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PLANNING FOR A FUTURE: A DEVELOPMENTAL BLUEPRINT TOWARDS SUCCESS AMONG CURRENT AND FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

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PLANNING FOR A FUTURE: A DEVELOPMENTAL BLUEPRINT TOWARDS
SUCCESS AMONG CURRENT AND FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
John Anthony Devine

June 2018

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ABSTRACT

Over 425,000 youth currently reside in the U.S. foster care system. Youth enter the foster care system for the many reasons, including but not limited to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, incarceration of a parent, abandonment, and death of a family member. Once in the foster care system, many youth remain until they reach adulthood. The purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives of current and former foster youth who remained in foster care into their adulthood and who participated in the Independent Living Program (ILP), a program designed to help foster youth transition to adulthood and independence. The study used in-depth, qualitative interviews to examine former foster youths' perceptions of the role ILP played in their transitions to adulthood. This study examines the difficult transitions to independence many foster youth experience and the corresponding skills and behaviors ILP addresses.

Several themes emerged from the data. Current and former foster youth with negative outcomes reported that staff assigned to them did not support them in correlation to ILP service deliverance and the transition into adulthood. The second major theme found was inconsistent participation in ILP. The third major theme was communication with clients so that they can be informed of upcoming events, workshops, and resources. The fourth major theme was participants' suggestions on improvements for ILP. The findings from this study have implications for ILP programs and for social work practice. These implications

and recommendations are discussed.

DEDICATION

First and foremost, I would like to dedicate this to God. Without him, I would not be in the position that I am. I would like to thank my closest friends and family for their nonstop support. They are the ones that keep fueling me to thrive and be successful. I would like to thank my wonderful girlfriend and her family for their continuous support and just being by side through all the moments in this incredible experience. Without you, I would be nothing.

For the past seven years, I have dedicated my career in social services and the specialized area of Child Welfare. Being both a product of the foster care system and professionally learning the components of Child Welfare have given me the knowledge I need in order to commit and live my life serving current and former foster youth no matter I am in the world.

For those that are reading this, never give up. All of us experience challenges and obstacles. Some will hurt and break us to the brink of giving up. As long you have faith and determination there is nothing you cannot do in this world.

- *From: One more system-involved youth that broke the statistics.*

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Formulation

Over 425,000 youth currently reside in the U.S. foster care system (Children's Bureau, 2016). The majority of these youth are male, and youth spend an average of 8.6 years in foster care. Every year approximately 243,000 foster youth leave the foster care system (Children's Bureau, 2016). Yet, not even half of the foster youth who reach age 18, the age at which they may leave the foster care system, are prepared to live independently (Dworsky et al., 2013). For many youth, foster care provides the basic necessities of food, shelter, clothing, and supervision. Yet, it seems that foster care may not always provide the basic life skills youth need to care for themselves once they reach adulthood and are expected to live on their own.

Youth and children enter the foster care system for the many reasons, including but not limited to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, incarceration of a parent, abandonment, and death of a family member. The social worker's main priority is to assess and identify any potential to place the child or youth. Sometimes, there are no immediate family members, thus the individual is placed in the foster care system (Dworsky, et al., 2013).

Over time, foster children's experiences, which often include trauma, can

increase the likelihood that the youth experience mental health problems and substance abuse. Foster youth are vulnerable, and this trauma also has a detrimental effect on their transition into adulthood and independence. Foster youth have very limited resources and support available to them. Foster youth are at an extreme disadvantage when faced with living independently, as they struggle to maintain with necessary skills that are needed for daily survival including; academics, employment, financial, housing, mental health, parenting, and social skills (Graham et al., 2015).

Consequently, a number of federal and state efforts to support transition-age foster youth have been developed; most notably the Independent Living Program (ILP). ILP was established by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 which aimed to assist youth aging out of foster care in the United States to obtain and maintain independent living skills (Dworsky et al., 2013). This program is geared to teach foster children basic skills needed to manage everyday life including how to do chores, going grocery shopping, and scheduling their own medical and dental appointments. However, since the ILP program is voluntary and not required; some foster youth decide not to participate in the program.

One of the main concerns ILP has is that foster youth often go unnoticed and are often underserved (Zetlin et al, 2010). ILP is concerned with the safety and well-being of foster youth that are preparing for the transition into adulthood and successful independence. ILP focuses on services such as academics and housing assistance to ensure foster youth are well prepared for adulthood by the

time they turn age 18. Research is growing involving the outcomes of former foster youth; however, research is still limited (Rosenthal et al., 2012). Research regarding this can tell us the extent to which foster youth are having difficulties in certain areas, as well as where agencies can provide extra support and resources. Furthermore, ILP is also concerned about the high probability of homelessness in the foster youth population as well as low probability of foster youth attending a community college or universities. “Less than 3% of foster youth will earn a Bachelor’s Degree and less than .04% will earn a Master’s Degree” (Davis, p.13, 2016).

It is important to understand this problem further because as social workers, we value the lives of whom we serve. When working with such a vulnerable population as foster youth, social workers both new and seasoned for child welfare, should make for the safety and well-being of foster youth their priority. It is equally as important for social workers to understand foster youth’s feedback on the effective of programs they experience including ILP. If foster youth are seeking a certain resource or life skill, and they have yet to learn about it, social workers may be able to step up and play a mentor role for their foster youth on their caseload.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives of current and

former foster youth who have participated in ILP. The study seeks to understand the part ILP played in their transition into adulthood. Few studies have evaluated the effectiveness of ILP, and this study begins to answer that question by asking foster youth for their perceptions of ILP. In addition, this study asks foster youth to explain how they have coped with and overcome challenges.

Significance of the Project

Understanding factors that contribute to the success of foster youth can inform social work practice. Building rapport with clients will increase trust between the social worker and client, and potentially allow foster youth to feel more comfortable voicing their needs and wishes in regards to the foster care system. This study will provide data on transitional programs that assist foster youth with successful independence and will also examine whether youth who emancipated from the foster care system felt prepared to live independently.

