates. For many young

people preparing to emancipate from the child welfare system, the idea of becoming an independent adult is both exciting as well as fearsome, especially for those who do not have a family to turn to as they age out. Without the necessary skills and guidance needed to overcome obstacles and navigate in the adult world, FCGs face hardships such as homelessness, criminal involvement, and the possibility of becoming prey to unscrupulous persons who would recruit them for criminal activities. Recent studies have highlighted the importance of the mentor as a preventative measure to help FCGs escape predators and to become self-sufficient (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Cox, 2013; Dima & Bucuta, 2015).

The significance of this study lies in understanding the role and experiences of the professional mentors who strive to help FCGs to become financially independent from the welfare system and self-sustaining young adults. The study was designed to explore the view and vantage point of the mentor, since his or her experiences can help developers to create future programs. This knowledge may help programmers to understand the needs of the mentors and how to help them increase effectiveness as they help foster care graduates to succeed in getting independent.

The research findings from this study may contribute to social change by increasing awareness and understanding of the mentoring process of agency mentors as they strive to help foster care youth prepare for adulthood and independent living. This study addressed the unanswered question of how the mentor’s perspective can benefit the foster care youth and puts forward what aspects of the program the mentor feels are most beneficial.

Summary

Many issues face foster care youth as they prepare to exit the child welfare system and become independent adults. For many of these children, reunification with their biological family is not an option, and they remain dependent upon the child welfare system to help them succeed in addition to and beyond the age of legal adulthood (Avery, 2011; Boldiş, 2014; Buss, 2010). For many, this transition is difficult, and the turmoil the youth are subjected to is compounded by a lack of support. To become successfully independent, graduates require a level of support that will address their emotional, developmental, and educational needs. The professional mentor who is trained to help young adults navigate and achieve success on their pathways is pivotal in the lives of foster care graduates with nowhere to turn.

Chapter 2 includes a review of literature that encompasses the history of how the United States child welfare agency was formed and Congressional acts that help to stabilize the foster care system. There is a thorough exploration of recent research studies which have helped to illuminate current research and trends in the foster care system, as well as an examination of areas for future research. The selected studies focus on recent research concerning aging out of foster care and emancipating toward independence for the foster care graduate. Chapter 3 is the design of this study—the methodology, design, population of the study, data collection, and analysis of findings. Chapter 4 describes the research findings, and Chapter 5 summarizes the research, interpret the findings, and discuss implications of the research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review was to examine the research that has been done on youth in foster care, especially the literature that pertains to ways mentoring can be put into effect to improve these youths' chances of success when they age out of the foster care system. To understand the contemporary operation of the U.S. foster care program and how a mentoring program can be built into the program, it was beneficial to survey the history of the foster care system in the United States and how it has evolved from its beginnings as an ungoverned and mentor-less system to one in which a series of laws pertaining to FCGs have shaped a more proactive program. To understand the current foster care system and the challenged face by mentors, it was important to examine how the federal foster care system was formed and evolved into the current governing program. By exploring recent studies and literature on government programs that help foster care graduates in gaining secondary education, programs that either include mentoring or that should have a mentoring aspect can be suggested and implemented.

The literature review focuses on studies pertaining to FCGs in the United States who have aged out of the foster care system and have been assisted by mentors as they attempted to gain secondary education through a university, college, or trade school. In reviewing the current research literature, I concentrated on studies and programs in the past 3 years that attempted to understand the experiences of mentors who assist foster care graduates. I did so by reviewing programs, reports from government agencies, previous research, conceptual frameworks, and research methodology that have

concentrated on mentorship or that could have been strengthened through a mentorship component.

Literature Search Strategy

U.S. laws pertaining to foster care date back to the 1800s ("History of Foster Care," n.d.). Articles are referenced in the literature review that support the history of how the U.S. government has attempted to help foster care graduates. This section is organized chronologically to help the reader understand the history and more positive future for this marginalized population. It begins with a timeline of how the U.S. lawmakers initiated efforts to rescue exploited orphans and delves into the history of how the system has been shaped, ending with the current state of the U.S. system, and the key role that mentors now play in helping graduated foster care children become independent and self-sufficient. The body of current research for this study dates back 3 years regarding recent studies and trends in helping foster care graduates. The section concludes with a review of recent studies that include recommendations for future research. The research reviewed in this chapter consistently suggests that mentors play a crucial role in helping FCGs succeed in their individual paths to independence.

The search for relevant information was made specific to the study of foster care graduates by using the key terms *foster care*, *emancipation*, *foster care graduates*, *foster care services*, *government programs*, *mentoring foster care youth*, and *foster care alumni* in various combinations. Searches were made through databases such as EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, and Academic Search Premier. Much of the reviewed research for this study is current (i.e., published within the past 3 years), the exception being some articles

that date back earlier that I included to help understand the history of child fostering. Inclusion of these articles allowed for a greater understanding of past practices, as well as current research that focuses on the importance and role of the mentor. Over 90 research articles, books, and government website reports were gathered pertaining to how foster care youth are supported by the U.S. federal government. This information allows for a chronology of how the system has evolved into helping foster care graduates achieve independence, and the role of the mentor who oversees the youth.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

Legislative History of Foster Care in the United States

Curran (2008) defined foster care as being formal and informal custodial guardianship of minors outside of their biological families. In every foster care case, the biological parents or guardians temporarily give up legal custody and rights, even when the legal parent or guardian has agreed to have the child placed in foster care. A child placed in foster care is not necessarily placed in a home with strangers. He or she can be placed with another member of the family or in a group home or a therapeutic treatment center (Curran, 2008). In recent years the system has evolved, and authorities more readily acknowledge that when people become 18, they are rarely capable of fending for themselves. Therefore, an overview of how the U.S. foster care system has evolved shows the growing understanding of the importance of the mentor's guidance to help support and aid youth transitioning to independence ("Mentoring Youth," 2016). It is necessary to understand where growth has occurred positively, as it is also to understand the history of the foster care system and how it could be improved.

The idea of foster care in various forms has been around for centuries ("History of Foster Care," n.d.). Taking in and caring for children born outside of one's family are mentioned in texts as old as the *Bible,* the *Quran*, and the *Torah*, each outlining the duties and laws of caring for orphaned or homeless children ("Extended Family," 2014; Katz, n.d.; Mooney, 2016).

The foster care system today has slowly evolved from a dark history fraught with abuse and neglect that was dependent upon the mercy of the wealthy. Historic church records show that early attempts were made by biased religious persons to place children in homes of people belonging to their own faiths, thus mentoring was done in the form of religious education (Curran, 2016). During the eighteenth century, orphaned children were auctioned off, many times indentured to people who often brutalized them. This solution was viewed as being kinder than keeping children in prison-like almshouses and orphanages, where they remained poverty stricken and abused or neglected. Until the late nineteenth century, children did not have rights, and there were no laws in place to protect them. During the Industrial Revolution (1820-1870), orphaned children were often exploited, sold for labor, and forced to work as many as 16 hours per day ("History," 2015).

The U.S. foster care system has showed positive evolution, although one improvement had tragic consequences. In recent decades, once a child reaches the age of 18, he or she must be suddenly aged out of the federal system and set free without a strong foundation to support and help them, such as a mentoring program to help them bridge the gap between foster care and adulthood outside the system. Such young adults

have faced dire consequences in the past; some have been preyed upon by unscrupulous persons who have involved these youth in prostitution, drugs, gangs, and other areas in the criminal justice system (Powers et al., 2012).

In April 1875, the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty (SPCC) organized and incorporated into the first known agency to organize and protect children (Herman, 2014) and within the first 8 months of starting this organization, hundreds of complaints were telegraphed to the agency, resulting in 72 children being rescued from abusive situations. During this time, the SPCC appealed to the courts to have child protection laws that attempted to legally manage abuses enacted, by making it unlawful to refuse food, shelter, and clothing to children. Primarily set up to investigate child mortality rates, the Federal Children's Bureau was created in 1912 by Congress to examine the wellbeing of children ("Legislative History," 2012). The bureau helped to influence social reform and to bring about positive change concerning child labor laws.

To date, the U.S. federal government has funded states to oversee programs and safety measures intended to help foster care youth, although states are still given free rein to allocate funding. As a result, some areas in the U. S. have a safety net designed to support foster children and alumni, while other areas lack even a basic system of support ("History," 2015). The U. S. system has certainly progressed; however, it still has room for improvement.

By 1935, the Federal Children's Bureau introduced the Social Security Act (Social Security, 1935), authorizing 1.5 million dollars annually, and at the current time, the U. S. has a well-established federal system for allocating funds to each state,

depending upon the statistics gathered on the number of foster children each state has in custody. Each state is permitted to create programing and appropriate funding into mentoring programs. While this should sound like positive news, what it equates to is an unequal system from state to state and county to county. Some states have safety programs in place, complete with a system of guardians, social workers, and mentors who oversee the physical and mental health and well-being of youth in the system. Unfortunately, there are still many places within the U. S. where funding is simply terminated once a youth reaches 18 years of age. Each state in compliance with regulations of the Social Security Act is allotted $10,000 and sometimes even more, up to $40,000, based upon the rural population of minors ("Legislative History," 2012). Funding changes, depending on annual budgets, and recent studies have focused on the importance of helping FCG alumni with programs aimed at ages 16 to 24 that help support a youth in transition. This would include mentoring programs (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006).

Public social welfare programs in the 1930s focused on groups of children deemed to be difficult to place into foster care. Mixed raced, physically and mentally challenged, Native American, and older children were numbered among the difficult to place. A solution was to offer families who were struggling financially money to help support them instead of removing children and placing them in foster care at the whim of a group who judged certain parents to be unfit. An early form of help was originally established by the Social Security Act of 1935 as Aid to Dependent Children (Herman, 2014).

In the Post Progressive Era, the goal shifted from fostering children to adopting them permanently to suitable families if the biological family was deemed unfit to care for them. By the 1950s, trends returned to fostering children with suitable families, and for the first time in history, children fostered in families outnumbered children living in institutions. In 1958, the Social Security Act amended P.L. 85-840 extensively with measures that broadened the umbrella afforded to children (Schottland, 1958). Persons under 21 years of age and those living outside of rural areas were included ("Legislative History," 2012). Funding for foster care increased to $60,000 per state; and states were required to match funds. The U. S. federal government began to take a larger part in protecting children, and states were prompted to begin to comply with regulations aimed at offering children greater protection.

By the 1960s, fostered youth outnumbered children housed in institutions by a ratio of two to one, and the U.S. federal government moved to create an agency that would oversee the cases of foster children, thus, removing the power of church and private enterprise from profiting or using biased judgment to place children in homes. This first division of government was Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which was again an agency without clear direction or mandated goals regarding the welfare or placement of children in the foster care system (Allen & Bissel, 2004).

During this decade, Congress increased funding and continued to amend the Social Security Act to include research that investigated how children in the foster system were cared for. The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare was formed

to advance research and oversee funding for projects that promoted child safety and welfare.

Federal reimbursements were offered to states to temporarily fund (less than 13 months) foster care for children who could not remain with their biological families. However, states were now strongly encouraged to take an active role in seeking a child's biological, extended family as a first choice in permanent placement.

The AFDC was formed in 1962. AFDC influenced approval of state licensed foster care institutions, oversaw the training of child welfare personnel, and helped to establish services from Medicaid and Medicare ("Legislative History," 2012). The government reformed the foster care program into a cohesive system that tracked and monitored children in foster care; social workers became a part of the foster care system, but there was no mention of a mentoring program to address the problems faced by youth as they aged out of the system. States were given the ability to oversee foster care agencies and were held accountable for cases of abuse and neglect. Each state now had to take an interest in what was happening to foster care children, unlike decades earlier when foster children were exploited for labor or funding. It would still be decades before the foster care system would expand to mentor and support graduates of the federal program and for help to arrive for persons aging out of care between 18 and 24 years of age and still in need of life-sustaining support (Sinatra & Lanctot, 2014).

By the 1970s, there were over 500,000 children in foster care, a number that stabilized and remains roughly the same today (Foster Care Statistics, 2015; "Child Welfare/Foster Care," 2016). In 1980, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act

was passed (Adoption Assistance, 1980), and from this law came the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (Adoption and Safe, 1997), the beginning of a more evolved system for rescuing foster youth that continues to be in place today.

Between 1930 and 1970, the lessons learned were hard won, although many of the examples of this era have taught the U. S. federal government the importance of overseeing the welfare and care of displaced, abused, or neglected youth (Curran, 2016). These lessons have shaped foster care today, and although both federal and state care has progressed, recent research has focused on how to improve our system. Mentorship programs that oversee the support system and direction of FCG are now gaining attention as the most recent steps in preventing foster care youth from coming to harm after they reach 18 years of age.

History of Foster Youth Care and Mentorship

The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (Adoption Assistance, 1980) provided funding and assistance for adopted and foster children and re-established the federal foster care system. The 1980 Act marked the beginning of the U. S. federal government program that would become more adept at tracking children and overseeing how children would progress to stated foster goals through a uniformed system ("Legislative History," 2012). Child Welfare Services (CWS) outlined directives and set limits on how long children could languish in the system before CWS took action to arrange permanent placement (adoption). Also, the U. S. federal government turned a lens on children over the age of 16 and set aside funding that would help create programs for children reaching the age of eighteen (legal adulthood) these steps led to the

establishment of mentorships. The first mentoring programs appeared as a way of teaching foster care youth what to expect after emancipation, such as dressing for a job interview, balancing a checkbook, and managing money. Two decades later, the role of the mentor would begin to shift, and in some areas, mentors would become the link within certain agencies between the FCG and services that would help to support the emancipation of the FCG to become self-sufficient ("Research and Analysis," 2016).

In 1990, Congress created the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (Omnibus Budget, 1990), which amended the Child Welfare Services Act that included the option of allowing a state to provide services to young people who were aging out of foster care by allowing the states to create programs that supported independent living (Social Security Administration, 1990). These living services were left to the states' discretion, but now children aged 16 to 24 could be included in the program. Funds were allocated in some areas for mentoring programs that served to help young adults to transition to independence (Child Welfare, 2016). This was a first step in helping to stabilize how a young adult exits foster care, rather than releasing young adults into the streets to fend for themselves ("Legislative History," 2012). However, by 1993, amendment PL-103-66 capped funding for the Independent Living Program and asked states to match funds in support of creating and overseeing programs that would help young adults to become independent ("Legislative History," 2012).

The Child and Family Service Reviews mandated in 1994 provided a way to examine a state's ability and performance in managing child welfare cases. A more effective federal child welfare program was created and replaced the agencies of the

Progressive Era and numerous agencies that followed. However, the system still needed to be studied and organized into a unified and organized system ("Legislative History," 2012).

In 1997, Blome synthesized 14 research reports and concluded that research based on statistical analysis was needed to better understand the care of emancipated foster care, for the data implied a link between foster care and negative outcomes in completion of high school and secondary education. Blome (1997) hoped to influence policy change that would begin to address the need for training foster care parents to monitor and encourage foster children to stay in school and to raise awareness to the need for further research on policy and practice that promoted their wellbeing. To date, some agencies have taken steps to create mentoring programs designed to help this population as a proactive step, instead of hoping the foster parents are mentoring older foster youth.

