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# FACTORS THAT IMPACT FOSTER YOUTHS' HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

Esther Thomas

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# FACTORS THAT IMPACT FOSTER YOUTHS' HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

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

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

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by  
Esther Thomas  
May 2024

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Esther Thomas  
May 2024  
Approved by:

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the factors that influence foster youth high school graduation rates. Over 50% of foster youth do not graduate high school and even fewer enroll in higher education. The study analyzes social workers' belief about foster youth high school graduation. Social workers have direct contact with and influence on foster youth, so understanding the extent to which their beliefs and actions factor into foster youth graduation rates seems important.

This study utilized a quantitative, online survey designed by the researcher to collect exploratory data. The researcher posted invitations to participate in the study on social media sites used by social workers. All participants worked with foster youth ages 16-21 years old. This study was conducted over a three-month time period and a total of 35 participants completed the survey via Qualtrics online survey software.

This study hypothesized a positive correlation between social worker belief and values around education and the volume of educational services social workers offered to foster youth. The survey data were analyzed using the SPSS statistical package for the social sciences. The researcher reported frequencies of participants' responses to survey questions and assessed correlations between the independent variable, social worker beliefs around education, and the dependent variable, provision of education supports to foster youth. The results of the correlation analysis did not support the hypothesis. There did not appear to be a correlation on what a social worker offered and if their youth

graduated high school and enrolled into higher education. There were limitations to this study. The participants self-reported and the sample size was small. The sample was also narrow in that the social worker participants only served youth ages 16-21 years old.

The results of this study suggest that other factors besides social workers' beliefs and values around education may impact foster youth graduation. The survey also noted that social workers do not always have the ability to prioritize education over other services. More research will also need to be conducted on what direct services the schools are providing for foster youth.

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## CHAPTER ONE:

### PROBLEM FORMULATION

#### Introduction

According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2021), there were 432,997 youth in foster care nationally on September 30, 2019. Of that population, 56% graduated high school (Case Family Programs, 2021). Children enter into foster care for multiple reasons; they can be offered services in the home while under the care of their parents or removed and placed into foster care. If a youth is placed into foster care, the foster home is responsible for enrolling the youth into school in a timely fashion and for acquiring other services the youth might need. High school graduation is always a placement goal when a youth is in foster care; however, this is not always achieved.

#### Problem Statement

In 2019, there were 47,360 youth in foster care in California (Casey Family Programs, 2021). Of those 47,360 youth, about 46,810 youth were enrolled in school (U.S. Department of Education 2020). Yet, foster youth in California are much less likely to graduate high school than their non-foster care peers. Fifty-six percent of California foster youth graduate high school compared to 84% of California non-foster youth. Multiple factors impact foster youth graduation rates, including access to information, the presence of supportive adults in their lives, and the stability of placements.

Therefore, this study hypothesized that if the social worker believed in and valued education then they would offer more educational services to a foster youth to assist them with graduating high school and enrolling in higher education.

### Policy Context

Foster care is considered a temporary arrangement. On average, a child will be in foster care for about 12- 20 months and around 4,000 youth age out of foster care a year in California (Children's Bureau, 2022). However, youth who cannot successfully reunify with their parents or find another permanent home will remain dependent on children's services until they turn 18. Once they are 18, the young adult can decide if they want to continue with foster care as a non-minor dependent or close their dependency case. A non-minor dependent is a youth who willing allows the court to hold dependency over them. They must also meet participation requirements and they will continue to have a social worker to meet with monthly (California Department of Public Social Services, 2022). Unfortunately, this option is not available in all states as this is a state-by-state decision. However, California does offer this option under the program Extended Foster Care. In this program, a young adult can decide to participate from ages 18 to 21 years old (California Department of Public Social Services, 2022).

### Macro Practice Consequences

There are programs available to assist foster youth with graduating high school. Foster youth can graduate with reduced credits if they meet the criteria

under AB 216 in California (California Educational Task Force, 2017). Under this law, they can also stay enrolled in traditional high school for five years versus the regular four. In addition, different counties in California offer monetary incentives to foster youth to graduate high school (California Department of Public Social Services, 2022). It should be noted that a high school dropout earns about \$20,241 annually versus \$30,627 annually for someone who graduated high school (Coachella Valley Adult School, 2020). Coachella Valley Adult School (2020) notes that high school dropouts have a higher unemployment rate, poverty, and incarceration rates. These statistics are not only for foster youth but all high school dropouts; if you compare those with just foster youth, the rates would be even higher due to parental support, financial support, and living situations. If the foster care system does not find other way to support foster care youth with graduation, it will have impacts on all government systems.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify if social workers' beliefs towards education are related to the provision of educational services social workers provide to encourage their foster youth graduating high school. The study seeks to understand whether and to what extend social workers' beliefs impact the kinds of services and support they offer to foster youth. Understanding social workers' beliefs about education help us understand low graduation rates among foster youth.