There is a lack of research found regarding foster youth's success rates after completion of transitional programs. The findings of this research study will add the perspectives of the youth these programs seek to assist to this literature. The study may also help inform the development of interventions that will better prepare foster youth for independence. This study is relevant to child welfare practice as it examines experiences of living independently from current and former foster youth. Different agencies advocate and provide services to assist

foster youth to overcome traumatic events that they have experienced. This research will provide data to improve services that aim to increase foster youth's chances of success in education and in caring for themselves.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter discusses the difficult transitions to independence many foster youth experience and the corresponding skills and behaviors ILP addresses. These include four topics: housing stability, education, employment, health and wellness. This chapter discusses the literature related to ILP and to these topics.

Transitioning into Becoming Independent

The transition into becoming independent for foster youth can be incredibly difficult as youth realize they are going to be entering the real world on their own. In education, 75% of foster youth are performing below grade level (California Department of Social Services, 2016). Only 50% of foster youth graduate from high school. 80% of foster youth that graduate from high school express a desire to attend a community college or university, but only 20% get accepted. Throughout their experience, 55% of foster youth become incarcerated and 50% of foster youth that age out become homeless (CDSS, 2016).

Fortunately, there is a program that assists those that are interested in developing preparation skills for independence. The Independent Living Program

(ILP), “...provides training, services, and benefits to assist current and former foster youth in achieving self-sufficiency prior to, and after leaving, the foster care system” (CDSS, 2016, p. 3). ILP can help youth learn daily living skills such as: money management, decision-making, building self-esteem, financial assistance with college or vocational schools, educational resources, housing, and employment. This program is voluntary, so youth are not required to participate in the program; however, social workers are supposed to strongly encourage each client to participate in the program. Foster youth may not wish to participate in ILP, perhaps because they are not interested in the program’s components or because they feel already competent to care for themselves.

Social workers are federally mandated to enter information on all foster youth into the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD). The NYTD is database about current and former foster youth, and includes the number and type of independent living services the youth has received, as well as the outcomes of all foster youth at ages 17, 19, and 21. The NYTD allows social workers and agencies to measure the effectiveness of services youth receive while in the Independent Living Program. The purpose of NYTD is to analyze progress and determine which services are effective and which services social workers should emphasize for different types of foster youth. The NYTD enables workers and agency to track each foster youth’s progress towards self-sufficiency. Areas that are reported include: attainment of a high school diploma/GED, current enrollment and attendance in school, full or part-time

employment, having a connection to an adult, experiences with homelessness, and health coverage (Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, 2018).

In addition to the NYTD requirements, social workers must also track the services their foster youth clients receive, and those clients' progress, in the Child Welfare System (CWS). The CWS also tracks all foster youth's personal information, case files, and court reports, as well as youths' participation in ILP using a Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP). The TILP is a tool that is used by social workers to establish clients' goals, project completion dates, and to ensure each client receives appropriate services. In short, both the NYTD and CWS databases require social workers to track foster youths' access to and participation in ILP programs. Consequently, social workers and the agencies for whom they work have the ability to track, in detail, their clients' use of ILP programs.

Housing Stability

Foster youth who age out of the foster care system are at an increased risk for homelessness (Bender et. al, 2015). Foster youth face a substantial risk of homelessness due to not being prepared for independency. "Among the populations at greatest risk for becoming homeless are the 25,000 to 30,000 youths who age out of foster care each year when they turn 18 or, in some states, 21" (Dworsky et al., 2013, p. 318). Most youth "...continue to live with or

receive financial assistance from their parents, these youths often struggle just to keep themselves housed” (Dworsky et al., 2013, p. 318). There are some states that only support foster youth until the age of 18. The process is to emancipate the youth so that the youth is independent by ward of the court. Other states participate in a program which allows foster youth to remain in foster care up until their 21st birthday. Youth that have a history of foster care are more likely to live in unstable and dangerous situations (Bender et. al, 2015, p. 222). A study compared to youth without foster care history and those that have indicated that foster youth tended to be homeless for longer and to report greater childhood maltreatment (Bender et. al, 2015, p. 227). Approximately 50% of former foster youth become homeless between two and four years after they exit from the foster care system (Dworsky et al., 2013, p. 318).

Extended Foster Care (EFC) is a program which supports foster youth after they turn 18. Implemented in 2012, EFC allows foster youth that are still in foster care after the age of 18 to extend their time in care until age 21. During this time, foster youth are non-minor dependents (CDSS, 2016). The goals of this program are to build and maintain a support system for foster youth experiencing independence in a secure and supervised living environment. It also provides an extended amount of time for youth to obtain educational and employment training opportunities in the outcome that youth are better prepared for successful transition into adulthood and self-sufficiency. Not all foster youth wish to participate in this program, sometimes due to the stigma of being labeled as a

“foster youth.” Any foster youth that reconsiders the EFC program after emancipating can re-enter the program under jurisdiction of the court.

ILP also helps foster youth access programs that provide temporary housing. Housing assistance is available for foster youth that voluntarily leave the foster care system and for those that are in Extended Foster Care. There are currently two housing programs available for foster youth. The Transitional Housing Program Plus (THP+) program serves foster youth that are not currently in care. Transitional Housing Plus Foster Care (THP+FC) is for foster youth that are in Extended Foster Care. Foster youth can take advantage of these programs between the ages of 18 and 24. These programs usually last for two years and assists foster youth with saving money and having a place to live. A foster youth can be in these programs for a maximum for three years if they are attending college. Foster youth pay a reduced rent for the duration of their stay in the program. Over time, the rent increases gradually. Once a foster youth graduates from the program, they receive a check for the total amount of money they put in for rent over the course of the program (CDSS, 2018). Thus, the program not only provides housing at a reduced rate, but also serves as a type of savings account for the participants.

Education

Nationally, it is estimated that, “50% of foster youth graduate high school

and less than 3% of foster youth earn a Bachelor's Degree" (Davis, 2016, p. 13). A main reason why statistics are low is because of the type of experiences foster youth face in their life. Depending on the intensity of the traumatic experience, can result in "...high rates of mental health disorders, physical or sexual victimization, and a lack to health care services" (Dworsky et al., 2013, p. 422).