During this decade, the Child Welfare Act was amended several times, and the states refined services and systems in place with the common goal of having the best interests of the child as the key to ascertaining how and when to place children in foster care or permanent families. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (Adoption and Safe, 1997) amended the earlier Social Security program to clearly spell out what was meant by *reasonable efforts* to work in the best interest of the child, as well as mandating that attempts be made to reunite children with biological families before other measures would be considered (National Social Workers, 1997). The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, later renamed the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, gave states the ability to use federal funds to help older foster care children obtain education

that would help them to become self-sufficient. This law allowed young people aged 18 to 21 to remain supported in the system while they attempted to become independent and capable of supporting themselves. States were required to oversee these programs and to report to the Department of Health and Human Services so that outcome measures could be understood ("Legislative History," 2012). However, a regulated system which collected data about this foster care group would not come to fruition until 2011.

Modern day foster care focuses on mentoring agencies which help youth gain access to some of these services. Mentoring programs today start well before a foster youth reaches 18 years of age. Indeed, many mentor-designed and operated programs in the state chosen for this research, such as Life Skills, make attempts to reach out to youth well before they age out in an attempt to prepare them for the transition to young adulthood (Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016).

Between 2000 and 2010, U.S. federal government reform in state foster care focused on creating pathways that helped aging foster care graduates by increasing the age limits on Medicare eligibility and included educational programs to teach and support this population as they prepared to exit the system ("Economic Well-Being Work Group," n.d.). Small organizations that attempted to help further the needs of foster care groups, begun as early as 1961, had solidified and grown through the decades into organizations that would eventually partner together under umbrella organizations like The Casey Family Programs ("Research and Analysis," 2016, "Measurement Domains," 2003).

Concern rapidly grew as foster care graduates became a marginalized group who were exposed to many dangers of homelessness. Researchers began showing links between unsupported foster care graduates and criminal activity such as drug use, stealing, and prostitution that preceded entanglement with the U. S. criminal justice system (Doyle, 2007). The emotional, developmental, and behavioral problems of children exiting foster care without a safety net in place to help emancipated youth overcome being unable to support themselves was believed to be a contributing link that resulted in why some emancipated youth were turned out into the streets to face homelessness (Wertheimer, 2002). Mentorship programs would be helpful in providing support to help FCGs establish stable housing, a degree or trade skills, and help FCGs acquire necessities as they navigate the adult world during the transition from foster care to self-sufficiency (Child Welfare, 2016).

Preliminary studies assessed the educational achievements and outcomes for young adults who were once in foster care. These reports showed that while some foster care alumni were successful in obtaining secondary education or gaining employment that enabled them to be self-supporting, alarming numbers of this same population were unable to succeed, and these numbers far outweighed the successful graduates (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora et al., 2006). Modern day mentoring programs are in development; however, they are the exception, not the rule. Federal funds are allocated to the states with the understanding that states determine independently how to spend the money.

Independent living programs are in development, but less than half of the emancipated foster care youth receive these benefits. Courtney and Dworsky (2006) established a link which showed that when foster care youth remained in child welfare services, their educational, employment, earnings and economic security greatly increased when compared to foster care youths who were neglected. Pecora et al. (2006), created policy for the Casey Family Programs and conducted a group comparison study of youths between 1966 and 1998. Researchers looked at 1,609 alumni cases who were helped by Casey Family Services. The researchers concluded that persons who were helped post-emancipation were shown to achieve high school diplomas or college degrees at or above the comparison group of non-foster care college students (Pecora et al., 2006). Both studies (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora et al., 2006), concluded there was a growing need for research that could help to create a policy regarding how foster care adults are approached and helped. Further, the studies highlighted the fact that of the persons researched, the groups of alumni who failed to achieve were not made aware of available resources, nor had policies been implemented that would ensure foster care graduates were aided. Mentors would have provided an umbrella of services. They could act as liaisons and resource advocates with the knowledge to help the FCGs access services and amenities in place which help rescue anyone aging out of foster care and entering the adult world. Pecora et al. (2006) noted that in many states, despite the availability of funds, measures had not been taken to create a safety net for this population. Harwood, Feng, and Yu (2013) conducted a quantitative study which analyzed data from the National Survey of Adopted Parents. These data showed links

among the foster care adoptees that suggest foster care children may have special mental and health care needs. The Harwood et al. (2013) research highlighted a need for training among mental health, health care, and other workers who work with adopted foster children and suggested that they should receive training specific to helping fostered and adopted children that would include understanding their possible emotional and physical needs.

In 2008, the 110th Congress passed the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (Fostering Connections, 2008) that included reforming federal child welfare financing to include support for foster care youth until the age of 21 (if the youth met the Health and Human Services department regulations). This support would include youth in school, working, or otherwise in a program to help overcome barriers to independent living ("Legislative History," 2012). By 2011, health care laws were amended to include children in foster care programs to the age of 26, although meeting the criteria and developing the program was left to each state to define what the term *child* meant.

The U. S. has a history of helping foster children at a painfully slow pace, often only when a crisis presents itself. Currently, states are afforded great liberty when it comes to establishing mentoring programs that are meant to assist FCGs. States were granted the ability to come up with ways of helping FCAs, but for many states, the freedom to create also meant the freedom to not act at all. In an executive summary presented to the National Governors Association, Oldmixon (2007) outlined an appeal to governors to take measures that would ensure a smoother transition from foster care to

stabilized adulthood. Her research report mentioned positive measures taken by some states as an example of how all states can be encouraged to take similar actions, this included programs to mentor young foster care adults who were about to age out of foster care. As an example, Oldmixon reported that, at that time, only 16 states had taken measures to increase the age of eligibility of FCA to remain covered by Medicaid. Each of these 16 states had at least one host city that is participating in a pilot program to assist FCA access aid and services that promote their independence (Oldmixon, 2007).

Current Studies Addressing Foster Care

Included in this section are peer-reviewed articles and reports that demonstrate how research now refocuses on current issues regarding foster care and helping foster care youth become independent. The research concludes with suggested future investigations that demonstrate how studies shift focus and slowly shape policies and programs.

According to the Children's Bureau, 23,000 young people emancipated out of foster care in the U. S. in 2014, which is a decline from the 2011 recorded statistics of 28,000 ("Recent Demographic Trends", 2016). Research has shown that youths leaving the foster care system often lack any form of a support system, are at risk of being excluded from support, and are left to fend for themselves (Dima & Bucuta, 2015, p. 53). In 2014, it was estimated that 59% of non-foster care youth were still living at home (Gaetz & Scott, 2012). But youth typically emancipate out of foster care between ages 18 and 21, depending upon the people and resources supporting them (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016, p. 21). Because many of these young people cannot return to their

families and do not have a familial bond with a foster home—often due to having several placements—they are left without direction or support, which places them at risk for homelessness, crime, drugs, and prostitution. They are at the mercy of predators waiting to exploit them (Doyle, 2007, p. 1583). A mentorship program is a strong preventative measure against such risks. Mentors who have aided FCGs have presented their cases before presiding judges in the past and testified as responsible parties who have overseen programs that focus on assisting youth in transition in the following ways:

- help to promote stable relationships with caring adults;
- support growth through education and employment programs;
- provide life skills that prepare individuals to thrive independently;
- assist youth to help them understand how to manage health needs;
- help youth to access safe housing;
- encourage youth to enroll in state programs (Oldmixon, 2007).

Mentors in the past have served to help FCGs access youth serving programs such as work force programs and secondary educational systems designed to aid FCGs toward independence.

The U.S. federal government mandated that states designate allotted funds and take an active role in designing and implementing programs which will rescue and help support FCGs as they attempt to become self-sustaining and independent adults. Yet despite monetary efforts, the lack of knowledge regarding this group is creating problems and inhibiting growth in program implementation (Powers et al., 2012). Researchers conducting current studies on FCGs have reported troubling trends for this marginalized

group. As states attempt to implement programs intended to help young people struggling to gain their independence, many states are only in the initial stages of attempting to discover what programs benefit graduates and what programs need to be improved upon. According to Jones (2014b), earlier studies on the first programs implemented reported dismal results, for the states are slow to move, often seeming to grapple with how to design and execute programs that are effective. Public awareness is part of the equation because few people consider what actually happens when a child exits foster care and becomes a capable self-supporting adult. Only 40% to 65% of foster care youth graduate with a high school diploma or equivalent; just 30% of former foster care enroll in colleges, and of that number, only 26% enroll in secondary education graduate with a degree or trade skill diploma (Jones, 2014b). Although mentoring programs in place have shown promise, an issue remains that not all areas in the federal system have such mentoring programs.

One troubling issue with researching this group is that there is not a sole issue that can account for why foster care graduates are in danger of becoming homeless, or getting involved with the criminal justice system, or are slower to become self-supportive and/or have issues with relationships that are not as prevalent among non-fostered groups. Therefore, researchers of current studies often suggest that future research focus on measuring program efficiency and/or counseling and mentorship programs to investigate how programs can be improved.

Ongoing court involvement. Buss (2010) examined the evolving role of juvenile courts in helping FCGs to leave foster care and become independent and self-supporting.

By 2010, the federal government passed the Fostering Connections to Success Act under Title IV-E, encouraging states to take a proactive role in helping these young adults. However, the laws and acts are not mandated, and many states remained sluggish about how to implement a system of their own design. The federal government insists only that if a state chooses to develop programs or oversee caring for someone exiting foster care that certain requirements are met. Title IV-E of the Social Security Act stipulates that states are required to:

- help a youth exiting foster care to develop a personalized transition plan;
- include in this plan options on health insurance, housing, mentoring and supportive services;
- review the case plan every six months;
- involve the young adult in creating and managing the plan, which includes the right to attend and be heard at all meetings and court dates.

Some mentoring programs in place, such as the ones in the state chosen for this dissertation research, appear to be proactively meeting these requirements, at least in part. However, the interpretation of Title IV-E of the Social Security Act varies from area to area, and even in the state chosen for this dissertation research, mentoring agencies have differing agendas and methods concerning foster care cases (Buss, 2010).

States are required to establish governing bodies that regularly review progress of these cases. Beyond that, states retain a great deal of freedom to decide what it constitutes. As Buss (2010) noted, opponents of this legislation present the argument that Juvenile Court is not appropriate for overseeing youth foster care independence. She argued that there is no greater agency than the court system, with its ability to organize,

oversee, and monitor the progress of foster care youth attempting to stabilize their lives by becoming financially independent, for mentored adults are shown to be helped and are at an advantage while navigating the court system. FCG cases have been successful in getting judges to allocate funding in family court settings for ongoing resources when the mentor and the FCG show which proactive steps have been taken to successfully help the FCG (Rhodes, 2013).

Homelessness and involvement in the criminal justice system. Mentorship programs can also play a key role in preventing homelessness. In June 2010, Tyler and Melander conducted a study on homeless youth. Their sample was comprised of 172 homeless between the ages of 18 and 26, and the researchers statistically examined family history variables such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and caretaker substance abuse with outcome variables across their sample to try to identify links with physical victimization, sexual victimization, depression, delinquency, and substance abuse (Tyler & Melander, 2010). Thirty-six percent of the people surveyed reported having been in foster care during their lives. Tyler and Melander (2010) divided the sample into two groups—those who were homeless who had never been in foster care but came from permissive and neglectful family backgrounds, and those who were homeless who had at some point in their lives been placed in foster care. They then compared the results of the two groups. In the discussion, they referred to the foster care group as a subgroup of the homeless, and stated a need for further research to study this population to develop treatment and services. There is a need to study what is successful when it comes to promoting FCGs' success, and as Rios and Rocco (2014) suggested, it is

important to research the role of the mentor to understand the impact on the FCGs' successful transitions.

Degrees and trade skills help to establish self-sufficiency. Sinatra and Lanctot (2014) studied 95 men and women, many foster care alumni living in poverty and homelessness, who were gifted a two-year college education from New York State in a program that began in 2009. Advantage Academy Program helped support the impoverished men and women to complete a two year, 60-credit, Associate's degree in specific categories, with the help of five charities that funded many of the students' needs—scholarships, childcare, transportation cards, housing, course and book fees, and jobs as needed (Sinatra & Lanctot, 2014). The researchers divided the 95 people into three cohort groups according to the year they had entered into the program and investigated the outcomes of the people entered into the program. Earlier studies of this group were intended to provide feedback to program administrators to enhance programming for future groups. Researchers investigated what mentoring additions to the program could benefit the students—the programs designed to oversee tutoring and college level learning skills, workshops, and academic retreats (Sinatra & Lanctot, 2014). Although only 40.5% of the adults from Cohort II graduated, this was an increase from the 30% graduation rate of the earlier Cohort I group. In Cohort III, 50% succeeded in graduating with an Associate's degree or higher. Researchers examined why the number increased and determined that the program had been adjusted as perceived areas of need were met, resulting in more students graduating. As a possibility for future study, Sinatra and Lanctot (2014) suggested testing the candidates for the program using resiliency

scales and assessing follow-up sessions with counselors and mentors who attempt to help potential students enroll in future programs.

Australian researchers Tilbury, Creed, Buys, and Crawford (2011) conducted a mixed methods longitudinal study utilizing both surveying and interviewing. Their study investigated how young people in foster care perceived their future education and career paths. They compared 202 foster care children with a matched group of 202 children who were cared for by their biological families. Tilbury et al. (2011) discovered that children in foster care had lower career and future expectations of themselves. The foster care group were more likely to seriously worry about their future, and during the interview process a prevailing theme was the idea that persons in foster care were left on their own and likely to face many obstacles in their futures. In the report of the discussion, Tilbury et al. (2011) noted the lack of skills development. In addition, the lack of role models created career and secondary educational barriers. The researchers noted that children in foster care who were coming of age and were to exit the supportive system had little support in career planning or knowledge of how to meet educational goals which could be alleviated with a mentorship in place. Tilbury et al. (2011) noted in their closing notes that there was a need for young people to be supported by being exposed to diverse experiences which would help them form interests and aspirations regarding their future. When caseworkers, foster parents, and schools were investigated during this study, most were found to have only a vague understanding or interest in how to promote foster children in the system, typically assuming it was another department's job to oversee this profoundly important yet underdeveloped aspect of the lives of foster

children (Tillbury, Creed, Buys, & Crawford, 2011). It appears that well-intentioned people and programs are not meeting the needs of the FCGs and young adults who are soon to emancipate out of the foster care system. Recent studies from Casey Family Programs (“Research and Analysis,” 2016) and from Dima and Bucuta (2015) have suggested future studies should examine the role and benefit of the mentorship programs in places that promote such resources to FCGs.

Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, and Colvin (2011) conducted a quantitative study that mirrored similar aspects of the study by Tillbury et al. (2011). The researchers examining educational aspirations of 1,377 youths who were enrolled in a Kansas program named Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEARUP), a mentoring program which included many youths in foster care. The young people were surveyed about educational goals, self-perception, and social support. Sequential regression was used to calculate the expectations of foster care and the actual outcome of their achievements by comparing age, race, grade point averages, and support of foster care youths against a group of youths not in foster care who also took part in the GEARUP program. One difference immediately noted was the lower level of aspiration among the foster care group. Just 43% wanted to gain a four-year degree, compared to the non-foster group who rated themselves 67%. In their reported findings, Kirk et al. (2011) suggested that one possible reason for the difference in scores might be due to the stressors that foster care children face, such as life disruptions and lack of biological parental support. Future recommendations for research centered on longitudinal studies of the foster care children’s educational expectations and aspirations as they changed

over time. There was also a recommendation to examine how educational expectations place foster care youth at risk. Another area of suggested research proposed was to examine mentored intervention programs that prepared children for college experience (Kirk et al., 2011).