### Significance of the Study for Social Worker Practice

There is limited research on social workers' beliefs about education and how these beliefs impact the services provided to foster youth. Currently there are basic services that the social worker provides, however this study is looking for the extra supports provided. This study explored if these extra supports were related to the social workers beliefs on education. If we better understood what social workers believe and how they serve foster youth, we could create policies and practices that ensure consistent information is provided to foster youth. We could also potentially develop training for social workers to address their biases.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

This literature review summarizes the barriers to high school graduation that foster youth encounter. This chapter focuses on the three most predominant barriers: limited supportive adults, disruption from multiple placements and unmet mental health needs. Finally, the last section of this chapter discusses theories guiding conceptualization.

#### Barriers and Protective Factors Faced by Foster Youth

There are multiple barriers that foster youth encounter on their educational journey to a high school diploma. Often, foster youth have limited supportive adults in their lives, disruption due to multiple placements in foster homes and/or group homes, and unmet mental health needs, often related to trauma and maltreatment (Day et al., 2012; Kinarsky, 2017; Negriff et al., 2014). Education can be one of the last needs met for foster youth, creating ongoing education challenges in a child's overall life (Day et al., 2012).

#### Supportive Adults

Since foster youth have been removed from their birth or adoptive parents, they can have limited or no parental support and unmet educational needs, leading to them not graduating high school and experiencing homelessness (Day et al., 2012). A supportive adult is a protective factor that can be anyone the

foster youth identifies as supportive. Examples include a former foster parent, school counselor, previous teacher, or court-appointed special advocate (CASA). Supportive adults can play a vital role in a youth's educational path. Multiple studies have revealed that youth in foster care need stable adult relationships outside of school (Avant et al., 2021; Day et al., 2012; Kinarsky, 2017; Skilbred et al., 2017). In addition, foster youth need to connect with teachers and social workers to support them on their educational journey (Day et al., 2012; Avant et al., 2021; Kinarsky, 2017; Skilbred et al., 2017). When foster youth have a supportive adult invested in them, they are better equipped to manage the challenges and stressors associated with education (Avant et al., 2021).

A social worker can be considered a supportive adult for the youth. According to Zelt (2005), a social worker can have a direct influence on a youth's education. A social worker has access to the foster youths' teachers, caregiver, birth parents and other supports. The social worker is also responsible for attending Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings and disciplinary meetings on behalf of the youth. The social worker can also utilize the rapport they build with the youth to identify barriers in school and advocate for additional services.

A Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) can be another protective factor for a foster youth. A CASA is a volunteer through the juvenile court (California CASA, 2022). They are often identified as a supportive adult in the youth's life. CASAs work with the social worker, foster parents, and other supportive adults to help guide and encourage youth throughout their life. A



unique part of being a CASA is that if the youth chooses, they can continue to communicate once the dependency is terminated. According to California CASA (2022), approximately 14,150 youth in California have an assigned CASA worker. A CASA can also follow the youth if they move placements or counties and write a report to the court along with the social worker every six months to report on the overall well-being of the youth (California CASA, 2022).

Finally, a caregiver, former foster parent or school counselor can also have an impact on the foster youth. The relationships a foster youth has with a school counselor or foster parents can impact what they feel comfortable sharing. These concerns or worries about school when shared can be addressed, however if the youth does not have someone to share these with then they might go unaddressed. A foster youth has more contact on a daily basis with their foster parents and school staff than a social worker (Day et al., 2012; Avant et al., 2021; Kinarsky, 2017; Skilbred et al., 2017). These adults can be a vital part in the youth's educational journey.

### Multiple Placements

Multiple placements are one of the biggest barriers faced by foster youth (Day et al., 2012). When a youth is placed in foster care, they must be placed in the least restrictive environment, with their siblings and in their school of origin; however, due to other mitigating factors, those requests might not be filled. For example, foster youth change schools more frequently than other youth due to placement changes, which can cause a delay in school records and different

academic standards between schools and leave former supportive adults and peers behind (Day et al., 2012; Negriff et al., 2014). In addition, youth in foster care are more likely to repeat grades due to changing schools with different curricula (Day et al., 2012).

Placement changes can happen for multiple reasons, such as moving from a foster home to a relative home or being stepped down from a short-term rehabilitation placement (STRTP) to a foster home. In 2017, 30 percent of foster youth in California had an average of three or more placement changes in a year (Kids Data, 2022). For a foster youth, this would mean three different caregivers, three sets of house rules, and three sets of friends or teachers; those changes could significantly affect a foster youth's educational goals. Foster youth struggle to connect to supportive adults, especially if experiencing multiple placement changes (Negriff et al., 2014). According to Whitman (2018), placement instability while in foster care can lead to not knowing how to navigate the educational system, such as networking and finding appropriate resources.

#### Limited Educational Resources

Educational resources can be both a barrier and protective factor. According to California Education Task Force (2017), foster youth are entitled to immediate enrollment, timely transfer of records, and grade protection. This policy was designed to protect foster youth a seamless transition to a new school; however, there are no set timeframes imposed by this policy, which leaves timeliness up to interpretation. Also, this policy grants the youth the

opportunity to join a sport in the new school, but not in the middle of the season, which can be discouraging for youth attached to these activities. It can be challenging for foster youth to adjust to a new school and to feel included; however, not having the proper transition supports in place can further impact their educational journey (Day et al., 2012).