There are many barriers that deter foster youth from obtaining a college degree. A quantitative study was conducted to determine educational aspirations and expectations of youth in the foster care system. Results showed, "...youth from the foster care system report lower educational aspirations and expectations, of which academic self-perception and parental support for education were the best predictors" (Kirk et al., 2013, p. 321). Most foster youth do not have support from biological parents and have limited access to resources, putting them at a disadvantage for completing educational goals they establish. It is said that "80% of foster youth have a desire to go to a community college, vocational school, or 4 year university" (Kirk et al., 2013, p. 309), however, only "...20% are accepted into a community or 4 year college" (Kirk et al., 2013, p. 309). Their history of trauma can result in poor educational outcomes. Foster youth may lose motivation and may think they cannot attain higher education and give up. In addition to a lack of financial support, academic challenges such as a lack of social supports, inadequate academic preparation, and a culture of low expectations, may place foster youth at a disadvantage when pursuing a postsecondary degree.

Employment

In 2013, it was found that, “52% of alumni foster youth were employed at age 21 which is lower than the national employment rate of 67%” (Barnow et. al., 2013, p. 162). Employment is crucial for foster youth. The ILP spends a substantial amount of time in preparing foster youth to land a successful job. ILP teaches foster youth topics such as; how to build a resume, how to effectively present yourself during an interview, interview practice questions, and tips on proper etiquette techniques. There are also programs that provide job training for retail and vocational work. A web-based program called iFoster, allows retail stores to participate in the program. The general manager from that establishment calls each foster youth to provide tips and tricks on how to land a successful job. For foster youth that are not eligible for ILP, aftercare programs provide tutorials and resume building tips to maximize chances of successfully landing a job (Dworsky et al., 2013).

Additionally, ILP’s sometimes host employment events during which participating youth are invited to talk with employers and people from different career fields. These events and other programs teach foster youth the importance of being “interview ready” by preparing the youth for proper etiquette in interviewing, practicing with foster youth by asking most popular interview questions, and even conducting mock interviews.

Health and Wellness

Research indicates that, “Half of all foster youth in the U.S. do not have proper health coverage” (Dworsky et al., 2013, p. 424). Learning about health and wellness is vital for foster youth; it is important for them to maintain health and manage their well-being for the future. However, getting health coverage is difficult when foster youth transition to adulthood. Before 2013, a parent’s history and income were the determinants of whether a foster youth was to receive health coverage. In the past, foster youth at age 18 would be determined independent by ward of the court; their income was not able exceed a certain amount in order to be covered. Foster youth also had to sign a form acknowledging they were in the foster care system and that they would be covered until age 21. After 2013, the California Legislature introduced a law which would provide all foster youth free health coverage until they turn age 26. This coverage includes hospital and doctor visits, free prescriptions, and counseling services (Hirst, 2014, p. 4). This newly implemented law provides extra assistance to those that need it the most. ILP advocates for both current and former foster youth, as well as encourages youth to remain in foster care past the age of 18 in order to become eligible for this service. If foster youth do not remain in foster care past their 18th birthday, they do not become eligible for this service.

Unfortunately, not all foster youth are eligible for these services. Youth who choose to leave the foster care system at age 18 are not covered by state

health coverage through age 26. Similarly, foster youth who move to another state, for example to attend college, may lose health coverage. "...currently, there are only 13 states that have decided to cover former foster youth from other states" (Hirst, 2014, p. 3). If foster youth decide to go to a state that does not currently support the program, they may still qualify for health insurance based on their income, but this is not guaranteed. Many foster youth simply do not understand the role health insurance coverage plays in staying physically and mentally healthy. ILP's often address this gap in knowledge with programming such as hosting a health fairs with community partners. The focus is to teach foster youth how to develop and balance a healthy life. This includes workshops on proper nutrition, activities such as rock climbing, and connecting with other resources in the community.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

The study is framed using psychosocial development theory - an eight-stage theory of identity and psychosocial development created by Erik Erikson. Erikson believed one would achieve a successful and satisfying life through an 8 stage cycle including; hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, and wisdom; Erikson thought one achieved a successful and satisfying life" (Kools, 1997, p. 264) It can be assumed that any traumatic event in one's history can experience hurt or despair depending on the intensity of the event occurred.

However, foster youth experiencing more traumatic events throughout their child and adolescent life stages, resulting in permanent damage in the development of those stages.

This damage may cause foster youth to be delayed in their development and therefore dissatisfied with their life. A study focused on adolescent identity development in foster care describes researchers exploring foster youth's thoughts and feelings about their status as foster children or their placement experiences. Results showed that foster care was found to have a negative impact on identity development, and the "...institutional structure of group foster care, diminished status, and stereotypical view of the foster child, contribute to devaluation of the adolescent's self by others" (Kools, 1997, p. 264). Using this research, the current study gathers more contemporary data focused on the adolescent life stage. This data will help assess the extent to which foster youth feel ILP has prepared them for the transition into adulthood and independence.

The first placement into a foster home can be one of the most difficult. This is a trauma within itself making it extremely emotional and mentally strenuous on foster youth. Attachment theory "...attempts to describe short and long-term interpersonal relationships and how humans respond within relationships when hurt, separated from loved ones, or perceiving a threat (Lang et al., 2016, p. 271). A recent study focused on foster children's attachment formation and its factors of influence during the first year in foster placement. Results showed that "...multiple placement changes and mental illness of

biological parents lowered attachment security in the beginning, while the professional background of foster parents fostered early attachment formation” (Lang et al., 2016, p. 273).

