Assessing the Self-Determination of Foster Youth & Alumni to Obtain Post-Secondary Education

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Introduction

There are > 400,000 children in the foster care system, and 23% are teens approaching the age of transition, known as emancipation (USDHHS, 2021).

Foster youth (FY) often transition out of care with minimal support and face societal barriers (Blakers et al., 2020; Miranda et al., 2020).

Only 2% of foster alumni (FA) obtain a post-secondary education (PSE), from a college or vocational program due to the lack of support, guidance, and stability given to FA (ABA, 2022).

It is vital to understand the lived experiences of current and previously in the foster care system to gain an accurate representation of the Child Welfare System’s (CWS) effect on this population.

Grace House Ministries (GH) is a Department of Human Resources (DHR) sponsored residential facility. GH provides a home to girls in foster care as well as developmental and transitional support.

Self-Determination Theory

- A theory for understanding human motivation, well-being, and personality development (Ryan & Deci, 2022).
- Organismic Theory – assumes humans have an innate tendency to grow and integrate within their supportive environments.
- Basic Psychological Needs (BPNs) – three universal needs that need to be supported in one’s environment for optimal functioning: Supportive environments create increased self-regulation, social relationships, and well-being.
- Motivation & Perceived Locus of Causality (PLOC) – Autonomous: Internal PLOC → voluntarily-regulated behaviors — Controlled: External PLOC → externally-regulated behaviors

Research Question: Only 2%-6% of foster youth obtain a degree at the post-secondary level. Do the lived experiences of foster youth and foster alumni impact the development of the basic psychological needs outlined by self-determination theory that are needed to obtain this level of education?

Eligibility criteria: Individuals must:
1. Be currently receiving care from GH.
2. Have received care from GH within the past 5 years (2018-2023).
3. Be ≥ 16 years of age.
4. Have access to Zoom (if unable to come to the GH campus)
5. Provide written assent/consent. DHR assent provided for participants < 19 years

Sample Population: 9 participants.

Methods: One-to-one, semi-structured interviews. Each interview was 1 hour in duration. During the interview process, participants were encouraged to discuss their experiences in foster care in their entirety rather than focusing solely on their placement at GH.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): All interviews were recorded and transcribed via a HIPAA-approved Zoom platform. Once transcriptions were corrected for accuracy and de-identified, the following steps were followed to develop themes. Dr. Tucker assisted in the IPA portion to decrease implications of bias.

Research indicated that the identified themes of identity formation, perceived support and influence, and sense of family significantly influence emerging adults’ academic motivation and success (Kim, 2014; Skhirtladze et al., 2019). The results of the study align with current literature, which concludes that frustration of the BPNs of family significantly influence emerging adults’ academic motivation and success (Kim, 2014; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Research indicates that the identified themes of identity formation, perceived support and influence, and sense of family are a vital component of post-secondary education.

Future Directions

Literature from the perspective of current FY is very limited. It is important to understand their perspective to accurately build supports tailored to their needs, especially for needs associated with aging out of the foster care system. The study results prove that there is a need for increased occupational therapy services within this population. The concept of self-determination is within the scope of practice of occupational therapy, as outlined by the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2020). Therapeutic interventions specific to the self-determination of FY are a need recognized by practitioners within the field of occupational therapy (Angel et al., 2019; Zivan, 2015). Future research should examine the benefits of trauma-informed care among FY (Crabbil & Hanson, 2018) and its impact on post-secondary pursuits.

References

Note: The interview transcripts were thoroughly reviewed, descriptively coded, and grouped by common themes. Frequent responses in this study generated the important themes listed above. Participant names and unique identifiers have been removed for privacy purposes.

Discussion

Identity Formation

The impact an individual’s lived experience has on their thoughts, attitudes, behaviors, and self-value.

Motivation

“So, I will incorporate a lot of my experience into my books and stuff so I can hopefully reach out to children because I have stories to tell that possibly help other children, the system, or even dealing with like different abuses.”

Coping Mechanisms

“This person’s not even trying their hardest for me, and sometimes I just give up. Sometimes I’ll give up, and I don’t try anymore. So, I’m just like, well, what’s really the point.”

Social Inadequacy

“I just can’t do normal kid things. And that’s okay. I don’t have control over it. I go to get food, and I don’t have control over what I do on the weekend. All I have control over is how much I eat to these things.”

Impact of Support System

“We have that bond, and we have that trust in each other because we’ve been through the same thing, and therefore we’ve been through stuff together. We know them, and they can only really trust us.”

Conclusion

The continuum of support from one’s various familial groups and its contribution to their well-being.

Increased

“So, I felt like I was separated, not only in my school life, but in my family life. I felt like the only person I could depend on was my mother, and you know, honestly, I didn’t. I felt so unlived by her, sometimes it just honestly hurt.”

Decreased

“I’m not really a social person. Like, people were not as nice before, if I took my hands to a teacher, I felt like she’s going to be like ‘what have you got the answer wrong but that’s okay. Everybody doesn’t have it right.’”

Self-created

“I mean yeah, they’re the house parents. They kind of treat you like they didn’t do anything. They were like this was the already my fault.”

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