### Gaps in Research

There is a gap in the literature regarding social workers' beliefs on education and if they would offer more educational services to a foster youth to assist them with graduating high school and enrolling in higher education. There were ample studies on hardships foster youth go through on the path to graduation and how the school can support them (Day et al., 2012; Avant et al., 2021; Kinarsky, 2017; Skilbred et al., 2017). Yet, there is a lack of research on the actions a social worker can provide that aided in graduation and continuance to higher education. These factors can be vital in providing foster youth with what they deem essential versus what is in place. This study built on prior research to identify social workers' beliefs about high school graduation for foster youth.

### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Two theoretical perspectives that have guided the ideology of this project are Bronfenbrenner's Ecological theory and Arnett's Emerging Adulthood theory. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological theory states that various systems can influence young adults' development (1981). He also theorized that a person could be

affected by outside factors such as their environment or community support. Emerging Adulthood theory states that in industrialized countries such as the United States, someone between 18 and 25 years of age is not ready to be an adult (Arnett, 2004). According to Arnett (2004), a youth that is in this age range is still in a period of development both biologically and mentally.

### Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory

According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, there are five interdependent systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem as the first level of people that have direct contact with the child, such as parents, siblings, teachers, and peers (1981). For foster youth, that could be foster parents, social workers, and other foster siblings. The next would be the mesosystem, which covers the interactions between the child and the child's significant adults in their life, such as parents, teachers, peers, and siblings. This system is vital because it influences a child's overall well-being, as how a parent interacts with a teacher can mean the child is successful in school. In a foster child's situation, it could mean the ability for that child to adapt to a new school.

The exosystem includes other formal and informal structures that may not contain the child but affect them due to one microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). For example, the exosystem can include the neighborhood, parents, friends, and media. Next is the macrosystem; this can be hard for a child in foster care as it is the cultural element that would affect their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1981).

Those can be poverty, ethnicity, and being in foster care. The last level is the chronosystem; all environmental changes that occur over the lifespan can influence development, including significant life transitions (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). Chronosystem is another important system for a youth who has been in foster care since being in foster care can change or shape their overall life. An example would be if the child could never obtain permanency and moved from home to home until they reached emancipation. Their outlook on stability and moving will be different from a child who has had a stable home and never moved from their original neighborhood their whole life.

### Emerging Adulthood

Another guiding theory is Emerging Adulthood, proposed by Jeffery Arnett. This theory states that between the ages of 18-25, a young adult is no longer an adolescent but is not ready to be an adult. Arnett's theory stated that youth between these ages focus on identity exploration (2004). Arnett reported that during his research, most young adults shared the perception of feeling "in-between" and were still pondering their identity. This thought was new as personal identity is usually established at the end of adolescence. Personal identity can affect a youth's self-esteem, self-worth, and personality. Foster youth can struggle with personal identity as they may not have ties to their birth family, affecting self-esteem. Moving multiple times can cause low self-worth or doubt, and having placement outside or against their birth culture can cause identity confusion.

Both of these theories play a part in the overall development of a child in the foster care system. They both support how youth in foster care will have a more challenging time graduating high school and enrolling in college. A youth raised in a foster home or group home setting will not have the same encouragement or support as a youth raised outside of foster care with an encouraging and supportive parent, affecting their overall earning potential (Kinarsky, 2017). In addition, these theories provide insight into the internal emotional struggles foster youth might be having.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This chapter discusses the research methods used in this study. The research methods examined social workers' beliefs about high school graduation for foster youth. The sections below discuss the study design, sampling method, data collection, instruments, and analysis in detail.

#### Study Design

This study explored social workers' beliefs and values related to foster youth high school education. The study's goal was to identify if social worker beliefs correlated to the services social workers offered to foster youth in support of their high school graduation. The study utilized a quantitative design with an online, researcher-designed survey to assess social workers' beliefs, practices, and knowledge related to foster youth education.

#### Sampling Methods

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling. The social workers were recruited from the researcher's personal network. Participants were also asked to refer one other person to participate after they completed the survey. The researcher also placed the survey on online social worker groups, such as Facebook and joining social worker forums to ask for participants to complete the survey. The survey's 18 participants were current or former social workers' who worked with youth ages 16-21 years old.

### Data Collection and Instruments

The online survey was developed by the researcher and included a variety of true/false, fill in the blank, and Likert-scale response question. The survey began with five demographic questions including age, gender, ethnicity, highest level of education, and social worker employment status. The next five questions asked participants to select Likert-scale response regarding their opinions on high school graduation, higher education, and trainings on funding for foster youth and higher education. Participants were then asked six true false questions and four yes/no questions to assess their knowledge related to assistance available for foster youth seeking higher education. Lastly the participants were asked about their caseloads and were offered an opportunity to share comments on the study's topic. These questions were designed to explore how knowledgeable the social worker was about higher education funding, programs that are available for higher education and to assess how important a social worker deems high school graduation and higher education to be in a foster youth's life.