When children are separated from their biological parents, most may not understand why they were removed from their family. After foster youth turn 18 years old, they are permitted to view their own case files with the county that initialized the case. Attachment theory can also help understand the impact of attachments on later relationships. Initially, attachment theory defines the relationship between children and their caregivers; however, sudden events that causes the separation between children and caregivers can result in hesitation with establishing future relationships when youth enter later life stages. Youth may develop trust issues, causing youth to just keep to themselves. The California Homeless Youth Project helps understand why attachment theory is crucial for homeless youth. “Young people very often do not speak how their behavior affects them because they have had very little experience with adults who listen and adjust their own behavior or attitudes, rather than expecting the youth to adapt” (Heineman, 2010, p. 2). This study will provide insights on a foster youths’ experience preparing to live independently, including preparing to form adult relationships.

Summary

Foster youth can be at a major disadvantage in the transition to adulthood, in part because they do not always have the social supports and knowledge they need about housing, education, health and wellness, and employment. With underlying gaps through foster youth's transition into adulthood, ILPs are designed to teach foster youth essential life skills in order for them to be self-sufficient, successful adults.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study examined current and former foster youths' perspectives about ILP services provided during foster care. This chapter describes the methods used to conduct this study. The sections discussed include; study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to examine current and former foster youth perspectives on ILP services provided during foster care. The study sought to better understand the extent to which ILP services helped participants transition into adulthood. This research project fills a gap in the literature by addressing this topic from the perspective of current and former foster youth. Understanding how former foster youth, who are the clients of ILP programs, perceive this program is an important component in evaluating the effectiveness of this program. Clients are more likely to participate in programs they perceive as useful or valuable. Conversely, they are likely to avoid participating in programs they view as not as

helpful.

A qualitative research design, using a semi-structured interview guide is an appropriate research design for examining participants' perspectives on their experiences. A strength in using an exploratory, qualitative approach with foster youth is that participants are allowed to add their own personal experiences to their answers, rather than being restricted to a limited range of answers. Since there is limited research that includes feedback from foster youth that experienced ILP, this study filled a gap by allowing participants to share their observations and insights about ILP. Participants who shared their experiences provided detailed explanations for their ILP participation, as well as descriptions of services, events, training, and life skill development. This study was designed to give participants an opportunity to share their experiences and their perceptions about the ILP program as one part of assessing the usefulness of ILP in helping foster youth transition to adulthood.

This study is limited in several ways. First, participants may have felt social pressure to give the answers the researcher wanted to hear, or to respond in socially desirable ways. In order to avoid this, the researcher made an effort to control his responses (both verbal and non-verbal) so participants did not get the impression that the interviewer liked or disliked the answers given. The study's participants are all fairly successful. They may have succeeded without ILP or may have relied more on ILP than their peers, and so this study's findings should be interpreted with caution. The perspectives of youth who participated in ILP

and were not successful in pursuing higher education, or those who did not participate in ILP at all, are not included in this study.

Sampling

This sample included six participants from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds and from all genders, whose ages ranged from nineteen to twenty-five. Participants were recruited from social work forums for foster youth on Facebook. Paper flyers were posted on these Facebook pages and were distributed in various locations around Southern California (see Appendix C). Criteria for participation included: being a current or former foster youth, being between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, and being currently or previously enrolled in ILP.

Data Collection and Instruments

The researcher collected demographic information by asking the participant to complete a brief questionnaire regarding the participant's age, gender identification, ethnicity, and educational goals. The researcher conducted each interview using an interview guide with ten questions developed to elicit participants' experiences and perspectives related to ILP. The interview guide was created by the researcher, based on information gathered in the literature

review. Questions included, “Tell me about when you first participated in ILP?”, “Tell me how you were informed of upcoming events in ILP?”, and “Being involved in ILP, what is one thing you would like to see improved on?”

Procedures

Data collection took place during spring 2018. A copy of the flyer was distributed on each Facebook forum. Interested participants sent a message to the interviewer setting up appointments for the interviews to be taken place. Interviews were scheduled according to the participant’s availability and were conducted in private study rooms.

When participants entered the room, the researcher welcomed them and gave them a packet containing the demographic questionnaire and informed consent forms to read and fill out. Next, the researcher discussed measures to protect participant confidentiality and asked the participant to sign the informed consent form. With the participant’s consent, the researcher turned on the audio recorder and began the interview. Towards the end of each interview, participants were thanked and were notified of when the study’s findings would be available for review. Each participant was then given a \$10 gift card in appreciation of their contribution to the study. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Protection of Human Subjects

The identities of the interview participants were kept confidential.. Each participant read and signed an informed consent form (see Appendix B) prior to participating in the interview, and consented to be audio recorded. The audio recordings were stored on the audio recording device and kept in a locked drawer. Audio recordings were transferred from the recorders to a laptop and were stored securely in password protected files. All interviews were transcribed by a paid transcriptionist. Each participant's number was used during the transcribing process for the purpose of not revealing any identities. All data including audio recordings, sign in sheets, transcriptions, and interviewer notes will be deleted within six months of completion of the study.

Data Analysis

All data that was gathered were analyzed using qualitative techniques. First, audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed. All supporting or opposing utterances and comments were documented on the transcription. Head nodding or other gestures of agreement were also documented and described during transcription.

After the interviews were transcribed, they were coded by the researcher. The researcher conducted each interview and read each transcript individually, and therefore was closely familiar with the data. The researcher identified codes

related to ILP participation, interest in receiving services, life skills that were either taught or learned, and ways participants were connected with ILP. These domains originated from the literature review. Participants' statements were categorized into challenges, barriers, or suggestions for change. Codes were examined to identify common themes related to ILP and how the program may or may not have benefitted participants in their transition into self-sufficiency.

Summary

This study has examined current and former foster youth's perspectives of ILP. The study sought to examine how participants perceived ILP and the extent to which it was beneficial in helping them move towards self-sufficiency and success in their lives. The interviews allowed participants to give their unique viewpoints related to foster care and ILP. The qualitative methods used in this study offered the best option for giving voice to participants' experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter discusses the general findings of the interviews conducted. A total of six current and former foster youth were interviewed in a period of one month beginning in March, 2018. Participants were asked to provide demographic information: gender, marital status, ethnicity, highest level of education completed, and highest level of education participants plan on attaining.