Salazar (2013) surveyed 250 foster care graduates who had attended college and had received or were receiving Casey Family Scholarships. The group of FCGs were compared with a same sample size of the general public. Considerations were taken to try to make the two groups as equal as possible in order to get a clear comparison between the two groups regarding work, income, home ownership, physical and mental health, and the use of public assistance. Salazar's (2013) study indicated that the two groups proved to be similar in income and employment rates. However, the FCG group struggled at a greater rate with issues of mental health and job security. When data from this study were compared to an earlier study—the Northwest Alumni Study (Pecora et al., 2006)—results showed there were more FCG college graduates and home owners, and fewer FCGs receiving welfare assistance than in the 2006 Pecora study. Salazer's interpretation of the data was that college education led to increased positive outcomes for this group. Recommended for future studies was a comparison of two groups of foster care alumni–one group who had obtained a degree compared to a group that had not—to better understand how higher education benefits this specific population (Salazar, 2013).

Transitioning toward independence. A 2015 longitudinal-regression analysis of 1,872 emancipated youths ages 17 to 21 investigated coping skills and how participants

employed coping strategies to overcome adversity in anxiety, educational outcomes, social support systems, housing or homelessness, and substance use (Grey, Berzenski, & Yates, 2015). The researchers demonstrated that the more resources and support an FCG was afforded, the less depressive symptoms and anxiety the individual exhibited. A relationship between depressive symptomology and the inability to select appropriate support systems was noted. In the concluding remarks, Grey et al. stated that the best way to help this vulnerable population to access appropriate resources and support should happen through classes and seminars designed for foster care alumni. Individual mentoring and educational training are necessary to help this group overcome stressors that threaten their independence and wellbeing. Other recent studies echo the need for a form of organized care with program specifics. Dima and Brucuta (2015) spoke of the need for after care for graduates to focus away from problems and issues and concentrate more on resilience-based youths' potentials to help strengthen these positive qualities as a means of helping foster care graduates. Such mentoring programs do exist in certain areas of the United States. However, mentoring and mentoring programs are a relatively new addition within the foster care system, and there is not a single approach to how a program is created or implemented.

Berzin, Singer, and Hokanson (2014) interviewed 20 young people who were recruited from two different community-based programs that offered mentored support such as programs that assisted FCGs with housing, emotional support, and college preparation services as they transition out of foster care. The goal of their qualitative study was to gain insight about the experiences of emerging FCGs as they attempted to

become independent and fully exit the child welfare system. Participants were asked open-ended questions about school, relationships, emotional and physical health, and their outlook for their futures. This study focused on the optimism of the participants to understand how their outlooks and projections for their futures were a help to them as they coped with transitioning (Berzin et al., 2014). The researchers detected a link between the optimistic attitudes of those who were offered support and stressed a need to develop programs in the future that would assist FGCs trying to become independent. Berzin et al. (2014) suggested a longitudinal analysis that would follow FCGs from the time they were about to emancipate from the system through the transition to independence as a way of understanding how emotional support groups impact successful outcomes of the participants.

The ways in which youth transition to independence from foster care is a social problem. In a recent research study, Boldis (2014) investigated how care givers, mentors, and youths in transition to independence perceive of their difficulties and support systems. Opinions differed between the groups as to what the root of the problem was and how it might be addressed in the future. Theories and sociological perspectives were used to understand this problem both as a social structure issue and as an issue of social interaction (Boldis, 2014). From the 163 interviews that were conducted, 85 were from foster care and temporary or protective residential care youths, and 78 were from care givers and mentors. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the differences in how these groups perceived support. Boldis noted that the care givers or mentors, in general, viewed themselves as being the main system of

support, more so than the biological family of the foster child or that of other support measures. These adults saw the main systems of support as being those who gave the child shelter and mentoring or emotional support. When queried about exploring the possibilities of resolving the issues that foster children face, many interviewed in the mentor/care giver group stated that a foster care youth's ability to succeed depended upon his or her ability to conform to the rules of society.

The foster care group, however, differentiated less between the support system stemming from foster care or their biological families. In general, the group expressed a need for support to help them achieve and finish gaining an education, help find a job, and offer support as they attempted to become independent and stable. According to Boldis (2014), the youth focused on physical and emotional supports they perceived a future need for. The researcher noted that while the authorities recognized the transition from care to independence as a social problem, the government was not yet adequately or uniformly addressing the issue. As a direction for further research, Boldis stated that she felt a limitation on this study was the short answers from those youths who were reluctant to be interviewed and recommended the formation of some type of relationship with interviewees before conducting interviews in the future.

Gharabaghi (2014) stressed the notion that there is so much more to caring for foster children than ensuring their math, English, and science skills are on par with their non-fostered school peers. Care for foster children should promote learning of the self, relationship, and interpersonal skills. Such mentorship teaches young people first how to overcome conflict, the mastering of an academic curriculum is secondary. Both learning

criteria are necessary to promote this subjugated FCG group from prior abuses and neglect that many have experienced prior to entering the foster system (Gharabaghi, 2014).

Mentorship and socially supportive programs. Avery (2011) examined the effectiveness of mentor programs on people transitioning out of foster care. Federal funds granted to the states from the Foster Care Independence Act (1999) are intended to be used for the support of mentoring programs that support FCGs emotionally and financially as the youth became self-sufficient. Avery noted that few of the programs had been evaluated for efficiency, and program organizers were grappling with ways to create programs that benefited and met the needs of graduating foster care youth. In her review, Avery noted that research had shown there was a gap in the emotional needs of foster care youth, because many of them had lost connection with their biological families. They had aged out of the foster care system and were left without a close tie or emotional mentor to help them acquire social skills. Avery referred to this as social scaffolding, a social system of supportive learning (also see Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal

Development, as noted in Lipscomb, Swanson & West, 2015). Avery (2011) suggested policy changes to include carefully examining and screening the independent living programs. The goal of these changes was to shift the perception that skills were all that was required to make foster care youth independent. Rather, there should be an understanding that young adults up to the age of 21 need appropriate mentors trained to

help the youth become emotionally stable (Avery, 2011). Cox (2013) wrote extensively on the importance of social work concerning FCGs. In a 2012 report to the National Association of Social Workers, Cox echoed Avery's suggestion for social service reform which focuses on ways to reestablish programs that teach mentors how to help foster care graduates to reestablish bonds and nurture relationships that help foster care youth to thrive.

Hudson (2013) conducted a qualitative investigation that examined the perception of career mentoring on 27 youths in foster care. She used a group-focus method of four meetings in which she looked for common themes in the experiences of children in care. She reported that foster care youth were well versed where risks and negative outcomes for foster care children were concerned. However, few of them had any knowledge about their career options. Participants identified a mentor as being someone who understood them and could firmly tell them how to go about achieving a career. Most thought a mentor was someone who had a career that they themselves desired—someone who could, in a brief time, help them realize how to obtain the career of choice, such as a veterinarian, FBI agent, etc. Although they had limited exposure to mentors, they idealized a mentor as being someone who was an authority figure and a rescuing support. Hudson (2013) stressed the economic feasibility of using mentors as a means of helping foster care youth to realize their potential. As an area of further research, the researcher suggested studying the effects mentoring programs have on FCGs.

Rosenwald, McGhee, and Noftall (2013) conducted a qualitative study about the benefits of independent living services (ILS) for youth aging out of foster care. Six

youth (three females, three males, between the ages of 19 to 23 who used ILS in a Florida agency) were interviewed using open-ended questions. Researchers were attempting to understand what the FCGs' experiences and perceptions of care were. The investigation revealed four recurring themes: (a) a need for emotional support, (b) a need for an increase in tangible services such as rent, food, and other cost-of-living expenses, (c) services that equated to life skills that would teach a graduate how to live independently, such as balancing an account, applying for school, and (d) an understanding of available program services. Although the goal of this study appeared to be to influence change in practice, the researchers recommended exploring goal completion as a protective factor as a future area for research (Rosenwald et al., 2013).

In a review of literature, Jones (2014a) examined recent studies that stressed the benefits that mentors can bring to foster care children and alumni. However, the researcher stated that formal mentorship programs where a mentor was part of an organization and was assigned to a foster child was not as effective as when a child in care had a natural mentor (Jones, 2014a). Her research on foster care has led researchers to believe that for mentoring to be effective, the relationship between mentors and foster care children should be a lasting relationship which provides consistency and emotional support. This dissertation's research may be able to address Jones's results, since it is possible that the participants may have opposing views with regard to this issue. Regarding policy change, Jones (2014a) suggested that social workers could assess a child in foster care to help identify bonded relationships with foster parents, biological family, friends, coaches, and teachers, to help the youth, maintain a supportive network.

Another of Jones's ideas for policy change was that no youth should leave foster care without such a supportive network, even if that person was aging out of foster care and potentially returning to a biological family. This idea may also be a theme found in the dissertation research.

According to Jones (2014a), the most pressing need for research now is to investigate how effective social support and mentoring interventions are in helping foster care youth to thrive and what types of support are most beneficial. In another of Jones's (2014b) studies, she investigated what FCGs thought would have made their transition easier. Classes focusing on living skills topped the list in her report. When asked, the youth suggested making the living skills courses longer and more realistic to their needs (Jones, 2014b). Almost 60% of those interviewed felt they were not prepared to live on their own. Self-care and competency in finance management also headed the list of their concerns. Graduates recalled that while they were struggling to become self-sufficient, they faced a myriad of unanticipated issues (i.e., transportation, school study skills, and employment issues) which thwarted their progress (Jones, 2014b). Jones concluded her report with a discussion of the need to help foster care graduates by providing transitional services. Jones opined that innovative programs could be formed that are uniformly created to oversee these areas of stress that hinder this group from achieving independence.

Garfat (2014), cofounder of International Child and Youth Care Network, has written extensively about youth care and explained how the amygdala in the human brain is the part that is alert to danger. Children in foster or group care experience a

heightened state of alertness, prolonged over greater lengths of time than average, if a child in care has been subjected to past abuse. His 2014 synopsis of his prior studies on children in care was published as material to be distributed to foster and group care parents to help them understand why some youth were resistant to support. Garfat cautioned that creating a mentoring, nurturing relationship was paramount in helping young people in care to overcome interpersonal obstacles. Children who experience strong and caring bonds with stable adults were less likely to fall victim to gangs or other predators who target and prey upon youth left seeking a sense of connection (Garfat, 2014).

Rios and Rocco (2014) interviewed 24 FCGs to gain insight as to what the group of participants defined as supportive actions they received, in addition to what they believed hindered their success in college. The criteria for being included in the group of participants was that each had to be an adult over age 21. Each had to have been emancipated out of the foster care system, each had to have been in foster care for a minimum 12 months prior to emancipation, each was enrolled in or graduated from a college, and each had been enrolled in a specific state's Road to Independence program. The average time in foster care for these participants was 10.2 years in care. Common themes of these interviews were that participants found caring teachers and counselors, college-minded foster parents and case workers, and education-knowledgeable mentors to be the greatest support toward successfully completing secondary education. Conversely, the participants reported that if these people showed apathy or indifference regarding the outcome of their futures, the participants felt this impacted them

negatively. Participants also credited low performing peer groups and issues with anger and bad behavior as being hindrances as well. Implications for this study suggest that the state's programs such as the Road to Independence program should be examined by other states that are currently enacting programs that focus on helping foster care students complete high school and go on to secondary education (Rios & Rocco, 2014) because mentorship was a definite benefit for these youths.

Current Studies on Mentoring Foster Care Alumni

Four 2016 studies focused on how foster care youth perceived natural mentors (Salazar et al., 2016; Seefeldt et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2016; Ward & Smeeton, 2016). A *natural mentor* as defined by Thompson et al. is described as:

> a very important, nonparental adult that exists in the youth's social network, like a teacher, extended family member, or coach, who provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement or coach who provides ongoing guidance, instruction and encouragement aimed at developing the confidence and character of the young person. (p. 3)

Thompson et al. (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of 38, peer-reviewed, journal articles, dissertations, and interviews on studies that included professional mentors. Typically, the focus of research to date has been on foster graduates who were emancipated or are about to be emancipated, data on their experiences, and the statistics garnered from qualitative and quantitative studies between 2006 and 2016. As a result, Thompson and colleagues included only studies that included the mentors who were involved with the youth at some point in their passages to adulthood. The researchers determined that future investigations should focus on mentors is warranted—specifically, studies that examine how natural mentorships are formed with foster youth and studies to

understand how natural mentors form relationships with foster care children and the perceived outcomes of the youth (Thompson et al., 2016).

Britner et al. (2006) examined the five social theories that comprised Rhode's Model of the importance of mentoring youth who are at risk (see also Rhodes, 2002; Rhodes et al., 2006). Various researchers have noted that that mentoring has a positive impact on at-risk youth (Avery, 2011; Buss, 2010; Rhodes, 2002). However, it is suggested that studies are needed to examine how the mentor acts to intervene with those youth by how he or she improves the lives of those who are at risk. Rhode's Model addresses the role of the mentor and the influence and impact on the people they are attempting to help. These five theories are:

1. Bowlby's 1969 attachment theory links interactions and caregiving behaviors with positive mentoring outcomes on youth behavior (as cited in Britner et al., 2006).

2. Acceptance-rejection theory is Rohner's 1986 framework on mentoring special youth populations who are at risk and links self-perceived parental acceptance or rejection as an influence on behavior (as cited in Britner et al., 2006).

3. Social support theory is Thompson's 1995 theory on how social relationships provide material support that help prevent youth from a wide range of negative outcomes such as dropping out of school, drug use and teen pregnancy (as cited in Britner et al., 2006).

4. Hetherington and Blechman's (2014) host provocation theory posits that exposure to antisocial behavior provokes at-risk youth to perpetuate cycles of offending.

5. An overwhelming sense of powerlessness or oppression may serve to limit a young person's opportunities for success, and mentoring becomes a mechanism that helps to liberate the oppressed by encouraging them to succeed (Britner et al., 2006).

Britner et al. (2006) concluded that the mentoring relationship provides a sense of autonomy to the youth by identifying outcomes and goals, the mentor seeks to build a relationship that will positively impact the youth's achievements. Researchers have stated that one of several areas for future research must focus on mentors of at-risk populations in order to discover which welfare, disability, juvenile, justice, mental health, and educational services best serve the young people for which they are intended (Britner et al., 2006; Courtney & Dworskey, 2013).