### Procedure

This exploratory study sought to only include social workers who have worked with or currently work with youth ages 16-21 years old. If the potential participant had not worked as a social worker with this specific age group, they were excluded from the survey. The survey link was sent out via email and via QR codes posted online via social media. The survey was anonymous and no



personal information was requested. Participants were provided with an informed consent prior to starting the survey and were notified that participation was voluntary and they could discontinue the survey at any time. Each participant was informed of the nature of this study, in which the researcher was gathering information to assess their beliefs on high school graduation and higher education in foster youth.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

Participants' personal information and responses were protected as all data was collected anonymously using Qualtrics online survey software. No personal identifying information was collected. Data was analyzed and reported in aggregate using SPSS statistical software. The researcher provided participants with an informed consent form and notified them that their participation was voluntary and they could stop the survey at any time. Lastly the participant was informed that of the purpose of this study and that it was being conducted with IRB approval. Upon the study's completion, the researcher will delete all digital files containing survey data.

#### Data Analysis

The data was collected using Qualtrics online survey software and the data was analyzed using SPSS statistical software. First, the researcher cleaned the data, removing any participants who were not qualified to participate in the survey. Second, the researcher analyzed participant responses to all survey questions using frequencies. Analyzing the frequency of responses allowed the

researcher to obtain overall insight on social workers' beliefs on education. This data also allowed the researcher to assess the services social workers provided to the foster youth and social workers' beliefs about whether the youth graduate high school and enroll in higher education. Third, the researcher used correlation analysis to identify a relationship between the independent variable (tell what the IV is) and the dependent variable (tell what the DV is). This analysis was used to test the hypothesis that social workers' beliefs about foster youth education correlate providing more and better educational supports for foster youth.

### Summary

In summary, this chapter identified methodological instruments utilized throughout this study. This section included study design, sampling, data collection, procedures, state analysis and protection of human subjects. The research was conducted with a quantitative design and used convenience and snowball sampling. An anonymous survey through Qualtrics was utilized which allowed the researcher to examine social worker beliefs on education and to assess whether these beliefs correlated with education services provided to foster youth.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

This chapter discusses the demographics of the study participants and the results of the surveys with social workers who services foster youth ages 16-21 years of age. The results help clarify whether and to what extend social workers' beliefs impact the kinds of services and support they offer to foster youth.

#### Participants Demographics

A total of 56 individuals completed the survey. Yet, only 18 (32%) participants met the inclusion criteria and completed the survey in full. A total of 38 (68%) participants were excluded from the study as they did not work with foster youth aged 16-21. Participants included 13 (72%) females and 5 (28%) males. Of those 11 (61%) had a bachelor's degree and 7 (39%) had a graduate degree.

The ages of the participants varied from 20-69 with just over one third of participants, 7 (39%), ranging in age from 30-39 years old. In terms of race and ethnicity, 8 (45%) participants were Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian, 6 (33%) were African American, 2 (11%) were White, and 2 (11%) were Asian.

The participants were asked about their experiences with programs that serve foster youth. They reported having experience in multiple programs during their careers. The most reported programs were: 10 (56%) had Independent

Living Program experience 9 (50%) had extended foster care experience and 9 (50%) had continued services experience. The middle reported programs were: 7 (39%) had investigation experience and 4 (22%) had resource family approval experience. The least reported programs were: 3 (17%) had medically fragile experience, 3 (17%) had Short Term Residential Treatment Programs (STRTP) formally group home, 1 (5%) had adoptions experience, and 1 (5%) had WRAP experience.

Participants in this study worked in a variety of geographic locations. This survey was completed by California participants from the following counties: 11 (62%) Riverside employees, 2 (13%) San Bernardino employees, 1 (5%) Los Angeles employee and 1 (5%) Marin employee. There were out of state participants from the following counties and states: 1 (5%) Dallas County TX, 1 (5%) Cuyahoga County OH and 1 (5%) Washington County OR. About 14 (77 %) of the social workers had 3 or more years of experience working with foster youth and 4 (33%) had 1-3 years' experience. None of the social workers who responded to this survey had under 1 year of experience working with foster youth.

### Presentation of Findings

The results of the survey provided insight on social workers' beliefs and values related to higher education. Participants were asked a variety of yes/no, Likert-scale responses, and open-ended questions. The questions and responses are reported below. All Likert-scale questions included responses on a

scale of one to ten, with one representing not important/likely and ten representing very important/likely. For reporting purposes, the researcher collapsed Likert-scale responses into three categories: 0-3 (not important/not likely), 4-6 (somewhat important/likely), and 7-10 (very important/likely).

#### Social worker beliefs about education (Questions 1-6)

In response to Question 1, "How important is it for a foster youth to graduate high school or obtain a GED?" 100% (18) of respondents rated this as important or very important.