Participants ranged in age from nineteen to twenty-five years old. Participant gender was equally divided; three participants were female, and three participants were male. Three participants identified themselves as African-American; two as Hispanic; and one as Caucasian.

All participants completed and received their high school diploma. Two participants had received post-secondary education and one participant was currently receiving post-secondary education (four-year University). All participants resided in San Bernardino County. All participants received ILP services at some point of their foster care experience. Only one participant was receiving ILP services and/or additional aftercare services at the time of the interview.

Results

Several themes emerged from the data. Current and former foster youth with negative outcomes reported that staff assigned to them did not support them in correlation to ILP service deliverance and the transition into adulthood. The second major theme found was inconsistent participation in ILP. The third major theme was communication with clients so that they can be informed of upcoming events, workshops, and resources. The fourth major theme was participants' suggestions on improvements for ILP. Lastly, all participants rated themselves in regards to how independently they are able to conduct certain tasks in everyday life.

Social Worker and ILP Staff Support

In general, when asked if social workers helped participants transition into adulthood by providing participants with all necessary services, participants responded negatively. All six participants interviewed revealed that social workers were not supportive of their transitions into adulthood. Through open-ended questions, the most common theme amongst current and former foster youth was the lack of contact between the social worker and client, which resulted in clients' not having the understanding and knowledge of ILP or taking advantage of ILP services.

Additionally, some current and former foster youth that were interviewed

reported that they did not have a good relationship with their social worker, or did not have a relationship at all. One former foster youth stated, “I didn’t really have a good relationship with my social worker because we hardly ever talked...” (Interview #2, personal interview, March, 2018). Another youth stated, “I had limited contact with my social worker...it was brief you saw them and then BAM, they’re gone” (Interview #3, personal interview, March, 2018). Participants recognized the value of having a social worker during their transition into adulthood and suggested that they could have been better prepared for self-sufficiency if their social worker built positive rapport with them.

Several participants reported that their social worker briefly explained to them about ILP services but never gave sufficient information as to the purpose or benefits of ILP. A former foster youth stated, “...yeah they told me where to go and that I would get an incentive but they didn’t tell me like this is everything involving ILP” (Interview #5, personal interview, March, 2018). A couple of participants had a positive experience with their social worker, stating, “...she went over all the benefits of ILP and everything I would need to expect and what I get out of the program...” (Interview #3, personal interview, March, 2018). Another participant stated, “Even though I was getting stuff late and I wasn’t able to prepare myself for what may be coming next, she did bring me the information no matter how late it was and it worked out” (Interview #1, personal interview, March, 2018). Participants noted that some social workers were more supportive than others.

A couple of participants shared that due to the lack of support from their social workers, that they no longer trusted them. One participant stated,

“...be real. Don’t just say what you think you should say, say what you know. Don’t say that you could call me anytime and then I call you and you don’t answer, then I leave you a voicemail and I don’t get a call back...you’re going to lose credibility with me” (Interview #2, personal interview, March, 2018).

These participants felt that it was not important to keep a relationship with their social worker and therefore, they missed essential information about ILP services. Participants reported that their social worker did not share information with them regard upcoming events in ILP, workshop classes, or resources.

Inconsistent Participation in the Independent Living Program

When asked if participants were involved in ILP services, all participants reported they had been involved in at least one ILP event. None of the participants fully experienced ILP from the beginning at age sixteen through the age of twenty-one. Some participants that had reported that they would attend some events, but not all. Some participants felt they were proficient in certain life skills and did not need to attend certain ILP events. A former foster youth stated, “...some events were repetitive, because I already knew about the sex ed class and other things... (Interview #2, personal interview, March, 2018).

Participants with negative experiences reported certain barriers that kept them from attending ILP events. Several participants explained that transportation was an issue in getting to and from ILP events. One participant stated, “The lack of knowledge from staff. I got information for a lot of events late, and because of me not knowing, I was missing transportation deadlines” (Interview #1, personal interview, March, 2018). Another participant explained,

...my parents. They were pretty strict and if chores weren't done or other things like that... my parents were the biggest critics at that point of time and hindrance as far as for me being able to maximize out on things (Interview #3, personal interview, March, 2018).

Some participants noted that ILP events could be rather dull or irrelevant. One participant stated, “...there were certain life skill classes that were kind of dull and boring. Some of the classes weren't that interesting” (Interview #4, personal interview, March, 2018).

Participants who had positive experiences with ILP mentioned that they enjoyed most of the events that ILP offered. One event that stood out as most beneficial to participants was “Independent City”. Independent City is an annual ILP event that takes current and former foster youth through a simulation of being independent adults. Youth use a checkbook to help balance their monthly paycheck throughout the day. The objective is to have a positive balance at the end of the event. One participant described the event as, “...the most fun event

at that time for myself. I was able to learn how to budget...and go across each stage of life such as the DMV, courtroom and the voting center” (Interview #3, personal interview, March, 2018). Another participant highlighted a life skill class that made her interested into car mechanics. This participant stated, “I remember going to a life skills class and they taught you how to get a car and gave information about oil changes, tire pressures, and things like that. I really enjoyed that class” (Interview #6, personal interview, March, 2018). Participants who enjoyed certain ILP events benefitted from learning about essential life skills that would better their transition into adulthood and become self-sufficient, successful adults.

Independent Living Program Communication

The third main theme was ILP communication. Participants were asked about how they were informed of upcoming events in ILP. Participants were asked if ILP contacted them using different forms of communication; email, phone calls, text messages, and flyers. Participants’ responses were rated from poor; having little or no constant contact at all from ILP services and resources, fair; having some constant contact regarding ILP services and resources, and excellent; always having constant contact regarding ILP services and resources.