In an exploratory study to understand the effect of a new mentoring program known as Caring Adults R Everywhere (CARE), Greeson et al. (2015) investigated the beliefs and attitudes of older foster care children and graduates enrolled in the program to understand their perceptions of natural mentorships. Seventeen young adults who met the criteria of being in foster care between the ages of 15 to 21 were enrolled in CARE and were interviewed to gain insight and feedback from their perspective about how beneficial the program was thought to be (Greeson et al., 2015). The youths were interviewed about how important they felt it was to have someone in their lives they could go to for advice, for many of them had no other adult they could turn to for help and guidance in their life. In concluding remarks, the researchers asked, "How can we better capitalize on these protective relationships and their innate ability to buffer youth from the negative outcomes that typically follow emancipation from youth care?" (Greeson et al., 2015, p. 142). Future recommended areas of research should focus on the initial findings of this study to better understand how natural mentorship and similar

programs promote foster youth and may decrease the chance of a youth becoming involved in negative circumstances.

The need for development and structured programs. Rutman and Hubberstey (2015) conducted a 14-month study of 41, foster care youth between the ages of 19 and 26 who had already been emancipated. Their goal was to understand how FCGs seek and access available support. In their mixed-method approach, they interviewed FCGs and analyzed statistical data from their research to understand major sources of support, as well as to learn what the youth considered to be beneficial. Rutman and Hubberstey (2016) noted that nearly 60% of their study participants reached out to family and friends for support, although a mere 14% said they had a mentor. In their discussion, the researchers noted that the foster care graduates had far fewer support systems than their non-foster peers. Further, this study contained a familiar theme that many current research studies contain—FCGs conveyed that if they did not have family to turn to, they felt that they were lacking crucial knowledge about everyday living knowledge such as handling money, deciding what to do about future education, handling mental health issues, accessing help and agencies, and even how to shop and manage basic self-care.

Two studies in particular, those of Salazar et al. (2016) and Rutman and Hubberstey (2016), focused on foster care and support systems for children and young adults with the goal being to explore current youth services and support systems in place to help foster care alumni peers. Salazar et al. investigated college supports and challenges in place for FCGs. One key point of support was the Chaffee Education and Training Program which offered vouchers of $5,000 toward college, or secondary expenses to foster care youth in secondary education. Although the program could make

a difference in encouraging FCGs to seek secondary education, few FCGs were aware of the program. This seems to be a common issue for foster care alumni throughout the United States—the lack of knowledge imparted to the youth concerning supports available to them. Salazar et al. surveyed 248 FCGs between the ages of 20 and 35 who had graduated from colleges and were enrolled in the Casey Scholarship program. Qualitative content analysis helped the researchers understand key themes that emerged from the interviews and surveys conducted for this mixed-methods study. The first theme revealed the relationship between positive and negative aspects of strength and support for FCGs; many of the young people interviewed stressed the need for FCGcentered support. They reported that foster care children were often moved through frequent placements, and that basic living skills courses offered to foster youth were missed due to many transitions between homes. Another recurring theme was the way many of the FCGs became overwhelmed during their college experiences. The youth noted a lack of support for those foster youth trying to gain a degree. Implications of this study revealed the need for trained mentor programs on campuses who offer support for the specific needs of FCGs on campuses.

Rutman and Hubberstey (2016) conducted a mixed-method comparison study of 43, former foster care youths aged 19 and older who were aging out of the system. Interviews were centered on supportive services and investigated the experiences of FCGs concerning formal and informal support for foster care youth, which supports were employed, and how FCGs perceived of such supports. An area of focus during the interviews was to understand what services and supports foster youth would recommend

for future support. In this group of 42 interviewees, most reported they had scant emotional support outside of family and friends. Areas where most felt additional support was needed were in navigating the struggles with employment, finances, education, mental health, income, housing, and legal matters. Rutman and Hubberstey (2016) suggested two areas of improvement for the future of helping foster care: (a) for qualified mentors to explore trying to bring the extended biological family of the FCG into the support system when possible; and (b) to focus future research on the role of the supportive mentor to influence program policy that can create youth-centered mentorship programs for FCGs.

Research Methodology Rationale

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences, feelings, and perspectives of mentors who work with foster care youth as they prepare to emancipate from the United States foster care system and become independent. In order to determine such information, this dissertation was exploratory in nature and was best suited for the application of a qualitative research method which investigates the perceptions, experiences, and considerations of mentors who are attempting to help foster care graduates as they emancipate out of the system and attempt to become self-sufficient (Creswell, 2015, p. 19).

The qualitative, in-depth interview was designed to be used to collect data on the experiences and perceptions of mentors and to provide this researcher with the opportunity to investigate their experiences and feelings; there was an added focus on the mentors as they attempt to help foster youth succeed in gaining skills, trades, and

education on their individual paths to self-sufficiency as they exit or prepare to exit the foster care system. Interviews allowed this researcher to survey mentors and examine their experiences, to understand how they perceive their duties, and to identify what mentors would like to see improved within their programs. Because mentoring is a personal form of guidance, a qualitative research approach was an appropriate method for evaluating the mentors' programs and their various approaches to the issue.

Current research studies that have focused on foster care alumni have used qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches to reveal the complexities and difficulties of helping foster care graduates access resources intended to help them gain independence. Regardless of the method used to examine the phenomenon, researchers are aware that foster care graduates are often unaware of or unable to access programs designed to help them become independent (Courtney & Dworskey, 2013; Gaetz & Scott,
2012; Grey et al. 2015).

According to the National Center for Women and Information Technology (NCWIT) ("Evaluating a Mentor Program," 2011), use of a qualitative method is appropriate to obtain feedback from the men and women mentoring the foster care population to better understand what services they provide, what services they would like to provide, and how they feel the programs can be improved upon. The NCWIT suggested the application of a qualitative, structured focus when the researcher is attempting to understand the phenomenon occurring within a mentoring relationship. In addition, the NCWIT recommended a list of topics to help the investigator narrow the

focus of the interview questions related to mentoring programs. Qualitative research is recommended when the researcher is attempting to understand the human side of research, to explore the observations and perceptions of the living human experience that is personal and cannot be as clearly understood through quantitative methods ("When to use Qualitative Research," 2016).

Summary

Articles in this literature review examined what systems were in place to help emancipated foster care youths navigate pathways to independence. The review was concentrated on the aspect of mentorship. Studies in this review contained information on the transitions of foster care graduates as they enter training programs or schools to gain certificates or degrees, especially those strengthened by mentors. Some studies had methodological limitations. However, these studies represented the most recent research on foster care youths who are attempting to become self-supporting and to exit the government programs in which they had been placed. Several studies (Boldiş, 2014; Dima & Bucuta, 2015; Gaetz & Scott, 2012) highlighted the importance of education for the foster care alumni as a means of helping them to avoid known areas of crisis (e.g., homelessness, use of narcotics, poverty, and negative involvement in the criminal justice system) that disproportionately affect this marginalized group.

Many of the studies in the review focused on supports that are currently in place such as the independent living programs mandated by the government; these studies also focused on known supports and how the foster care graduates perceived the programs and the mentors. However, a majority of these studies fell short of focusing on the

experiences and perceptions of professional or trained mentors as key contributors with an important stake in the mentoring of foster care graduates navigating educational systems. The primary focus of most of the studies was on the status of the FCGs and on the supports that were correlated to individual success stories (Avery, 2011; Berzin et al., 2014; Gharabaghi, 2014). Because the primary focus of most research was on the youth's educational outcome, with a secondary or minor focus which examined the supporting system, the experiences of the foster care graduates were reported in detail. However, there is a gap in literature regarding the experiences of the mentors who attempt to help foster care graduates. Researchers have captured the experiences of the FCGs as they struggle to become independent, but few have explored the experiences of the mentor who plays a vital role in this process.

The research sample and data collection analysis are outlined in the research methodology and design of this study in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 describes the research findings, and Chapter 5 summarizes the research, interprets the findings, and discusses implications of the research.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this investigative study was to examine the experiences, opinions, and perspectives of mentors who have attempted to help FCGs as they prepare to leave the government child welfare system and become independent. This chapter includes information on the research methodology and the specific procedures employed to complete this study.

Research Design and Rationale

The research design for this qualitative study was phenomenological and involved using structured interviews. I conducted face-to-face, in-depth interviews to collect data. Interview questions were centered on the exploration of the experiences and views of mentors who were currently active in helping FGCs to become independent as they emancipated from the social welfare system and became self-sufficient. The United States National Library of Medicine endorses in-depth interviewing as a viable method for learning about and retrieving information from human beings ("When to use Qualitative Research," 2006).

According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), interviews are a means for researchers to get to know the interviewee in a way that helps them to understand the perceptions and meanings of the phenomena in a qualitative study. Qualitative interviewing is encouraged because it allows for the interviewees to share experiences through their personal accounts and then allows the investigator to analyze the experience). The purpose of such interviewing is to contribute to the conceptual and theoretical body of knowledge about the life experiences of the interviewees (DiCiccoBloom, & Crabtree, 2006).

Creswell (2009) endorsed qualitative interviewing as a method for exploring personal or social problems while the researcher remains focused on learning the meaning behind the experiences of the participants, and how they view the social problem or issue. According to Creswell, the researcher becomes the key instrument who collects the data through direct interviews with participants—as opposed to mailing out questionnaires or

surveys—and then reviews all the data and organizes it into categories to make sense out of it by gleaning common themes that occur throughout the interviews (Creswell, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences, feelings, and perspectives of mentors who work with foster care youth as they prepare to emancipate from the U.S. foster care system and become independent. Qualitative interviewing allowed me to investigate and collect the necessary data to explore, investigate, and report on the experiences of these mentors. Although a quantitative survey design could have provided access to the experiences and feelings of the mentors, a quantitative approach would have only yielded a numeric depiction of participants' undertakings and would have been less likely to articulate the rich experiences and viewpoints of the mentors (Qualitative Research Consultants Association, 2016). In contrast, a qualitative design allowed for the mentors in the study to share their views, experiences, and feelings in a way that may divulge the encounters and experiences the mentors share. Listening to the voices and seeing the expression on the faces of the mentors helped me to understand the true depth of what they were conveying.

Qualitative research encompasses the collection, interpretation, and analysis of data that are not capable of being reduced to numbers, in contrast to quantitative research (Anderson, 2010). In qualitative research, collective data relate to the social world and attempt to study behavior of the people. Qualitative research can be found in applied and social sciences as a way of investigating a phenomenon. Such an approach provides an

in-depth understanding of the problem or situation which adds to the body of knowledge in a manner that insight numerical values might miss (Anderson, 2010).

Role of the Researcher

According to Letts et al. (1998), a researcher conducting a phenomenological study seeks to answer the question of what it is like to have a certain experience. Letts et al.'s suggestions for interviewing for a phenomenological study include listening to the participants as they answer open-ended questions. Because there is a need to explore this issue in depth, the researcher was aware of how these questions would lead the interview, so bracketing steps were taken to become aware of how the researcher/interviewer's personal experiences might encroach upon the interview process. In qualitative research, there are several forms of bias that commonly occur, and most of these center on the interview questions. Care was taken to create interview questions that did not imply acceptance, expertise of the interviewer, or acquiescence; questions that were leading; or questions that resulted in interview fatigue. Participants were allowed to choose the setting of the interviews so that they could control the level of comfort and atmosphere.

My goal was to keep the time of the interview to about 30 minutes, with an assumption that the participants would have an average speaking length of a few minutes per question. If the participants were willing to elaborate further and take more time to tell their stories, they were given the opportunity to do so. In the introduction to the interview, there was a clear estimate of how long the average interview was expected to take. However, if the participant was willing to take time to share further, I deemed it

important to allow for this extra time, so that the richest amount of detail could be obtained.

Methodology

Research Population and Sample

Participants were chosen from mentors to answer the research question concerning their role from the perspective of professionals who were working within agencies created to monitor and mentor youth preparing to graduate out of the foster care system and become self-supportive. The participants for this investigative study were mentors who, at the time of the study, worked with foster care persons who were preparing to graduate from the U.S. foster care system and who needed to gain government assistance to help them become independent. The population consisted of mentors throughout a southern U.S. state, primarily from two counties in the state chosen for the research. It was difficult to ascertain the total number of persons working in the capacity of professional mentor to foster care graduates because many agencies in the state's counties offer mentoring services, including but not specifically limited to the following examples: the Department of Children and Families, the police, agencies that work independently within the court systems, as well as privately hired therapists who offer career mentoring services.. Participants for this study were mentors who are associated with designated agencies committed to mentoring FCGs. According to this southern state's Department of Children and Families, as of 2015, a conservative estimate of 1,500 persons were working in a professional mental health capacity who worked strictly with foster care children (FDCF, 2016).

Geutterman (2015) cited Creswell's (2009) five-design typology for selecting the size of a convenient sample for qualitative research; this type of sampling for a phenomenological study may allow for 3 to 10 participants to be interviewed. However, Geutterman cautioned that circumstances of the study may require more participants, because the study is not complete until the researcher clearly understands a theme that distinctly expresses the scope and topic of the phenomenon being investigated. Therefore, as the participants created a clear picture of what they experienced and what their stories are conveying, the number of interviewees for this study were met (Geutterman, 2015). A group of ten participants were acceptable—as many interviews as could be obtained within a reasonable time period and who were needed to fully investigate the experiences of what it is to be a mentor who helps foster care graduates to emancipate and become independent. Guest (2006) stated that data saturation can occur within the first 12 interviews, because with a phenomenological study, it is unlikely that new phenomena will emerge from the interviews; thus, making 12 interviews the point of saturation. However, since Creswell (2015) stated that small survey samples are typical in order to study phenomenological occurrence, this researcher chose 10 participants for the research study.

As a way of reaching out to potential interview candidates, this researcher contacted the chosen state's Aging Out Institute with a brief letter of introduction and a short explanation and expressed interest in meeting mentors to interview for the study. The state's Independent Living Resources Guide [state name deleted] Department of Children and Families, 2014) was beneficial in listing agencies with mentorship programs

which focus on helping foster care youth access resources that help them to become independent. It was this researcher's hope that during initial contact, both this southern state's Independent Living Resource Guide ("Florida's Independent Living," n.d.), The Aging Out Institute, and local care agencies would verbally agree to participate in this study and to recommend mentors who might be interested in being interviewed.

Research Design and Instrument

The purpose of this participatory action research study was to investigate the perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and experiences of mentors who were attempting to help foster care youth ready who were aging out of the system or who had been emancipated from the U. S. government foster care program and were attempting to become independent and self-supporting. This research design employed a qualitative approach to examine this phenomenological study.

According to Larabee (2010), case study research examines people, events, and phenomena with the purpose of extrapolating themes and results that illuminate hidden issues which can be applied to practice. Case studies are used to understand important research problems with greater clarity by examining the individual in a way that explores the real-life context of a particular phenomenon.

The instrument used is the interview protocol (Appendix B) consisted of openended questions that addressed five main research questions:

RQ1: What is the job or mission of the mentor?

RQ2: How does a mentor define his or her role and responsibilities?

RQ3: How does a mentor affect the outcomes of foster care graduates seeking to become independent?

RQ4: How does mentorship support and encourage a foster care graduate to continue and/or complete a college degree or trade school diploma?

RQ5: How do mentors view current mentoring programs and their effectiveness?

Interview protocol guides the process of interviewing the participants in order to ensure consistency and accuracy. Once the selected mentors were invited to participate, they were presented with a letter of introduction to the study (Appendix B) and an informed consent form (Appendix A).