In response to Question 2, "How important is it for foster youth to enroll in higher education?" 88% (16) of respondents rated this as very important and 12% (2) of respondents rated this as somewhat important.

In response to Question 3, "How important do you think education is overall to a foster youth?" 90% (16) of respondents reported very important, 5% (1) of respondents rated this as not important and 5% (1) of respondents reported somewhat important.

In response to Question 4. "How often did you mention graduating high school and higher education to the youth on your caseload?" 95% (17) of respondents reported very often, and 5% (1) of respondents reported somewhat often.

In response to Question 5. "How often did you follow up with the high school seniors' counselors or school staff to see how many credits they had, if they were on target to graduate and what assistance they needed to graduate

timely?" 78% (14) of respondents reported very often, 17% (3) of respondents reported somewhat often and 5% (1) of respondents reported not often.

In response to Question 6. "In the last year how often did you ask graduating seniors about college?" 100% (18) of respondents reported very often.

#### Social Worker Education Knowledge and Training (Questions 7-9)

In response to Question 7. "How knowledgeable do you feel you are in referring your youth to higher education?" 88% (16) of respondents reported very knowledgeable and 12% (2) of respondents reported somewhat knowledgeable.

In response to Question 8. "How knowledgeable do you feel as a social worker to help your foster youth apply for college?" 88% (16) of respondents reported very knowledgeable and 12% (2) of respondents reported somewhat knowledgeable.

In response to Question 9. "How many training hours have you completed in the last year in regards to higher education, FASFA/DREAMERS act or education?" 100% (18) of respondents reported between 4-6 hours of training.

#### Social Worker Knowledge of Education Grants & Policies (Questions 10-14)

In response to Question 10. "Do you know what the Chafee Grant is?" 83% (15) of respondents reported yes, 17% (3) of respondents reported no.

In response to Question 11. "You can get the Chafee Grant only until the age of 26?" 72% (13) of Respondents reported true you can only receive the

grant until 26 and 28% (5) of respondents reported false you can receive the grant after 26.

In response to Question 12. "The Dreamers Act is a form of financial aid for undocumented foster youth?" 88% (16) of respondents correctly identified The Dream Act as a form of financial aid for undocumented youth and 12% (2) of respondents reported no it is not a form of financial aid.

In response to Question 13. "Guardian Scholars/Renaissance Scholars/ EOPS provide services to only current foster youth?" 83% (15) of respondents reported no they provide services to former and current foster youth and 17% (3) of respondents correctly answered yes - they only provide services to current foster youth.

In response to Question 14. "All colleges waive application fees for foster youth." 67% (12) of respondents correctly answered - yes the fees are waived for foster youth and 33% (6) of respondents reported no they are not waived.

#### Social Worker Knowledge of Supportive Services for Foster Youth (Question 15-17)

In response to Question 15. "Transitional Housing Programs (THP) and Transitional Housing Programs (THP) plus are the only housing options for foster youth in college," 83% (15) respondents reported no this is not the only form of housing and 17% (3) of respondents reported yes this is the only housing option for foster youth.

In response to Question 16, “As a social worker do you know who to contact at your local community college or four-year College in regards to foster care services?” 72% (13) of respondents reported yes they know how to contact foster care services and 28% (5) of respondents reported no they did not know how.

In response to Question 17. “As a social worker do you know how to locate the foster care liaison for the school districts that services your youth?” 83% (15) of respondents reported they know how to contact the foster care liaison and 17% (3) of respondents reported no they do not know how to contact the foster care liaison.

#### Social Worker Education Practices and Foster Youth Characteristics (Question 18-23)

In response to Question 18.” When was the last time as a social worker that you reviewed/filled out a FASFA with a foster youth?” 56% (10) of respondents reported in the last year, 33% (6) of respondents reported over three years ago and 11% (2) of respondents reported in the last two or three years.

In response to Question 19. “As a social worker what portion of your caseload are seniors in the 2023-2024 school year?” 89% (16) of respondents reported 0%-25% of their caseload are seniors and 11% (2) of respondents reported 26%-50% of their caseloads are seniors.



In response to Question 20. "Of that proportion of seniors in high school on your caseload how many graduated high school or will graduate from 2023-2024?" 50% (9) of respondents reported all of my students, 28% (5) of respondents reported some of my students, 17% (3) of respondents reported most of my students and 5% (1) of respondents reported none of my students.

In response to Question 21." As a social worker what proportion of your graduating high school seniors for the 2023-2024 school year applied for college, trade school or other higher education?" 78% (14) of respondents reported some of my students, 17% (3) of respondents reported most of my students and 5% (1) of respondents reported all of my students,

In response to Question 22. "As a social worker what proportion of your caseload is over the age of 18 but under 21?" 61% (11) of respondents reported some of my caseload, 22% (4) of respondents reported none of my caseload and 17% (3) of respondents reported most of my caseload.