Overall, participants received a fair amount of contact by both ILP staff members and social workers. Some participants received phone calls and flyers for upcoming events, but did not receive reminder calls or emails regarding these

events. Some participants reported that they missed events and workshops by not being notified. One former foster youth stated, "I would receive upcoming flyers sometimes, but did not receive phone calls from ILP" (Interview #1, personal interview, March, 2018). Another participant stated, "I remembered talking to one of the ILP people on the phone for an upcoming event" (Interview #3, personal interview, March, 2018). One participant received an excellent amount of contact as the participant always received phone calls, text messages, and flyers for upcoming events. The participant stated, "...you either heard it multiple ways because you heard it from the social worker and then they would also speak about the events coming up in life skill classes" (Interview #3, personal interview, March, 2018). The participant also received this information multiple times through the social worker and ILP staff. A couple of participants received a poor amount of contact. These participants rarely received any kind of form of contact by ILP staff due to an issue with placement and residing in group homes. One participant stated, "...there was no easy access to email...the group homes usually intercepted the flyers...we moved so much" (Interview #5, personal interview, March, 2018). A former foster youth also stated, "...I moved around a lot and I eventually just lost track of it...I would lose their numbers so it would be hard to keep in contact with them" (Interview #6, personal interview, March, 2018).

Suggestions for the Future

The fourth main theme that was discussed was suggestions for the future. Each participant experienced ILP by attending events, workshops, and getting access to services that could help them transition into self-sufficient, successful adults.

Participants' suggestions included: improved communication, enhancing the youth's voice, making ILP mandatory for foster youth, and increased funding for the program. Two participants suggested communication from two different perspectives. One former foster youth suggested,

Communication is very important because we get overwhelmed sometimes if we don't have the right organization skills and communication skills...we just wanna make sure that we're getting the information in a timely manner...I personally wish I was able to attend more events and more classes (Interview #1, personal interview, March, 2018).

Another former foster youth suggested, "A lot of us in foster care don't even have phones...and don't have secure communication to receive flyers or emails" (Interview #6, personal interview, March, 2018).

One participant suggested that youth's voices should be included more

often when it comes to planning events and workshops in ILP. This participant suggested doing so would facilitate increased participation for all ILP eligible youth. The participant stated, "...if we're going to be driven and empowering youth, we gotta have the essentials that stick out to the meaning...in today's time and age, nobody's really trying to learn anything so it's hard to get the youth to come out to want to learn" (Interview #3, personal interview, March, 2018). A former foster youth also suggested an increase in funding would, "allow kids to have more resources" (Interview #5, personal interview, March, 2018). These resources may include; providing more incentives for increased foster youth participation, being able to offer more transportation to those foster youth that are far distanced from events, and increased engagement of ILP events.

Level of Self-Sufficiency

The fifth major theme was participants' level of self-sufficiency. ILP teaches foster youth how to thrive as they prepare for the transition into adulthood through sets of life skills that are taught through ILP events and workshops. Participants were asked how comfortable they were with a list of life skills that they can conduct independently. These life skills included; housing options, developing lifelong connections, educational preparedness, financial aid for college, health and wellness, obtaining vital documents (birth certificate, social security card, etc), paying bills on time, buying food from the grocery store, cooking food, voting, preparing and filing taxes, obtaining employment, developing a resume and cover letter, buying a car, finding transportation (bus,

etc), setting up medical and dental appointments, budgeting and saving money, and completing daily chores.

Participants rated their abilities using five different categories: very poor, poor, fair, good, and very good. Some participants mentioned that their skills in these areas did not just come from ILP but from other social supports in their lives, such as foster parents and probation staff, as well as from youths own initiatives in learning these skills. Overall, most participants rated their skills in these areas as good. One participant rated his/her skills as very good, while another participant rated his/her skills as poor. Participants responses centered mainly on five skills: housing options, developing lifelong connections, educational preparedness, health and wellness, and obtaining employment.

Housing Options

Overall, four participants rated this life skill as “very good”, one participant rated as “fair” and one participant rated as “poor”. Participants who rated as “very good” reported that they were very competent, and they had both knowledge and resources when looking for housing. Most participants stated that both ILP and their foster parents taught them how to search for sufficient housing. One former foster youth stated, “...I’m stable, and have been for a while and then not only that, I know of other resources which I provide to people that I meet...” (Interview #4, personal interview, March, 2018). One participant that rated as “poor” stated, “...honestly would say I didn’t learn any of that stuff through them [ILP] but on my

own” (Interview #6, personal interview, March, 2018).

Developing Lifelong Connections

Overall, four participants rated their skills in developing lifelong connections as “good”, one participant rated as “very good”, and one participant rated as “fair”. Participants who rated their skills as “good” reported that they had a supportive network filled with friends, mentors, and other social supports. Most participants reported that ILP, probation staff, and foster parents played a role in developing this life skill. One former foster youth stated, “I’m always having a good network to help me... and overtime I’ve had people that I’ve known for a long time...” (Interview #2, personal interview, March, 2018). One former foster youth that rated his skill as “fair” stated, “I’m still not going to open those lifelong connections so at times people have to pry at me but I’m better than I was” (Interview #1, personal interview, March, 2018).

Educational Preparedness

Overall, three participants rated their educational preparedness as “good,” two participants rated this as “fair,” and one participant rated this as “very poor.” Participants who rated this skill as “good” reported they received information on how to attend postsecondary education as well as how to pay for it. Participants were taught at hands-on workshops from ILP on how to apply for college financial aid through FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). Other

participants reported being taught by foster parents or other students with whom they attended high school. One participant stated, “They [ILP] were always talking about college and the different kinds of financial aid...” (Interview #2, personal interview, March, 2018). One participant who rated this skill as “fair” stated, “...education is still complicated to me. I still think I need some help...who doesn’t need a mentor?” (Interview #1, personal interview, March, 2018). One participant that rated “very poor” stated, “I didn’t learn anything from ILP” about this topic (Interview #6, personal interview, March, 2018).

Health and Wellness

Overall, four participants rated their health and wellness skills as “good”, one participant rated these skills as “very good” and one participant rated as “fair”. Participants that rated this skill as “good” reported that they received demonstrations from ILP regarding how to set up medical and dental appointments. Participants reported that their foster parents also taught them how to set up and make these appointments as well as maintain personal hygiene. One participant stated, “I work out regularly and keep up with the wellness of my mind” (Interview #3, personal interview, March, 2018). One participant who rated as “fair” stated, “I remember this one workshop where they basically just told us to shower and stuff like that...that’s what I remember” (Interview #6, personal interview, March, 2018).