The letter of introduction introduced the researcher as a student researcher, informed participants about the study, and detailed how the participants will serve in this dissertation work. The letter also included information regarding confidentiality; how and why the interviews were recorded; how long the interviews were expected to take to complete; how the information would be stored; and how the participants could at any time decline to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable. A list of the interview questions was included in the letter of introduction.

Data Collection Procedures

Primary data were collected from interviewing persons selected from a sample of mentors currently working in mentoring centers in two counties in the state chosen for the research. Each potential interviewee was given the option to decide upon the location of the interview that was in a quiet location of their choosing. Interviews were recorded using two cassette tape recorders to ensure against technical issues, and each interview was labeled with only the date, time, and pre-assigned code number of the interviewee.

The one-on-one interviews were be transcribed by this researcher, and a copy of the transcription were mailed, emailed, or hand delivered to the participants, depending

on their preference, within a one-week time period. This gave them a chance to review and make changes to their responses. This process is known as member checking, a way of ensuring accuracy.

At the end of the one-week period, a follow-up call was conducted after a copy of the transcribed interviews was forwarded to the participant. This allowed the participant to inform this researcher that the mentor was satisfied that his or her voice, opinions, and perspectives were accurately understood and portrayed. This also allowed for an occasion for the participant to add any further comments which could enrich the interview.

Research and Interview Questions

The interviews addressed the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What is the job or mission of the mentor?

RQ2: How does a mentor define his or her role and responsibilities?
RQ3: How does a mentor affect the outcomes of foster care graduates seeking to become independent?

RQ4: How does mentorship support and encourage a foster care graduate to continue and/or complete a college degree or trade school diploma?

RQ5: How does a mentor view current mentoring programs and his or her effectiveness?

The interview questions (IQ) included the following:

IQ1: How do you define your role as a mentor?
a. What are your responsibilities?

IQ2: How did you become a mentor to a foster care child?

IQ3: What training did you receive or experiences did you have that helped you to become a mentor?

IQ4: How long have you been a mentor? How many youths have you mentored?

IQ5: What types of youth do you have experience working with and what does your typical caseload look like?

IQ6: What are your goals when you are working with foster care alumni?

IQ7: What are some of the ways in which you help the youth become selfsupporting?

IQ8: What resources do you have available to you?

IQ9: How do you perceive of the manner in which funding is allocated to your department or agency?

IQ10: Describe a particular case you mentored that you feel was successful.
a. What factors contributed to the outcome of this case?
b. What did you do that contributed to the outcome of this case?
c. How did the system respond that contributed to the success of this case?

IQ11: Describe a particular case you mentored that you feel was less than successful, or unsuccessful.
a. What factors contributed to the outcome of this case?
b. What would you have liked to have done differently in this case?
c. How would you have liked to the system to have responded differently in this case?

IQ12: What resources would you like to have that you feel would help you to be a better mentor?

IQ13: What would you like to see change within the system or organization you work within to help you be a better mentor?

IQ14: Is there anything you would like to add to what we have addressed today? Is there something you would like to express that I may not have asked you?

Mapping of Interview Questions to Research Questions

RQ1: What is the job or mission of the mentor? This question was addressed by IQ1, IQ1a, IQ6, IQ7.

RQ2: How does a mentor define his or her role and responsibilities? This question was addressed by IQ1, IQ2, IQ3, IQ4, IQ5, IQ7.

RQ3: How does a mentor affect the outcomes of foster care graduates seeking to become independent? This question was addressed by IQ4, IQ7, IQ10, IQ11.

RQ4: How does mentorship support and encourage a foster care graduate to continue and/or complete a college degree or trade school diploma? This question was addressed by IQ6, IQ7, IQ12

RQ5: How do mentors view current mentoring programs and their effectiveness? This question was addressed by IQ8, IQ9, IQ12, IQ13.

These research questions and interview questions were vetted by a Ph.D. Counseling & Counselor Education faculty member, and a program chair of a southeastern U.S. college with no affiliation to Walden University, who acted as a consultant and subject matter expert to ensure the questions were accurate and appropriate. Research from this program chair was not included in this study.

Data Structure, Coding, and Analysis

In order for the information gathered from the interviews to be helpful in answering the research questions, coding was used. According to Creswell (2009),

> Coding is the process of organizing the material into chunks and segments of text before bringing meaning to information. It involves taking text, data or pictures gathered during data collection, segmenting sentences into categories and labeling those categories with a term, often based on the actual language of the participant, called *in vivo*. (p. 186)

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and each of them was analyzed using NVivo® software. For purposes of confidentiality, an assigned number was given to each participant, and only the researcher had the list matching the participant's actual identify to the assigned number.

Qualitative Data Analysis Process

NVivo® is a software package that allows a researcher to organize data in a way that makes the research simple to search, link, and code (QSR International, 2016). The purpose of coding was to categorize data from interviews into themes that made information easier to consider and evaluate. Qualitative research is a method of investigation that attempts to understand the living phenomena that are occurring and to discover meaning in the model cases being examined. Among many other uses, this software is designed to organize qualitative, unstructured data so that the researcher can realize themes occurring within the transcribed interviews. Themes are then gleaned from the common wording used in participants' interviews in order to capture a frequent theme and experience of the mentors.

Once interviews were collected and transcribed, the final product was generated by capturing themes and word frequencies inside of the software's conversation analysis. This was expected to reveal significant points the participants convey for the study about their perceptions and experiences.

Issues of Trustworthiness

I am currently a guardian ad litem (GAL) for a county and when volunteering for family court, have come into contact with many people involved in the foster care system. I am not a friend or are otherwise personally familiar with anyone working in the capacity of a mentor to a child in foster care. A brief class on mentoring from Career One was part of my continued education in 2015 to be a GAL. However, I do not personally know anyone whose specific job was to mentor foster care youth readying to

leave the system. Special consideration was taken to avoid interviewing people I have met through the court system of the offices of the GAL. My role as a student researcher was to create an atmosphere where the people participating were at ease as they share their experiences during the interviews. I did not want them to have concerns about expressing their voices and perspectives on their current mentorship programs. I assured all participants that everything would be kept confidential. No form of relationship or connection to the agencies they are working for and within was established beforehand. My goal was to investigate the experiences, feelings, and perspectives of mentors who work with foster care youth as they prepare to emancipate from the United States foster care system and become independent, what the mentors perceive are beneficial actions that aid the youth, or what issues are not being addressed.

Ethical Procedures

I took necessary precautions to adhere to and maintain the ethical standards of Walden University. Once approval was granted for the study through the Institutional Review Board to ensure compliance with all international guidelines relating to conducting research on human beings, potential interviewees were be approached and asked to consider an interview. Precautions were in place to help to ensure the confidentiality of all participants was protected. All participants were informed that their participation in this study was strictly voluntary; they had the option to decline to answer any question during the interview and to withdraw from the study at any time.

Mandated ethical standards and practices of protecting human participants were observed and followed as required. All participants in this study were notified about the

purpose of this study and assured that their participation was strictly voluntary, and that all information received were kept confidential.

Before each interview, participants were given the informed consent form (Appendix A) which includes a description of the study and its purpose and were asked to sign this to confirm their willingness to partake in the study and to be interviewed. The informed consent includes a confidentiality clause that clearly explains the maintenance of all recordings and transcripts of the interview, and how these records were stored in a floor-bolted safe in the researcher's home. As mandated by Walden University, all records were kept safely stored for a period of five years and then destroyed via a professional service.

Interpretation of the transcribed information was generated in a way that kept all participants anonymous to everyone other than the researcher. Participants' career locations, residences, and other personal information were restricted to notes for the study and were known only to me.

Summary

This chapter outlined the method employed for the dissertation research and includes an overview of the research plan, design, and interview protocol development. The research population, data collection, the role of the researcher and how the data were to be analyzed were stated, and ethical issues and limitations were presented. This study was designed to understand the experiences, attitudes, feelings, and perceptions of mentors working within a southern state. Chapter 4 includes a discussion of research

findings and analysis. Chapter 5 addresses the discussions, implications, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, I present my interpretation of data collected from in-depth interviews of 11 mentors currently working with young people about to emancipate from the U.S. foster care system in a southern U.S. state. The primary purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences, feelings, and attitudes of the men and women who mentor foster care youth, for these young people are preparing to become self-sufficient as they transition out of foster care. The results illustrate the viewpoints and perceptions of the interview participants and give meaning to the experiences of the men and women working as mentors to guide FCGs as they attempt to become independent and selfsufficient. I sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What is the job or mission of the mentor?

RQ2. How does a mentor define his or her role and responsibilities?

RQ3. How does a mentor affect the outcomes of foster care graduates seeking to become independent?

RQ4. How does mentorship support and encourage a foster care graduate to continue and/or complete a college degree or trade school diploma?

RQ5. How do mentors view current mentoring programs and their effectiveness?

The responses described later in this chapter are organized in the order that the research questions were discussed during the interview narratives. All participants in this study were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Table 1 shows each participant's pseudonym and gender; included are the number of years participants have been mentoring, and their estimate of how many foster youths they have mentored who were emancipating out of foster care.

Table 1

Participant Information

Name	Gender	Years mentoring	Estimated FCGs mentored
Austin	M	30	200
Lowell	M	16	40
Trenton	M	8	75
Mesa	F	20	100
Aurora	F	13	150
Savannah	F	14	200
Corona	F	1	4
Charlotte	F	4	65
Mineola	F	3	20
Juneau	F	20	150
Madison	F	10	75

The study sample consisted of 11 mentors who were currently working in southern U.S. state agencies who help young people as they emancipate from the U.S. foster care system to become self-sufficient. The sample included three men and eight women whose experience ranged from 8 months to 30 years; all participants were employed at the time of the study and carried caseloads that included foster care

graduates who were striving to become self-sufficient. The educational background of the study participants varied greatly. One of the mentors interviewed had a doctorate, two had master's degrees, two had bachelor's degrees, and two were currently in school and completing their degrees in social work. Participant profiles follow. Pseudonyms are used.

Austin is in his mid-60s and nearing retirement after 30 years of working as a mentor in a southwest state in various mentoring positions. He began working as a mentor when he managed facilities for boys in foster care in the early 1990s. He managed a care facility for over 20 years for youths and currently worked in an agency that promotes youths exiting foster care who have not obtained a high school diploma or trade. The agency he works for helps to fund education for foster care graduates who make a pledge to complete requested training.

Lowell is retired from the U.S. Navy and has worked the last 16 years as a mentor to young men and women preparing to exit foster care. His work with foster youth begins before they emancipate from the foster care system. He speaks to groups of young men and women to prepare them for high school graduation and encourages them to choose entering a trade school or local university. Lowell describes himself as a person who coordinates logistics between a foster care youth and the chosen educational path that will help a foster care graduate to become self-sufficient.

Trenton has been a mentor for 8 years and works in an agency in a southern state that promotes foster care graduates as they attain education to become independent. Foster care youth are often referred to Trenton's agency for aptitude testing and career

counseling to help the graduate determine possible career paths and to attempt to place the student on a matched educational path. Trenton resources money for education, then continues mentoring students as they navigate college or a trade school. He describes his mission as a mentor as being the one who tries to help a student navigate college or trade school when issues arise and to help a student overcome problems and achieve a certificate or degree.

Mesa has an M.S. in Social Work and a background in law. She worked as a mental health therapist for many years and has held several different mentoring positions for graduating foster care youth for over 20 years. Mesa describes her mentorship as being “an educational coach” who fosters independence specifically for troubled foster care youth who have experienced dependency or involvement with the Department of Children and Families.

Aurora has been a mentor for 13 years and has held various positions in several agencies that work with foster care youth as they strive to become independent. She describes herself as a coordinator who helps youths access resources as well as helping them to obtain help from various agencies as they exit foster care. Her desire is for her clients to achieve their dreams of becoming stable and independent. Aurora considers herself to be that mentor who is networked across the United States, so that, when a students wishes to leave their present state, she can help that person realize what it takes to succeed and helps prepare that person to move to another area of the country. Although Aurora works in an agency based in a southern state, she attempts to remain in contact with youths she has helped achieve educational pursuits in other states and views

mentorship as an ongoing process that is sometimes maintained even after a student has earned a degree.

Savannah has been a mentor for 14 years. She has a degree in education and began her mentoring career as a dependency case manager; she currently manages a residential group home. Savannah defines her role as a college coach who often works with foster care youth who are or were homeless, as well as foster youth who were adopted; her caseload also includes those who were dependent and emancipated out of the foster care system. She sees herself as a resource guide who helps students get into college. Within the agency where she works, one of Savannah's roles is to coordinate ongoing education and training for other mentors working with the foster care population.

Corona is the youngest mentor who was interviewed for this study. She is currently a college student and also a foster care graduate; she believes this background gives her the necessary background to be a mentor to the foster care population. Corona is presently working with four foster care graduates. Three of them are currently enrolled in college, and one of them is struggling with homelessness. Corona describes herself as the middleman, a person who is well connected and capable of helping someone who is just starting to gain a college education and is not certain of their direction. Corona credited her own experience in the foster care system and her struggle toward her own independence for making her the mentor she is now. Corona believes she understands her mentees because she has navigated the system herself.

Charlotte is working on her M.S. degree and is serving in an agency for her internship as a mentor for foster care youth. She has helped in 65 cases and currently has four foster care youth she is mentoring. Two students are in trade schools, and two are in college. Charlotte defines her mentorship role as being a support person. Because the youths she is helping have individual needs, Charlotte describes herself as a source of support in a variety of ways, depending upon what the foster care graduate needs.

Mineola has been a mentor for 3 years and currently is helping six foster care graduates who are in college. She has an M.S. degree in Higher Education Administration and defines her role as that of a guide who offers support to her students. She believes her role is to help the young people determine what they want to do; then, she supports them by guiding them through the process. Mineola stated that one of her strengths as a mentor is her ability to be in contact and involved with the school that one of her charges is attending, and these schools are a way in which other foster care graduates have been referred to her.

Juneau has a B.S. in Management and now is head of an agency that focuses on foster graduates seeking certification from trade schools such as cosmetology, automotive repair, and welding. She has been a mentor for 20 years and has mentored over 200 foster youth. Juneau describes being a mentor as being a specialized referral service, a person who is flexible and has good people skills. One of her roles is to be an advocate who can help her students attain primary needs while attending school, such as housing, transportation, and living costs.

Madison has an M.S. in Social Work and has been a mentor for 10 years. She defines her role as being the person who guides foster care youth as they outgrow the foster care system. She believes that helping foster children gain higher education is her most important task, but mentoring youths encompasses a wide range of help, including life skills. She is currently working with 10 foster care graduates, all of whom are in college. Madison has developed an Internet app for her agency that allows her charges to maintain easy contact with her when they need to, whether it is just to keep in touch and check in with her, or if an issue arises that they need help with.

Results

The hour-long interviews were carefully transcribed and run through NVivo™ software to identify the important themes from these 11 interviews. This software was used to investigate themes and ideas from the text of the interviews. After transcription to text, the interviewer's voice was removed to facilitate understanding themes the interviewees were conveying. Within the software, case file containers were created by filtering the interview statements that were correlated to answer each research question. Word frequencies were run to reveal common viewpoints, attitudes, and perceptions that the interviews yielded.