In response to Question 23. "Of those youth, how many are attending community college, a four year college, a trade school or other form of higher education?" 73% (13) of respondents reported some of my students, 22% (4) of respondents reported none of my students and 5% (1) of respondents reported most of my students.

#### Social Worker Beliefs about Foster Youth (Question 24-27)

In response to Question 24. "As a social worker do you feel like you have a direct impact on the youth on your caseload graduating and continuing to

higher education?" 50% (9) of respondents somewhat agree, 39% (7) of respondents strongly agree and 1% (2) of respondents neither agree nor disagree.

In response to Question 25. "As a social worker do you believe that the foster youth look to you for advice and guidance?" 50% (9) of respondents strongly agree, 45% (8) of respondents somewhat agree and 5% (1) of respondents neither agree nor disagree.

In response to Question 26. "Place the following items in order based on your opinion as social worker one being the most important and five being the least important." 39% (7) of respondents reported that placement was the most important, 34% (6) of respondents reported that mental health was the most important, 22% (4) of respondents reported that physical health was the most important and 5% (1) of respondents reported family connections was the most important.

In response to Question 27. "Is there anything you would like to add?" There was only one response that was reported: higher education isn't for everyone, despite my own degrees. Therefore, I encourage educational and career goals that are realistic for each of my youth.

### Bivariate Analysis

Based on the results of the survey a correlation analysis between the independent variable on social worker belief on valuing education and the dependent variable of school/education is the most important service delivered

revealed no significance correlation. There was no significant correlation between these variables of social worker values education and education being the most important service delivered to a foster youth ( $r=.164$ ,  $p=.529$ ). Correlation is not significant at .164 level (2-tailed).

### Summary

This chapter detailed and explained the results of the quantitative study to understand the relationship between a social worker beliefs and values on education and if education is the most important service delivered to foster youth. The study hypothesized that the data would reveal a positive correlation between a social worker values/beliefs on education and education being the most important service offered to a foster youth; however, the data revealed no significant correlation.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This chapter discusses the results, the relationship between the study findings and the existing literature. In addition, this chapter examines the study's limitations and recommendations for social work practice and research.

#### Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between social workers' beliefs about education and the services they delivered to their foster youth. It was hypothesized that if the social worker believed/valued education then they would offer more educational services to a foster youth to assist them with graduating high school and enrolling in higher education. This hypothesis was formulated based off research indicating foster youth are less likely to graduate than traditional youth and maybe a social worker has a direct impact on high school graduation (Day et al., 2012).

#### Social Worker as Supportive Adults

There has been extensive research on foster youth and educational outcomes. That research indicates that foster youth face multiple barriers on their educational journey. They have limited supportive adults, multiple placements, and unmet mental health needs (Day et al., 2012; Kinarsky, 2017; Negriff et al., 2014). This study's findings suggest social workers do not always believe that

they are a supportive adult in the foster youths' life. This is, in some ways, inconsistent with the previous research suggesting social workers' are viewed as supportive adults in a foster youth life (Day et al., 2012).

### Social Worker Values Around Education

This study found that education is important to social workers but is not a top priority in their work with foster youth. In fact, all of the respondents (100%) in this study rated education as very important. Most of the social workers who completed the survey had a bachelor's degree or higher. However, even though they did value education they did not place education as a top priority in their work with foster youth. Most social workers rated placement and mental health as the top two most important things for a foster youth. The previous literature supports this finding as multiple placements and unmet mental health needs are some of the biggest barriers a foster youth faces (Negriff et al., 2014). This is also consistent with the previous research that education can be one of the last needs met for foster youth (Day et al., 2012). In many instances, prioritizing placement stability and mental health make sense, as without these basic needs met, foster youth may be unable or unwilling to focus on education.

### Conclusion

The results of this study revealed that a social workers' beliefs or values on education are not correlated to the services they provide to foster youth. This issue was not directly addressed in the literature, which focuses on placement, mental health, and supportive adults (Day et al., 2012). Most of the social worker

did provide or offer their foster youth educational services and were knowledgeable of the educational resources available to high school students. Most social workers were aware of the services, housing and funding options for youth who graduate and want to enroll in higher education. Most of the social workers did not see themselves as having a direct impact on the foster youth graduating high school or not and did not feel like their youth looked to them for advice and guidance. This finding is surprising because a social worker is often referred to as lifelong connection to their foster youth and can be seen as someone who knows the foster youth best. One would assume a social worker would see themselves as someone to offer guidance and advice to the foster youth on their caseloads.

There has been extensive research on foster youth and educational outcomes. That research indicated that foster youth face multiple barriers on their educational journey. They have limited supportive adults, multiple placements and unmet mental health needs (Day et al., 2012; Kinarsky, 2017; Negri et al., 2014). It was identified through the course of the data analysis that a social worker did not always believe that they are a supportive adult in a foster youth life. It was also confirmed that education is not a priority for social workers. Most social workers reported that placement and mental health are their top priorities in working with foster youth. The literature suggests that multiple placements and unmet mental health needs are some of the biggest barriers foster youth face (cite here). Even though social workers clearly value education,

the study's results suggest the hypothesis that social workers' values and beliefs about education correlate with more services offered, was not supported by the data.