Obtaining Employment

Overall, five participants rated this life skill as “good” and one participant rated it as “very good” These ratings were associated with two other life skills including “how to develop a resume” and “how to develop a cover letter”. Participants that rated this as “good” reported that through ILP life skill classes, they were able to learn how to create a resume as well as a cover letter for potential employers. One participant stated, “...ILP introduced me to the class and I took advantage of their employment specialist. She helped me out” (Interview #1, personal interview, March, 2018). Another participant added, “I know how to get a job and keep a job” (Interview #4, personal interview, March, 2018).

Summary

Overall, ILP participants had both positive and negative experiences. ILP services were viewed as effective and beneficial by some participants, but not by all participants. Participants shared that they had more than one social support that helped them transition into adulthood and live self-sufficiently. Participants reported that they were not informed of ILP services from other social supports such as their social workers, which was detrimental to some participants as they transitioned into adulthood. ILP communication seemed vague for many participants as they did not receive certain information about upcoming ILP events, some with little to no contact at all from ILP staff and social workers.

Additionally, participants shared many suggestions towards improving ILP for future generations of foster youth.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapter five provides a discussion of the research findings from the interviews conducted. This study was explorative in nature and the resulting data is presented as new research regarding outcomes of self-sufficiency in current and former foster youth that attended ILP. Study limitations and strengths, conclusions, implications for social work practice, policy, research, and recommendations for directions in future research are also discussed.

Discussion

In other studies, a significant portion of studied participants reported a lack of skills that aid in independent living. In fact, many youth that were both in care and out of care did not report proficiency with the majority of skills associated with independent living (Thompson et. al, 2018). Several factors that place foster youth at risk include housing and financial instability, difficulties attaining education, and lack of social supports (Stott, 2013). Overall, participants in this

study reported both positive and negative experiences with ILP. Participants reported that ILP played varying roles in helping them to become self-sufficient.

Half of the participants had positive outcomes when having social worker and ILP staff support; informing them of ILP, as well as other resources and services that transitioned them into adulthood and helped them become self-sufficient. The other half of participants did not feel they had sufficient social supports and additionally felt agency supports were not there for them during their crucial time of their transition. From participants' view, it is believed the ILP was underutilized and did not play a main role in participants' transition into adulthood.

Most participants felt that the development of a social support network came from ILP and other social supports in their life. Building connections is important in the growth of adolescents as they are able to go out in the world and network with potential persons of interest such as an employer. This can open new doors for them to take advantage of so that they can become self-sufficient, successful adults. Building social supports is significant to the literature as it allows foster youth to network in order to become employed and develop a plan that allows them to transition into adulthood.

None of the participants attended all events ILP had to offer. This could indicate that they were unaware of, unable to take advantage of, or disinterested in some of the services.

Most participants received some form of communication from ILP regarding upcoming events, workshops, and additional resources that could help assist them in the transition to adulthood. Some participants however, received forms of communication late, which resulted in no available transportation to take them to and from ILP events. Some participants did not receive any form of communication due to placement change and barriers with those that lived in group homes during their foster care experience. Those that do not receive information are not able to attend the events which results in foster youth having a lack knowledge in life skills that can allow them to become successful.

The fourth major theme found was suggestions from participants. Those that experienced ILP have found positive and negative components that can be improved. Participants shared that communication, increased funding, as well as youth having a voice are three main areas that would allow ILP to flourish as well as have increased participation of ILP eligible youth. It was equally important to understand some of the suggestions participants may have had towards their ILP experience, and how some of those suggestions could be implemented to have a positive impact on future generations of foster youth. Participants would be able to give their insights from both their positive and negative experiences.

Most participants rated their level of self-sufficiency learned from ILP to be “fair”. Some participants rated better due to have other social supports guide them to become the individuals’ they are today. ILP should be more involved with those that are ILP eligible and work with them individually so that clients’ can

benefit from the events and workshops they attend.

The focus of this study was to explore how current and former foster youth experiences in ILP impacted them towards their transition into adulthood as well as being self-sufficient. On average, participants thought ILP was helpful, however, there were areas within ILP that participants' felt needed to be improved.

Limitations

Participants in the study were self-selected. Many participants that were interested in the study chose not to because they were required to be audio-recorded. One young adult currently attends ILP services and during the brief interview, may not have had sufficient time in the program to analyze which were most beneficial and needed more improvement on.

The data received may not be an accurate representation of the rest of ILP eligible youth that experienced ILP. Even though participants in this study said that the information was true, it may not be true for all ILP eligible youth.

Strengths

Participants' that received ILP services were asked open-ended questions allowing them to mention experiences of receiving ILP services. This qualitative research allows for more in-depth information regarding the participants' personal experiences. This allows researchers to discover categories and themes with the

interview responses. The qualitative nature of this study also was geared towards the specific experiences of participants.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

This research provides insight on the transition into adulthood for foster youth. Reviewing the result of this research can offer insights for future research, policy, and practice related directly to assisting current and former foster youth in their transition through adulthood.

Practice

A recommendation for social work practice based upon this study is the importance of social workers' role in a foster youth's transition into adulthood. Many system-involved youth do not have appropriate support for advice, motivation, and assistance. As presented in the findings of this study, some participants wished for additional support from their social worker as they prepared for the transition into adulthood. Social workers should be more attentive to foster youth clients and make it a priority to address clients. Social workers should build rapport with clients in order to establish trust, so a client may open up to their feelings and be able to receive appropriate services. This finding reveals the importance of a social workers' role in a foster youth's life and the amount of impact they may have on the outcomes of foster youth on their caseloads.