Research Questions

Research question 1: What is the job or mission of the mentor. Each of the men and women interviewed held similar views about what being a mentor meant to them. The dominant themes regarding a mentor's mission or job was that a mentor was one who guided, supported, and advocated for the foster care graduate attempting to

become self-sufficient. The mentors uniformly defined what they did as offering help in many ways including aiding their students to attain education, life skills, money management, emotional support, guidance, and goal setting and achievement of those goals. All participants felt the need to convey that they offered more than a single type of help or service to the youth they supported and mentored.

Asked to define what being a mentor means to her, Savannah described her role as a mentor as being understanding and encouraging:

> My actual job title is a college coach and how I define my role is an advocate for young persons who are underrepresented, kind of giving a voice to them so that opportunities become equal for them as well as other students who are typically represented. My responsibilities are to provide support to students who are interested in going to college, specifically students who are in the foster care population, students who may be homeless or unaccompanied. . . . My one and only goal is for the young people who I'm working with, for them to feel empowered and knowing that their past does not determine what their future holds for them. . . . . I advocate for them. However, I also, I will hold their hand the first few times around, but I hope that by holding their hand, I'm giving them the tools that they need . . . So, I support them emotionally. I support them mentally, academically. . . . we helped to meet their social needs to kind of wrap around our arms around their entire life so that they can move forward.

Austin explained his role as a mentor as being the type of career that takes him out from behind a desk. When he is not directly helping an FCG, he described a schedule that takes him out into the community networking, resourcing, and sometimes even tracking certain pupils down if they need him or have been out of touch for too long. When asked to define what it was to be a mentor Austin said:

> [I am] someone who is there . . . someone that's there for the youth . . . when a youth is having difficulty with something that's going on in their lives and sometimes even when it's good stuff for them to be able to share it with them. The first is to be a listener . . . when they go and apply for jobs, if they want to get a higher-level job, the person that's hiring saying, well, you can't be a manager, we need to start you at a lower level because you haven't worked. . . . there's

> really not a lot of people talking to them about future goals. So that's my goal is to get them thinking about the future.

Madison explained how the role of the mentor is often broader than the simple explanation of offering support:

> [M]y role . . . [is] trying to be a support system. . . . whether it's referring them to somebody or whether it's just a matter of like talking and just being able to just be there . . . I see myself as more of like guiding others and just the best way possible and a resource that they need and . . . being a support system. Just being able to understand what they're going through and how is it that you need to do every day because they might walk in through your doors today and they need help with one thing. The next time they come they might need help with something else is finding a way to be very flexible. . . . it's not only about sitting there and just talking, it's a lot more than that. Kind of like being a friend to them and just being able to support them. I can. . . . like as a family member.

In the follow up question about her your responsibilities as a mentor, Charlotte described how the role often expand to include a diverse range of concerns for her students:

> I would say first and foremost as a support person. . . . for some students it's really about dealing with personal stuff and for others it's around jobs and housing and meeting basic needs. . . . I'm just checking in with them on a regular basis, and I'm trying to help them focus. . . . a lot of the times I would have students who are trying to do so much, and you know, I'm taking five classes and I'm working full time and I'm trying to do this. So just time management is a big thing. . . . I help them . . . understand how to manage what all the different parts of their lives and how to follow through on some of the things that they have planned and consistent consistency and just really, you know, when we set a goal, how do we systematically go about achieving that goal.

Trenton defined why the mentor's advice may very likely be different from that of a friend or family member:

> Not a parent, not a friend (someone that you think will agree . . . or disagree with you because of their position in your family or in their social structure [so] they can almost tell anything and not be judged by what they say, whether it's a good thing or a bad thing. They're not looking for someone to give them the answers. They just want to share with someone what they thought was the answer and not

> necessarily be told if it was right or wrong. So being a good listener is the key, I think is the very first thing. The initial thing that the mentee is looking for. Someone that will just listen to them.

Lowell gave his view on how being a mentor is more than pointing the student in the right direction:

> Someone that they believe . . . doesn't have a motive as far as being in a relationship with them or mentor, mentee type relationship. . . . that's where the relationship isn't exactly what the mentee thought it would be because they're not, in a lot of cases, they're not looking for someone to give them the answers.

Mesa defined her role as a mentor:

> I define my role as a mentor . . . what has been poured into me over years of experience, over trials, over errors. Just taking all of my personal experiences and my personal law knowledge and pouring it back into students. . . . I pretty much work with students from freshman year or whatever I'm able to reach them, find their path through their college career, so whether it's helping them with the enrollment process, whether it's helping them register for courses, I'm just having a personal place to come and be free and comfortable in my office . . . having a safe space to come and speak . . . all the way up to the point of retention and graduation. Also connecting with different resources . . . having those connections to the academic advisors . . . to the financial aid representatives. So, when I have students who had immediate questions, I have a key contact person in each department that will be able to help my students without any issues.

The mentors believed they offered a wide range of support and sources; a view they held in common was that the mission is to support and help an FCG by offering a wide range of skills and services that encourage these students to succeed. They may differ in their approach, but nonetheless, each mentor interviewed mentioned education and college or trade school as the fundamental goal when working with FCGs. When mentioning other sources of support, it was spoken of in secondary terms of supporting a person who wanted to attain a trade or degree as a means of becoming self-sufficient.

Research question 2: How does a mentor define his or her responsibilities?

Eight of the eleven participants in this study defined their responsibility toward this

specific foster care population as support for the FCGs as they helped the graduates navigate their individual paths to becoming self-sufficient adults. Four of the participants stated they are the mentors they are today because they were once foster children, and each of those four stated that being in foster care has given them a unique perspective on what a foster care graduate might need.

Common themes among all eleven interviews were the responsibilities of being a mentor; having the experience, knowledge, and specific training of the mentor to work with the foster care population. Every person interviewed recounted the importance of advocating and coaching their charges as they navigated school and daily living as an adult as a primary responsibility in mentoring. Several of the interviewees related that their responsibilities encompassed more than just walking a student through the processes of entering school, although each of the mentors mentioned the importance of helping foster care graduates to understand the steps in enrollment and the need to comply with course and campus expectations.

Mesa defined her responsibilities in mentoring foster care graduates:

> [T] foster independence. . . . To have them open up their minds to different experiences . . . A lot of these youth come from very rough backgrounds, may not have been [in] the most supportive situations. . . . instilling that positivity in them and working on a strengths-based approach, letting them see what they have, what are their capabilities and mounting on that. . . . building a broad network . . . is key, working with different homeless shelters is key to getting our students housed . . . immediately . . . because we may have students who are living on the beach, on the park benches in their cars and how can you expect them to focus in the classroom and they don't even have a steady and stable place to live.

Corona was one of four of the participants who explained how her experience as a child in foster care had positively influenced her role as a mentor for this population:

> I didn't choose the mentor life, it chose me. . . . [G]rowing up in foster care . . . I didn't have any mentors actually, so I didn't start getting mentors until like I turned 18 . . . I just always think of the work I had to do on my own at that age. And . . . it was trial and error and luckily it all worked out . . . You don't even know where to start. So, I feel like their confidence is already shaky because they didn't have anyone helping them. They're trying to do stuff on their own because everybody was letting them down in the past. They don't have anybody. And then if everything falls, could you imagine what that does to their self-esteem? This is not taught. . . . I bring a unique perspective because I lived in it . . . I"m able to identify with them on a different level.

Mineola described her responsibilities as a mentor and how her past experience as a case manager in dependency cases had helped her to become adept at working with foster care graduates:

> [M]y responsibilities as a mentor are two, we have students that referred, and others walk in. . . . They'll have been referred by a case manager or they'll have been referred by their schools . . . [and] I provide them with the facts . . . They'll share with me their goals for their future or even further the short term and longterm. So, what I do is I, I sort what they want to do and that we provide them with resources or the information that they need in order to set up on that. . . . [It is] a population that I hold dear and near to my heart because they need everything. So, the kids have the experiences I had . . . and I went through a significant amount of training while I was training to become a case manager. . . . I know that population, I know how to speak to them. I know how to approach them.

Juneau voiced her thoughts about being a case manager and described the diverse responsibilities of being a mentor:

> Responsibilities? To get it as a mentor is to make sure that I talk with my main theme for women. I want them to know if they need me, they know where to find me. . . . That's really what this means to me . . . They have nobody in their life, especially those kids in foster care. . . . [T]he day that they turn 18, it's a different story. Ask a case manager. They have a lot of people turning 18. All those people are no longer part of the system once they age out, so now they really need someone. They can pick up the phone in the middle of the night and say, guess what? I'm having a headache. Do you know what I need to do? . . .They don't [know] because while they are in care, we are responsible to do everything for them. Even getting an aspirin, they cannot do it by themselves. . . .So therefore, they don't really know how to act when they are 18. . . . So, my job is to push that

> educational thing and . . . they feel more comfortable in that group setting where they can talk to each other. And then I'm just there for support; if they want to get me involved in the conversation I do. But my job, what I do is just to support and provide food. You know. So that's what I do. And I have done so much. Most of it's really part of the mentoring, that extra thing that I'm doing. The mother in me.

Savannah described how her past experience as a case worker for DCF cases led her to take on the role as a mentor at an agency that supports foster children who are aging out of the U. S. foster care system:

[M]y role is specifically helping students to get into college. . . . I typically work with our youth who are, who were impacted by the dependency system. So, it could be students who were adopted, students who are currently or were in foster care, students who were in the dependency system and currently are living with their families, um, students who are unaccompanied students who are homeless. Asking the mentors to define or describe their responsibilities did not yield simple responses. Although most described helping the foster graduates enroll in school or teaching them skills they need to live day to day, the responses of the mentors differed slightly in the way they included unique case examples and how the mentors extended themselves to help a young adult gain what they needed to exist day to day as they became independent adults.

Research question 3: How does a mentor affect the outcomes of foster care graduates seeking to become independent? In order to answer this research question, participants were asked to describe cases they considered successful as well as cases they felt were less successful. Th mentors were invited to elaborate on what they thought helped and hindered the cases they worked with. Some participants chose to specifically state what they felt helped or hindered them, and others decided to give examples of when a case was successful and what when wrong in a case that was not successful. A

few of the participants responded that they did not see cases in specifics such as being successful or not, that there are only cases where the foster care graduate has reached a plateau where she or he is stable, happy and self-supporting, or else there are cases where the foster care graduate still needs to move forward and achieve self-sufficiency. Some mentors felt a case may not be described as successful because only the foster care graduate can determine what success is for each of them.

In describing how a mentor influences graduates to becoming independent, one of the most common themes was whether or not a foster care graduate had graduated from a university or trade. Austin described that any case was successful if he could help a foster care graduate to be accountable for their actions. “By taking ownership in their lives, taking ownership in their education. I’m not thinking that it’s someone else’s responsibility to do it.” When asked to give an example of what he was referring to, he stated that the first step in being an influence was to determine for himself if the student was in a position to feel accountability.

> I had this one student that when she came in for suitability, I was right on the fence wondering whether she would work out in the program . . . her ultimate goal is to be an R. N. So, we went from high school dropout to GED. [After] she received her certification and can . . . she was promoted at the new job that she had as a home health assistant . . . [and] in three months I'll close her out of the youth program. She is 24, which is the edge of the youth program. . . . I’ll enrolled her in the adult program for LPN, so then she’s going to go into the LPN program in August, so she’s . . . moving up because of her experiences and her certifications; she’s moving from one level of nursing to the other and ultimately we will have her as an R. N.

Participants had a range of views on what influenced or created an impact for a student. Three of the mentors in this study talked about how they had to understand a foster care graduate’s history in order to know how to help them.

Mesa described the background of one of her cases and how she worked to support the youth in decision making and keeping up with her goals:

> I had a student who came from a different country and she was sexually abused by her father. She was removed from the home, jumped from foster home to foster home, was not allowed to be in that foster home with the parents if they were not present. . . . she was still a student attending school and doing her best to be successful. I knew there was something in her that I had to push . . . just be that listening ear . . . and I was able to see her all the way through getting adopted.

The mentors in this study considered which examples they wished share. When asked about a case that was successful that illustrated her influence, Charlotte responded:

Success is different things for different people. . . . these students experience really traumatic stuff in their lives . . . [S]he was really diligent about getting her GED at first. . . . there were definitely some, several setbacks. . . . We provided tutoring, we gave her the time to do it. She would come to the resource center to study. We provided the study guides and we really just supported her through it. And once she got her G.E.D. she immediately enrolled in college and now she's thriving in college. She's getting all of these awards and she's accessing scholarships . . . it's a true embodiment of what this program is about. Not all stories have successful happy endings, although the mentors I interviewed did not seem to be unduly upset when a case ceased to progress. Rather, each considered a resource spent on a less successful case to be the main concern. The foster care graduates have time to reenter the programs until a certain time point. Once a resource is lost, however, this loss is seen as a resource that might have been used for someone who needed it.

Lowell spoke about a young woman he was trying to help even though she had not been using his organization's resources in a thoughtful way:

> I had a conversation with one of my students today . . . she had pretty much stopped coming into the program . . . she found out today that one of the tests that we would normally pay for it, she would have to pay for it because the voucher that I gave her expired and her, her reaction to that was I thought you guys were

> there to help me and to take care of stuff so I didn't have to pay for certain things. After a while we stop paying. We have to, uh, because some of these kids will stop respecting the resources. This is why we have to carefully consider who we think will be a success story. . . . Once we pay a school that money it's not refundable. . . . Especially since it could have been spent on someone who maybe would have graduated from a program with it, you know.

Madison elaborated on a case she had that needed to be turned around in another direction. She gave this example of not giving up on a case just because it looked at first to be less successful:

> [A] particular case that I mentored was with a young lady . . . through one of our partners, like a housing agency. . . . I realized that she had her ways of just like, okay, I'm going to just do whatever, . . . but it was a matter of just talking to her over time saying, okay, you can't go on and just live your life like . . .You have to get a regular job. … she got the job that, like I found for her; she ended up getting fired. So, I thought okay, . . . I'm going to help you find another job. And even right now she's working and she's at school and it's a matter of just her going through it. And then even now she said, okay, then I'll go without funding. Like the past, finished, I'm just going to go into the military. I'm like okay, that is fine. . . . [O]ver time, I became her friend enough that she listens to me now.

Madison did not give up on trying to persuade this young woman to change direction. However, most participants in this study conveyed to me that mentoring can become a form of therapy because the mentor is not usually telling them what to do or steering them in a specific direction as much as the mentors realize what the foster care graduate wants and help them to determine how to get there.

"You can't make someone get a degree or trade," Charlotte explained to me, because the young people have to want it for themselves. Unless the person wants to move forward, there is little the mentor can do other than be there for them, regardless of the decisions made. "But I never give up hope that the day will come when they decide they do want to change and grow. Because I'll be here still willing to try to help."

Research Question 4: How does mentorship support and encourage a foster care graduate to continue and/or complete a college degree or trade school diploma?

Encouraging FCGs to enroll in and remain in school was the issue that was mentioned the most. Each participant expressed the view that education counseling and resourcing is the essential concern with regard to helping FCGs become self-sufficient.