### Limitations of the Study

The study's results should be interpreted with caution due to several limitations. First, this study used snowball sampling to recruit participants. A snowball sampling method increases the likelihood that the sample is not an accurate representation of the population studied and may not generalize to the population. Second, the study included a very small sample size of 18 participants. Third, the participants were limited to social workers who worked directly with youth ages 16-21 years old. Choosing this limited perspective provided only what a social worker believes or values related to an older youth population and not throughout the life of the youth including elementary and middle school ages. Future studies looking into the topic on social worker beliefs and values on education could benefit from using a simple random sampling method. They also might want to focus on all age groups to compare if social workers' beliefs and practices vary based on the age of foster youth they serve.

Lastly, a limitation could be only asking social workers. A foster youth could be impacted by school staff, counselors, therapist, and foster parents. A future study could benefit from surveying multiple adults involved in a foster youth's life. This would give a broader picture of what is needed for a foster youth to be successful on their educational journey.

### Implications for Social Work Practice

There were an estimated 432,997 youth in foster care nationally on September 30, 2019 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). Of that population, 56% had graduated high school (Casey Family Programs, 2021). In order to have an impact on the foster youth high school graduation rates more effort will need to be made in training. This study did reveal that social workers need more training in educational services for foster youth, such as training on how to help a foster youth fill out the FASFA forms. Out of the 18 participants who completed the survey 17 of them had 0-5 hours of training in the last year on FASFA/Dreamers Act. These services are utilized by many youth in foster care as they often do not have financial support from their birth parents. The school usually assist youth with completing the FASFA/Dreamers Act their senior year, however a youth who is home schooled or takes the GED will not have the same access to these services as a youth who attends traditional high school. A social worker needs to be able to assist their youth with not only filling out the forms but answering questions on these forms.

Another practice implication would be how most of the social workers did not see themselves as having a direct impact on the foster youth graduating high school or not and did not feel like their youth looked to them for advice and guidance. As foster youth do not have a lot of consistent people in their life social workers need to work on their relationships and rapport with their clients. As a social worker in a child welfare system there has to be effort on building those



relationships for the benefits of the youth. In a social worker's everyday practice there are things that can be done to improve these skills. Implementing motivational interviewing and strengths based practices can assist with building positive rapport.

### Implications for Social Work Research

The results of this study did not show a correlation between social worker beliefs and the provision of services to foster youth. Future research should explore other potential factors that might impact the provision of services to foster youth. Similarly, other future research might explore other social worker beliefs and attitudes that could impact the provision of services. Similarly, future research could approach this topic from a foster youth lens, examining from foster youths' perspectives what they need to be successful in their educational journey. Last, future research might examine the role of social worker training in understanding and impacting foster youth education.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this research study was to explore the relationship between social workers' beliefs and values related to education and the services they provide to foster youth. The researcher designed an online survey to collect data on social worker beliefs and practices directly from social workers who served youth ages 16-21. The results showed no statistically significant correlation between a social worker's beliefs on education and services provided

to foster youth. The results suggest that social workers may have other priorities, mainly placement stability, that impede or hinder their attention to education issues.

APPENDIX A:  
INFORMED CONSENT

**INFORMED CONSENT**

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine if a social workers beliefs towards education effect the services they provide in assisting the youth towards graduating high school and enrolling in higher education. The study is being conducted by Esther Thomas, a graduate student, under the supervision of Nicole L. Arkadie 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 at CSUSB.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of the study is to examine if a social workers beliefs towards education effect the services they provide in assisting the youth towards graduating high school and enrolling in higher education

**DESCRIPTION:** Participants will be asked several questions on their knowledge of services of higher education, their beliefs on high school graduation and enrollment into higher education, their encouragement of high school graduation and enrollment into higher education 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:** Your responses will remain confidential and data will be reported though survey data collected.

**DURATION:** It will take 10 to 15 minutes to complete the survey.

**RISKS:** Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your participation.

**BENEFITS:** There will not be any direct benefits to the participants. However, findings from the study will contribute to our knowledge in this area of research.

**CONTACT:** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Arkadie at [nicole.arkadie@csusb.edu](mailto:nicole.arkadie@csusb.edu)

**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 2024.

\*\*\*\*\*

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

---

Place an X mark here

---

Date

APPENDIX B:  
SURVEY

### Demographic Questions

1. Are you a current social worker or social services practitioner?
2. Age
3. Gender
4. Race/ Ethnicity
5. What is your highest level of education?
6. What is the highest level of education you plan on obtaining?
7. Have you in the last three years or do you currently work with foster youth ages 16-21 years old in some capacity?
8. Are you employed by a child welfare or foster family agency?
9. Which agency?
10. How many years of experience do you have with foster youth?
11. Have you been assigned any of the following programs?