Policy

It was noted by a couple of foster youth that they feel ILP should be mandatory for foster youth. Participants' felt that the voluntary nature of the program allows the chance for foster youth to miss important topics that are in everyday life. The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 implemented ILP and its services for foster youth to become prepared once aging out of the foster care system at age 18 (Scannapieco, 2007). This change in policy is supported by Arnett's theory on Emerging Adulthood. This theory focuses on the life stage of emerging adulthood which according to Arnett, occurs between ages eighteen and twenty-five (Arnett, 2000). Making ILP mandatory for foster youth until the age of 18 might improve young adults' rate of self-sufficiency. For those that are over 18, more incentives could be offered to young adults' so that ILP can have increased participation. This would benefit foster youth so that they are prepared for their transition into adulthood and so they can become successful in their lives.

Research

Future research should explore in greater depth the experiences of foster youth at various stages of adulthood, to help provide a deeper understanding of the range of experiences. This research should include youth whose cases were closed at age 18, those who participated in ILP and those who did not, as well as those who chose to remain in extended foster care throughout their eligibility. Interviewing a larger range of foster youth will be beneficial as it will provide a more accurate representation of the experiences of foster youth. It may also be

beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study with current and former foster youth that experienced ILP across different geographic locations. This would participants from different counties to share their ILP experiences in order to give a more comprehensive overview of the program. Ultimately, if changes to the program are needed, additional research would help identify which changes will be most useful for the foster youth.

Conclusion

This qualitative study was conducted to evaluate perspectives of current and former foster youth that participated in ILP. Through this study, it was discovered that ILP did not play a main role in many participants' transition into adulthood. Some participants reported that ILP was beneficial in their transition into adulthood and some participants did not utilize ILP much at all. This study concluded with recommendations for increased involvement in ILP. Such recommendations include: increased funding for transportation, events, and incentives, making ILP mandatory for foster youth until the age of 18, and increased support from social workers and ILP staff.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions
Participant ID Number:

1. Tell me about when you first participated in ILP?
2. What are some things you've enjoyed in regards to being involved in ILP? If never involved in ILP, were there some things you heard about that you disliked or were not interested in? Please explain.
3. Tell me how you were informed of upcoming events in ILP?
4. Tell me what set of life skills you learned by attending ILP workshops and events?
5. Tell me if there were any challenges or barriers that kept you from attending ILP workshops and events?
6. Did your social worker initially explain to you about ILP and its benefits? If not, what resource explained to you about ILP? Did you ever request information from your social worker about programs that could help benefit you as you were preparing to transition into adulthood?
7. Do you feel that having a social worker benefit you in preparing for the transition into adulthood? Did your social worker provide you with all necessary services that you may have requested? In general, do you think your social worker has listened to your requests, concerns, and thoughts? Please explain your answers.
8. Did your social worker work together with you on establishing goals using a Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP)? If you were involved in ILP, did you use ILP as a tool to meet with your goals? If you were not involved in ILP, what steps did you take to meet with your goals?
9. If you were involved in ILP, what is one thing you would like to see improved on.
10. Tell me life skills that you comfortably have mastered and are able to conduct independently.

Life Skills	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor
Housing Options					
Developing Lifelong Connections					
Educational Preparedness					
Financial Aid for College					
Health & Wellness					
Obtaining Vital Documents					
Paying Bills On Time					
Buying food from Grocery Store					
Cooking Food					
Voting					
Prepare & File Your Own Taxes					
Obtaining Employment					
How to Develop A Resume					
How to Develop A Cover Letter					
Car Buying					
Transportation (Bus, etc)					
Setting up Medical & Dental Appointments					
Budgeting Money					
Saving Money					
Daily Chores					

(Interview questions developed by John A. Devine)

Demographic Information Form

Instructions: Please provide a response for each of the following questions:

1. What is your age? _____

2. What is your sex?

Female Male

3. What is your marital status?

Single Married Separated Divorced Widowed

5. With which racial or ethnic category do you identify?

African American Asian/Pacific Islander Caucasian Latino

Other: _____

6. What is your highest level of education completed?

- High School Diploma
- Some College
- Bachelor's Degree
- Graduate Degree

7. What is the highest level of education you plan on attaining?

- Bachelor's Degree
- Graduate Degree
- Professional Degree

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine perspectives of the Independent Living Program (ILP) amongst current and former foster youth age 18 and over. The study is being conducted by John Devine, a graduate student, under the supervision of Dr. Deirdre Lanesskog, Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-Committee at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to examine perspectives of the Independent Living Program (ILP) amongst current and former foster youth age 18 and over.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked of questions pertaining to ILP participation, life skills development (before/after ILP participation), the purpose of ILP, social networks and supports, experience in the foster care system, and some demographics.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY: Your responses will remain anonymous and data will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: It will take 30 to 45 minutes to complete the interview.

RISKS: There are no foreseeable risks to the participants.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Lanesskog at (909) 537-7222

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2018.

I AGREE TO HAVING THIS INTERVIEW AUDIO RECORDED: Yes _____ No _____

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

_____ Date

Place an X mark here

909.537.5501

5500 UNIVERSITY PARKWAY, SAN BERNARDINO, CA 92407-2393

The California State University • Bakersfield • Channel Islands • Chico • Dominguez Hills • East Bay • Fresno • Fullerton • Humboldt • Long Beach • Los Angeles
Maritime Academy • Monterey Bay • Northridge • Pomona • Sacramento • San Bernardino • San Diego • San Francisco • San Jose • San Luis Obispo • San Marcos • Sonoma • Stanislaus

APPENDIX C
RESEARCH STUDY FLYER

ARE YOU A CURRENT OR FORMER
FOSTER YOUTH (AGES 18-25)?

HAVE YOU PARTICIPATED IN THE
INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM
(ILP)?

**WE NEED
YOU!**

YOU ARE INVITED
TO PARTICIPATE IN
AN INTERVIEW
DISCUSSING THE
EXPERIENCES
FACED IN ILP.

INCENTIVE WILL BE
PROVIDED!

IF INTERESTED, PLEASE CALL JOHN DEVINE
(909) 733-3142. THANK YOU!

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