Another main theme discussed when this question was asked was the need for resources. Each participant stressed the importance of resources for their agency and how they tried to be responsible with expenditures. If there was a point during the interviews where a participant showed angst, it was when a mentor described how important it was to use resources wisely. The mentors interviewed described the different resources acquired and how they were used. Tuition, housing, clothing, food, living expenses, school fees, transportation, and medical aid are categories of resources, although this is not an inclusive list. The mentors relayed examples of how they access resources and use them according to need. Austin explained

> [This center] is always are looking to see what they can add to our resources and programming to make it easier to work with all populations. I'm happy with the funding the agency can offer. If I need something like funds for a certificate or a course or something I itemize a report and send it in. Nothing happens quickly but, in the end, I almost always get the funding I need for something.

Mesa communicated the following as an example of how she was able to acquire resources that helped one of her students remain in school:

> [w]hen I have students who had immediate questions, I have a key contact person in each department that will be able to help my students without any issues. . . . So, there was a specific . . . female student. Um, I was able to get her [a] homeless waiver because she has been bouncing around pretty frequently . . . and

> I was able to get that waiver process in our mission's office. She was very excited in the beginning to go to school, not have to worry about tuition.

Sometimes the mentors themselves are the resource. All of the participants for this study shared stories of how they personally went above and beyond the career expectations to help someone in need to gain what help or services they needed to remain in school. Aurora explained what it meant to offer a personal level of support:

> [F]inding a way to be flexible to serve them in any way possible, because it's not only like one thing say, well I'm a mentor. . . . sometimes you might have to go out with them to go to a doctor's appointment. . . . Sometimes [the mentor] has to actually go with them somewhere to help them [get] what they need. I think our partners plays a big role because they're the ones that we basically guide our students to.

Savannah offered her opinion on how she provided support that helped her students to remain in school:

> I support youth by encouraging them. I advocate for them . . .mentally [and] academically. . . . we . . . wrap around our arms around their entire life so that they can move forward. . . .[W]e have a lot of community partnerships . . . from housing to clothing needs to food needs [but] we have to have a lot of community partnerships to really make sure that we're addressing all of the needs of each individual student.

All mentors interviewed spoke about the importance of helping a foster care graduate enroll in and attend school, to obtain the books, tools, and supplies necessary to complete the coursework. Both Austin and Trenton stated that they did not feel it was beneficial to offer advice, although all interviewees felt it was important to be a good listener. The other nine mentors described in detail how they actively coached and gave advice as part of their mentoring methods.

Life skills relate to the basic living skills that most people overlook, but are a part of daily life for most. The mentors discussed the necessity of modeling these skills for

their mentees, such as paying bills, balancing a checkbook, making and keeping appointments, filling out applications, creating and maintaining a budget, being aware of healthy eating, etc. Six of the eleven mentors found ways to teach life skills and felt this was a necessary part of the education that was including in mentoring the foster care population.

The subject of money and management was brought up by four of the mentors, although each spoke not about obtaining it, but teaching their mentees how to manage it. The four mentors who mentioned money management lamented that in foster care, few children learn to budget or save, and it impacted their lives negatively.

Housing was a concern approached by five of the mentors. Homelessness is an issue that many foster care graduates must deal with once they turn 18 years old if they are suddenly without family or support (Boldiş, 2014). The organizations that mentor the FCGs often find that the first step in rescuing an FCG is to locate housing; this is a difficult issue because housing can be difficult to obtain. The mentors who brought the subject up all expressed a wish to have more housing available, and each mentioned the necessary voucher required and the necessity of getting systematic approval. Mesa described the need for housing:

> I wish there was more options available for students in terms of housing because one of the most basic needs that you may think these students have, unfortunately they don't. . . . [I]t compromises their safety and that leads to a lack . . . of focus in the classroom and just being able to have clear direction in their life. So, if I was able to have a wish box, I would wish that we had more accessible housing for our students.

How the mentors determined which sources are needed to help an FCG is decided on a case by case basis. Mentors interviewed for this study talked about their primary sources of supportive services. The type of agency the mentors were working in naturally affects the type of assistance requested for the FCG. Housing was mentioned by many of the mentors as a critical form of support, as was teaching life skills, funding for tuition, allowances for living, as well as simply advising the FCG on a multitude of life subjects. Table 2 shows the five most commonly mentioned modes of help that mentors offered FCGs.

Table 2

Mentoring Methods

Mentor	Advice	School or College	Life Skills	Money or Job Help	Housing
Austin	No	Yes	-	Yes	-
Trenton	No	Yes	Yes	-	-
Lowell	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	-
Mesa	Yes	Yes	-	-	Yes
Aurora	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes
Madison	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Savannah	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	-
Corona	Yes	Yes	-	-	-
Charlotte	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	-
Mineola	Yes	Yes	-	-	Yes
Juneau	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: Mentors stated yes or no to specific program methods used to help FCGs. A dash indicates that the method was not mentioned by the interviewee.

While every mentor described advocating for trade school or college during advisement, two of the mentors expressly stated that they purposefully refrained from advising FCGs. The five most commonly mentioned approaches were advising, promoting college or trade school, helping with life skills, helping students to acquire jobs that would help with money, and housing. Many other types of help were discussed, but these were the five most common themes the participants mentioned.

Mentors in this study indicated the type of support most commonly accessed. However, the different agencies where the mentors worked varied concerning what they offered the FCGs. Every agency's goal is to help an FCG to become self-sufficient, although agencies differed in method and management of the cases. Some agencies strongly supported helping FGCs gain a university degree, while other agencies set the goal as gaining a self-supporting skill or trade. Each of the mentors interviewed expressed satisfaction in their careers and stated they felt supported by the agency and community outreach programs.

Research Question 5: How does a mentor view current mentoring programs and their effectiveness? The mentors interviewed for this study held a unified belief that funding was adequate, and each advocate spoke passionately about how well their programs worked to rescue and help foster graduates to succeed. Each mentor heralded the good work of the organization they worked for and had a positive regard for their organization and how the organization influenced the community. The participants

emphasized the positive change in the lives of the foster care population, and several of the mentors spoke about how their working with these young people made a difference in lives of the aging-out foster care population.

Many credited grants and government funding for their program's successes. Some of the mentors spoke about the importance of what they termed community partnerships, a term used to categorize outreach groups that donate time, money, supplies and needs to the organizations.

Table 3.

How Mentors Perceive Program Funding and Need

Mentor	Funding Needed	Grants Received	Government Funding Received	Community Partnerships
Austin	No	-	Yes	Yes
Lowell	No	-	Yes	Yes
Trenton	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mesa	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Aurora	-	Yes	-	Yes
Madison	-	Yes	-	Yes
Savannah	No	-	-	Yes
Corona	-	-	-	Yes
Charlotte	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mineola	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Juneau	-	-	-	Yes

Note: $N = 11$. This chart depicts the funding sources the mentors referred to during the interviews. A dash indicates that this area was not mentioned during the interview. It

should not be assumed that because a type of funding was not mentioned that it is not a source for the agency that the mentor works

Each mentor interviewed expressed the importance of community help, for community partnerships and sources are helpful in fulfilling requests. It is the community that offers a level of support to foster care graduates because funding alone does not resolve certain issues such as housing, teaching life skills, or making sure that a foster care graduate is getting adequate food and medical care. Community partnerships provide for these needs by networking and providing essential living necessities. All mentors interviewed spoke of how indispensable their communities were in providing crucial services and necessities to FCGs in need.

"To me, I have, I have the community. Um, I'm a firm believer in that it takes a community to raise a child," Austin explained. He clarified that funding coming to his organization is allocated according to specifics that not all the applicants are eligible for, and this is how the community makes an impact. Lowell's thought on how the community serves the FCGs were similar. He stated, "I have to say that anything that we need, we get. I don't have any great need for anything or any other resources. I know the resources are available to me. Just have to find them and use them. Some of them I haven't found, but I know where to find them, so I can get them." Aurora described the effectiveness of her organization this way:

> [I]t's the communities we work with . . . you refer [the youth] to those partners if it's housing or food or money for education—the community comes through with funding when we need it. . . . Is it going towards the program, is it hiring more staff to support these foster care youth? I feel like the funding that we received in the organization, we know how to divide it to basically serve our population. I do ask for things on a case by case basis. Sometimes I need to find resources for housing or medical or school expenses. Last year I had a student that needed

> funding for a school project in order to complete his degree [and we] located it for him.

Mesa described her organization as one that was able to find a way to help when and where help was needed. However, she saw a need that she felt was necessary to help her group to become more effective:

> We have a very strong team [of] grant seekers who are out there . . . to get us grants and different funding. . . .[S]omehow the money is always found for us to be able to help these students. . . . I wish there was more options available for students in terms of housing . . . I would wish that we had more accessible housing for our students. You know, in the foster care system.

When asked about how she perceived her organization's goals and effective mentoring, Madison expressed similar thoughts to Mesa's view on partnerships and housing:

> I think our partners plays a big role because they're the ones . . . we basically guide our students to . . . [If] a person needed help with food or anything, then you refer them to those partners; if it's around housing and you refer them to those. So, I think it's more the partners that we have around us that kind of makes us stronger to serve the students. If it's around college, then we have these college coaches on the campus that we could guide the students to. . . . I feel like the grants . . . we received has allowed us to serve a lot of our youth because that's basically where our funding comes from. So, if . . . there was more funding to be allocated to actually having more affordable housing. Okay. If between the age of 18 to 23 and after that you hit, you got to figure it out on your own. If more funding can be allocated to housing for foster care that would be very beneficial.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the data collected from the transcriptions of the in-depth interviews which were rechecked by the participants to be certain their views and experiences were accurately represented. Before data collection began, each interview question was matched to a specific research question. For analysis of the interviews, the researcher used NVivo™ software to organize the words and phrases used by the interviewees; all words spoken by the researcher during the interviews were removed. The research questions were then used to create case classifications, and word analysis was used to summarize themes from the interviews. The excerpts from responses were presented verbatim from the recorded interviews. The data taken from the interviews captured the experiences and views of the participants who mentor the FCGs who are striving to become self-sufficient and independent as they transition out of the foster care system.

Based on the interpretation of the interview narratives, almost all of the participants viewed mentoring as a career that encompasses a holistic approach to helping FCGs succeed in their undertaking to become independent and self-sufficient. Mentoring FCGs is a multi-faceted career that comprises a diverse set of skills and resources. Every mentor interviewed described the importance of partnering with the local community to be successful at what they do.

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the research investigation, the conclusions reached by this investigator, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

An estimated 250,248 children exited the U.S. foster care system in 2016 (Child Welfare, 2016). Experts believe that 8% of this total were young adults who were emancipated out of the system without the support of family (Child Welfare, 2016). *Emancipated* is a term used by the child welfare system to specify young adults who have reached the age of 18, no longer qualify for foster child services, and are expected to live independently. As a result, thousands of youth age out of the system without adequate means of supporting themselves. According to Courtney and Dworskey (2013), many end up homeless, become involved in criminal activities, or fall victim to predators who exploit them. Courtney and Dworskey (2006) found that many emancipated youths were woefully underprepared to live independently and had difficulty transitioning to independent living. Most were undereducated, underemployed and involved in criminal activities as a means to survive (Dima & Bucata, 2015).

The United States Congress authorized an initiative to assist FCGs as they transitioned from the foster care system to independent living in 1999. The goal of the new programs was to help youth become self-sufficient and independent of the foster care system (Foster Care Independence Act, 1999). The programs established under this new act aimed to help youth learn the life skills that would assist FCGs to become independent.

In the past 18 years, a prominent two-fold theme has emerged through trial and error within numerous assorted independent living programs. First, agencies should begin working with foster care youths at an earlier age to prepare them with life skills.

Second, programs should be created for mentors who help the FCGs enroll in college or trades and encourage them to remain in school. Today's mentor is trained to help FCGs and is knowledgeable about available resources that can be used to protect and support FCGs as they strive to become educated, which is their first step toward self-sufficiency (Grey et al., 2015).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences, feelings, and perspectives of mentors who work with foster care youth as they prepare to be emancipated from the U.S. foster care system and become independent. The 11 participants in this study were men and women mentors currently employed in a southern state in organizations and programs that include mentoring foster care graduates emancipating out of the foster care system. The overarching research question concerned how current mentors viewed what they did and how they perceived the programs they worked in.

The theoretical framework for this study combined Rhodes' (2002) sociomotivational theory and empowerment theory as defined by Kaplan et al. (2009) and Britner et al. (2006). Rhodes' socio-motivational theory focuses on mentoring youth who are at risk, neglected, disabled or abused. Empowerment theory underscores the importance of empowerment as an interventive part of the mentoring process that encompasses educational achievement, employment, sheltering, and court appointed services. Empowerment is a supportive component of mentoring foster care youth who are seeking independence by increased influence over their circumstances. Foster care youth remain disproportionately dependent on caretakers after the age of 15 as compared

to non-foster care youth, and this contributes to youth feeling disempowered and less capable of achieving independence and self-sufficiency (Kaplan et al., 2009).

Mentoring empowers FCGs to succeed. A mentoring empowerment program called Mentoring System Involved Youth (MSIY; 2016) encourages the development of mentoring programs designed for foster care youth and emphasizes the challenges unique to them such as biological issues, mental and emotional issues, developmental issues, education, and employment. MSIY encourages the creation of programs that provide strong rapport with FCGs and motivates them to succeed by exploring potential educational and career pathways that may lead to their independence.

Interpretation of the Findings

Interview Findings

The three emergent themes that permeated the interviews were the importance of available housing, allocation resources, and community connections and partnerships. Structured, open-ended interview questions allowed the participants to express their views and experiences as mentors to foster care graduates. The resulting data were summarized in tables and quotations from the participants' narratives which provided knowledge and insights into their perceptions about mentoring and mentoring programs.

This study supports the findings of Courtney (2006) that young people aging out of the foster care system experience better outcomes when they remain under the care and supervision of the child welfare system. This also supports the findings of Hudson

(2013), who researched foster care graduates and concluded

> Career mentoring is an affordable and feasible intervention for child welfare agencies. This could lead to more motivated and prepared youth living in foster care for vocational training or higher education. Learning opportunities from a career mentor may be a lifeline for preventing negative psychosocial outcomes for foster youth, reward achievement goals, and improve overall quality of life in emerging adulthood. (p.132)

Salazar et al. (2016) also advocated for mentorship and college support, stating in their research findings that college graduation rates were bolstered by FCGs who emancipated from the system.

Although responses of the mentors in this study were unique, the themes were unremitting—the importance of housing is a much sought-after support for FCGs to attain education, the importance of networking with local community, and the allocation of available resources. The mentors' narratives demonstrated adept proficiency in offering support, finding resources and helping FCGs enroll and remain in college courses as they pursued a trade or degree.