### Survey Questions

1. How important is it for a foster youth to graduate high school or obtain a GED.
2. How important is it for foster youth to enroll in higher education.
3. How important do you think education is overall to a foster youth?
4. How often did you mention graduating high school and higher education to the youth on your caseload?

5. How often did you follow up with the high school seniors' counselors or school staff to see how many credits they had, if they were on target to graduate and what assistance they needed to graduate timely?
6. In the last year how often did you ask graduating seniors about college?
7. How knowledgeable do you feel you are in referring your youth to higher education?
8. How knowledgeable do you feel as a social worker to help your foster youth apply for college?
9. How many training hours have you completed in the last year in regards to higher education, FASFA/DREAMERS act or education?
10. Do you know what the Chafee Grant is? 83% (15) Respondents reported yes, 17% (3) respondents reported no.
11. You can get the Chafee Grant only until the age of 26.
12. The Dreamers Act is a form of financial aid for undocumented foster youth.
13. Guardian Scholars/Renaissance Scholars/ EOPS provide services to only current foster youth.
14. All colleges waive application fees for foster youth.
15. Transitional Housing Programs (THP) and Transitional Housing Programs (THP) plus are the only housing options for foster youth in college.

16. As a social worker do you know who to contact at your local community college or four year college in regards to foster care services. .
- In response to Question 17. As a social worker do you know how to locate the foster care liaison for the school districts that services your youth?
18. When was the last time as a social worker that you reviewed/filled out a FASFA with a foster youth?
19. As a social worker what portion of your caseload are seniors in the 2023-2024 school year?
20. Of that proportion of seniors in high school on your caseload how many graduated high school or will graduate from 2023-2024.
21. As a social worker what proportion of your graduating high school seniors for the 2023-2024 school year applied for college, trade school or other higher education?
22. As a social worker what proportion of your caseload is over the age of 18 but under 21?
23. Of those youth how many are attending community college, a four year college, a trade school or other form of higher education?
24. As a social worker do you feel like you have a direct impact on the youth on your caseload graduating and continuing to higher education?
25. As a social worker do you believe that the foster youth look to you for advice and guidance?



26. Place the following items in order based on your opinion as social worker.

27. Is there anything you would like to add?

This survey was created by the researcher.

APPENDIX C:  
IRB APPROVAL LETTER

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## IRB-FY2023-48 - Initial: IRB Admin./Exempt Review Determination Letter

1 message

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do-not-reply@cayuse.com <do-not-reply@cayuse.com>  
To: esther.oh4384@coyote.csusb.edu, Nicole.Arkadie@csusb.edu

Thu, Jul 6, 2023 at 8:54 AM



July 6, 2023

**CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**  
Administrative/Exempt Review Determination  
Status: Determined Exempt  
IRB-FY2023-48

Nicole Arkadie Esther Thomas  
CSBS - Social Work  
California State University, San Bernardino  
5500 University Parkway  
[San Bernardino, California 92407](#)

Dear Nicole Arkadie Esther Thomas:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "FACTORS THAT IMPACT FOSTER YOUTH'S SUCCESSFUL HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION" has been reviewed and determined exempt by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. An exempt determination means your study had met the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has weighed the risks and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants.

This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses. Investigators should consider the changing COVID-19 circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites should follow CDC, California Department of Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's [COVID-19 Prevention Plan](#) for more information regarding campus requirements.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action. The Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is due for renewal. Ensure you file your protocol renewal and continuing review form through the Cayuse IRB system to keep your protocol current and active unless you have completed your study.

- Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.
- Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study.

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4/18/24, 8:11 AM

CoyoteMail Mail - IRB-FY2023-48 - Initial: IRB Admin./Exempt Review Determination Letter

- **Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research.**
- **Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.**

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at [mgillesp@csusb.edu](mailto:mgillesp@csusb.edu). Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2023-48 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive from participants and/or others related to your research may be directed to Mr. Gillespie.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

*King-To Yeung*

King-To Yeung, Ph.D., IRB Chair  
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

KY/MG

APPENDIX D:  
RECRUITMENT FLYER

**Do you or someone you know work for Children's Services (CPS/DCFS/SBCS) or a Foster Family agency?**  
**Do you or someone you know work with foster youth ages 16-21?**  
**If You Answered Yes to Both Question, This Survey NEEDS YOU!**

A study is being conducted to explore if a social worker beliefs towards education effect the services they provide in assisting the youth towards graduating high school and enrolling into higher education.

Participation in this survey is voluntary and greatly appreciated.

Your responses will be used for study purposes only and are confidential.

Online survey link:

[https://csusb.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_40FO9gpWg6ZfaqW](https://csusb.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_40FO9gpWg6ZfaqW)



Questions/concerns?

Contact Esther Thomas, Student Researcher, anytime at 001464384@coyote.csusb.edu, or Research Supervisor, Dr. Nicole L. Arkadie at [Nicole.Arkadie@csusb.edu](mailto:Nicole.Arkadie@csusb.edu).

This study is pending approval by the California State University, San Bernardino Institutional Review Board. (IRB#: IRB-FY2023-160)

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