The prevailing response among all participants in this study was that their role as mentors was vitally important in helping an FCG succeed in school, and also that mentors depended greatly upon their local communities to help acquire many resources and necessities. The mentors felt they were well supported by the agencies they worked for and that their work was important. All mentors reported that being networked in local communities was vital to the mission of supporting the FCG to complete education and thereby become independent and self-sufficient. Each mentor interviewed spoke

reverently about help received from their local communities. Mentors stated that, in large, networking with local charities, religious outreach programs and services and other charitable organizations (e.g., Kiwanis, Salvation Army, Donate Your Car for Kids, and similar organizations) was critical to a mentor being successful in helping to rescue FCGs. All of the mentors interviewed stated that when they needed a specific resource to meet the need of an FCG, they found it from their communities rather than the organizations employing them. This is because agency funding is often allocated in specific ways, and the charities in the local communities were able to respond more readily and quickly with necessities.

The participants acknowledged that being well networked means getting involved with the community. It means not just asking for money but making connections and making potential partners aware of their organization and the population the mentors help strengthens community ties and support from the local public. Corona explained, I guess you could say not necessarily asking them funding, but I feel like it makes us more visible and because of that then we'll continue to get funded. So, we have to find programs that are out in the community, make them aware that we have this population of kids that need them and then put them into those programs.

Seven of the 11 mentors stated that finding housing for their homeless students was sometimes difficult but was a critically necessary resource that required community networking to locate. These seven mentors said that somehow, the community does come through, but it is often a daunting or frustrating task that takes a significant amount of time and effort to secure. Madison wished there was more funding available for

shelter. "So, if . . . there was more funding to be allocated to actually [have] more affordable housing available," the mentors would be able to provide even more services for the youth who are aging out of the system. Homelessness is an epidemic among FCGs that is unseen by the general public, but it is a challenge many mentors must deal with as a first step in stabilizing the FCG's environment. Without adequate shelter, an FCG is at risk and is highly unlikely to concentrate on gaining an education while worrying about where their next meal or warm bed is going to come from (Courtney & Dworskey, 2013). The mentors who mentioned homelessness as a concern tended to focus on finding an immediate vacancy, sometimes at a hotel, sometimes in an accepting house with a spare bed. Although there is money to help the homeless FCGs that is funded through the Casey Foundation, money is usually federally awarded through court programs, and funds take time to access ("Research and Analysis," 2016). When it comes to emergency housing, mentors often work to find placements before funding can be approved. Because this is a well-documented issue and a primary concern to mentors working with FCGs, it is difficult to understand why any densely populated area does not have established housing for FCGs in crisis. These young people are a marginalized population often incapable of surviving without help (Courtney & Dworskey, 2013). The United States subsidizes housing for low income households, and in 2015, the United

States spent 50 billion in housing assistance for low income families ("Federal Housing Assistance," 2015). The federal government could designate some of this money to help

create shelters accessible to mentors who seek to rescue FCGs from having to sleep in cars or couch surf with their friends.

Conclusions

The over-riding opinion of all of the participants was that being a mentor was a very important career and each shared stories of how they made a positive change in the lives of the people they helped. All expressed satisfaction with how they were helping others accomplish the goal of self-sufficiency. Three of the mentors mentioned training courses they were taking in order to hone their skills when working with FCGs, and all of the mentors at some point in the interviews spoke about their future plans regarding being a mentor.

From the perspectives of the participants interviewed for this study, mentoring FCGs is a dynamic, constantly changing, and rewarding career for self-motivated, innovative people who seek to find a way to help support foster care graduates facing adverse life situations. Every person interviewed had a slightly different approach, although their goal remained similar—helping an FCG to become independent. Every mentor interviewed felt the agency they worked for was adequate, but each of the eleven participants stated that when they needed some form of help for an FCG they reached out to the community, rather than to the organization they work for. Austin explained that the agency he works for has funding from specific accounts, and that money is earmarked to help people based on whether they are under or over a certain age. Some funds are specifically for school tuition. For everything else a student might need, Austin reaches out to the community. Madison outlined how her organization receives

money and immediately divides the funds into specific programs that support tuition fees.

She also said that for the unforeseen issues that come up, she reaches out to the community. Charlotte described what happens when an FCG in her charge has an issue:

> Were not a housing program, we're not an employment program, but through our great partnerships with these different entities that focus on these different areas, . . . we can provide this holistic support to the young people. . . . we have about five different products and programs that we have really great partnership with. So, if a student is experiencing homelessness or having trouble with housing, then there are people I can call.

All of the mentors affirmed the importance of community partnerships and outreaches when it comes to assisting FCG, to help them stabilize and remain enrolled in school.

Limitations

I realized late into this study that the scope of this study was limited by its design. I decided to conduct interviews face to face with mentors currently working in agencies that were government funded. If I had included the ability to conduct interviews by using media communication outlets such as Skype,™ I would have had the ability to speak with mentors from around the country, not just in my area. When the original website invitation was posted, there was interest from mentors in agencies in other states to be interviewed, but I did not account for this when I submitted my proposal to the Institutional Review Board at Walden University and had to restate the parameters of who was eligible for the study on my website by adding a sentence about participants needing to be in the a southern state area for a live interview.

Implications

The implications for positive social change might begin with subsidized housing for FCGs while they are enrolled in school, since this is an issue of high concern for the mentors. If the United States government can fund agencies to promote FCGs as they try to become self-sufficient, policy writers should find a way to stabilize their housing situation, since this can negatively influence an FCG's ability to remain in school and focus on their studies, even if this means housing the students in dormitories while they attempt to achieve certificates and degrees. Children are not usually placed in foster homes or the foster care system because of something they have done. An FCG who is emancipated without family to support them are exposed to homelessness and exploitation (Boldiş, 2014). It would seem a logical step in the rescue process that in order to stabilize and help a person complete school, the youth should be assured of a roof over their heads and a bed to sleep in while they are studying to become independent.

Throughout this study, a subject that was mentioned several times by the mentors; life skills are not uniformly taught to foster care children. Several mentors stated that all foster care children should have mandatory life skills courses beginning at around age 14 to help prepare them for independent living. FCGs would benefit from programs that were standardized and created with the focus on teaching FCGs skills that the mentors deem as critical, skills that the mainstream population takes for granted. These skills are taught in family settings, as therefore many foster children lack basic knowledge of budgeting, finances, shopping, food preparation, etc. It is true that many cities do offer

some form of life skills, but the courses are not equally taught or even offered to all foster youth. About 28,000 foster care graduates between the ages of 18-22 emancipate out of the foster care system annually (Salazar et al., 2016). Many of these young adults exit

the foster care system without an understanding of how to live day to day in common ways most people never have to consider. The best way to create such programs would be to ask professional mentors to create lists of skills they realize FCGs need and to implement skills teaching in a uniform way that will help to prevent foster children from falling through the safety net that allows them to live independently. Such classes should include financial and budgeting instruction, domestic skills such as cooking and cleaning, health and hygiene care, and basic social skills, to name just a few of the life-skills areas the mentors stated were unavailable.

During her interview, Juneau explained that some FCGs did not understand how to shop for food, maintain a budget, schedule medical and dental appointments, drive vehicles, or take basic care of themselves, because the foster care system is designed to oversee even the most basic needs such as taking an aspirin for a headache. Foster parents may not take an active role in helping the foster youth prepare for life after 18 years of age. Mentors explained that it would benefit the foster child and the community if foster children were helped to build and understand community support that is available to them before they turned 18. Juneau stated that the foster care children who has strong ties to a community have a network of help to reach out to when they age out of the system.

It is this researcher's hope that the findings in this study will contribute to positive change in the lives of the FCGs and the mentors who strive to help them succeed as they endeavor to become self-sufficient. Emancipated foster care youth are a marginalized population, and no one knows this better than the men and women who mentor them. The first step in positive change can occur when the public listens as the mentors describe what is needed in the foster care system before and after a child ages out. The men and women interviewed for this study were not hesitant to share information on what they did and how they accomplished rescuing and stabilizing FCGs. Not every story they relayed was successful, but nevertheless, the mentors could pinpoint what had occurred that negatively affected the outcome of such cases. The mentors have information on how to create better all-encompassing programs that would further help FCGs.

Those who care about the safety and welfare of these young people are closer to the answer of how to rescue this marginalized population than ever before. The United States has a vast and dark history of trying to figure out how to help foster children. The government foster care program seems to grow and change by making mistakes or dealing with the after-effects of tragedy. In the past several decades, the United States has begun to take a proactive stance on helping FCGs to become independent. However, without a standardized system of evaluating and supporting young adults who are emancipated from the foster care system, many are still being left behind and abandoned to the streets, especially those living in rural areas where there are no rescue programs in place. The United States foster care system has come a long way, but it still has a long

way to go in helping young adults who are emancipate and become successfully independent.

Responses from the mentors were not what this researcher was expecting to hear. There was the expectation that they would rail against the agencies they worked for, however none did. All mentors expressed being adequately supported, even when they had to find ways to reach out to access provisions and services. After investigating their experiences, this researcher realized that they collectively had described exactly what was needed, and what they would like to see in the future of mentoring; more housing available for the FCGs, better life-skills programs, and funds earmarked to support such programs.

An area for positive social change mentioned by several of the mentors during the interviews was in the creation of greater public awareness and partnerships with the colleges and universities that focus on emancipated foster youth. Salazar et al. (2016) conducted a study of 248 foster care participants and learned that only 18 of them attended colleges that offered support services designed for foster care alumni. An important further step might be to bring attention to the plight of these FCGs to universities, colleges, and trade schools so that they can provide services that support foster youth enrolled in these schools.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings and the feedback from the mentors during the interviews, the following recommendations are proposed. First, courses in daily living skills for older foster children should be created and standardized so that FCGs

emancipate with basic knowledge about how to care for themselves. In the current U. S. foster care system, the Federal government allocates moneys to each state predicated on the number of foster care children reported. Each state is then responsible for determining how funds are distributed and how they are used. Not all states have programs in place to help FCGs who emancipate from the system. Indeed, in the southern state where this research was based, some foster care and group home children are offered a form of classes in life skills courses that they can choose to decline. This is analogous to asking any child if he or she feels like going to school each morning. A uniformly developed assessment and system would create a better safety net for FCGs that could teach them how to live independently, as well as how to access community help and services. Assuming that foster parents are teaching life skills necessities is a form of neglecting the foster child. Young adults sometimes exit the foster care system without an understanding of basic life knowledge such as cooking, washing clothes, budgeting, grocery shopping, and many other daily jobs that capable adults take for granted. It would also be beneficial to have a standardized assessment available to assist mentors in observing and determining which skill sets FCGs are lacking and what their strengths are so that resources can be sought according to individual need.

Second, the child welfare agency administration should consider ensuring that all foster care children are given consistent life skills and personal planning instructions. All foster children emancipating from the foster care system should be offered the opportunity to be supported in completing a trade or degree, not just those foster children living in metropolitan areas.

Last, since money is allocated to mentor FCGs so that they enroll in and remain in schools, housing should be made available to support FCGs who are students. These young adults often lack familial support and are homeless which creates a crisis and becomes antithetical to enrolling and remaining in school. All the educational support is for naught if a person is searching for a place to sleep and a meal to eat; the student is less likely to be concerned about completing studies. This crisis needs to be addressed and managed so that mentors will not have to grapple to find beds for their homeless FCG cases. If the U. S. government can provide housing for indigent families, then it stands to reason that some form of housing for homeless FCGs should be established, especially in metropolitan areas where there are more foster youth emancipating without a family to return to and are forced to become homeless.

Recommendations for Future Research

Researchers should consider repeating a study that examines mentors and their impact on the transitions of foster care youth to independent living nation-wide. This dissertation study was limited to a specific location in a southern state which has some funded programs and trained mentors. Many other cities and rural areas do not. Further, there is not a standardized system in place to help FCGs; therefore, while some areas receive funding, others do not, because it is up to the states and counties to decide how to allocate funds. The result is disproportionate and inconsistent care and programs for foster youth.

The mentors who agreed to talk to me and take part in a recorded interview were enthusiastic about sharing their knowledge in hope that the study would garner attention

for their cause. They realized that more attention equates to better funding and are eager to make the world take notice about what they do and how they help FCGs. There is a future in researching and investigating how mentors systematize and complete their individual missions.

Conclusion

Meeting each of the mentors in this study was an excellent learning experience that has brought awareness of the work and challenges mentors working with FCGs face. This study has given me the opportunity to research the history of how the United States foster care system slowly and often painfully evolved to what is has become today. I see mentoring as the new frontier in the modern-day battle to rescue a marginalized population of youth who are often victims of circumstances beyond their control. Mentors are the unsung heroes who are currently paving the way for FCGs to benefit lifelong from attaining higher education.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Hello! My name is Josephine M. Kunkle, and I am a Ph.D. student at Walden University in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The purpose of this interview is to help me gather information on the perceptions of mentors who are actively involved in helping foster care youth as they prepare to leave the foster care system and attempt to become independent. Your answers to the questions will become a part of my dissertation and will be kept confidential. The consent form you will receive will have information explaining the study and what is going to happen to the interview and the information we discuss. The interview will be tape recorded, and you can feel free to answer or decline to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. If you have any questions about this process, please contact me.

The following is a list of the questions I will be asking you during the interview:

IQ1: How do you define your role as a mentor?

a. What are your responsibilities?

IQ2: How did you become a mentor to a foster care child?

IQ3: What training did you receive, or experiences did you have that helped you to become a mentor?

IQ4: How long have you been a mentor? How many youths have you mentored?

IQ5: What types of youth do you have experience working with and what does your typical caseload look like?

IQ6: What are your goals when you are working with foster care alumni?

IQ7: What are some of the ways in which you help the youth become self-supporting?

IQ8: What resources do you have available to you?

IQ9: How do you perceive of the manner in which funding is allocated to your department or agency?

IQ10: Describe a particular case you mentored that you feel was successful.

a. What factors Contributed to the outcome of this case?

b. What did you do that contributed to the outcome of this case?

c. How did the system respond that contributed to the success of this case?

IQ11: Describe a particular case you mentored that you feel was less than successful, or unsuccessful.

a. What factors contributed to the outcome of this case?

b. What would you have liked to have done differently in this case?

c. How would you have liked to the system to have responded differently in this case?

IQ12: What resources would you like to have that you feel would help you to be a better mentor?

IQ13: What would you like to see change within the system or organization you work within to help you be a better mentor?

IQ14: Is there anything you would like to add to what we have addressed today? Is there something you would like to express that I may not have asked you?

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate in the Study

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

Dear Invitee,
My name is Josephine Kunkle. I am a doctoral student at Walden University's Forensic Psychology Program. I am kindly requesting your participation in a doctoral research study that I am conducting titled: Mentors and their Impact on the Transitions of Foster Care Youth to Independent Living.

The intention is to investigate the experiences of men and women who serve as mentors to young adults preparing to or already aging out of the foster care system.

The study involves completing a 20-question interview that was designed to investigate what it means to be a mentor to a group of young persons aging out and preparing to become self-sufficient.

Participation is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time or decline to answer any single question. This study is anonymous, therefore, your name and other identifying information will not be used.

If you would like to participate in the study please read the Informed Consent letter below.

To begin the study, kindly contact me at Josephine.Kunkle@aol.com.

Your participation in the research will be of great importance to assist in social change in helping researchers and policy writer understand what it means to help support a marginalized group of people preparing for independence from the U. S. Foster Care system.

Thank you for participating.
Your time is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Josephine Kunkle, M.S., Doctoral Student, Walden University.