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## Aging out of Foster Care Successfully

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Aging Out of Foster Care Successfully

By Kelly Prettyman, BSW, LSW

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the

School of Social Work

St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas

St. Paul, Minnesota

in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University & the University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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### **Abstract**

Annually, in Minnesota, thousands of youth transition out of foster care. The purpose of this content analysis was to explore some of the variables associated with a successful transition while “aging out of” foster care, and to better understand how youth define and experience this transition from their perspective and in their own words. I asked questions such as: what do youth perceive as having helped them, what do they need from formal and informal caregivers, and what might they need as they transition into the greater independence associated with young adulthood. Data were collected from online interviews, documentaries, blogs and memoirs, in order to hear youth speak in their own voices and from their perspectives about their experiences and successes in navigating this transition. Primary themes identified included: sources of resilience (internal and external), and in particular, the importance of “continuity” and “stability.” Implications for formal and informal care givers are discussed.

## Introduction

With over 400,000 adolescents in the foster care system nationwide (Children's Bureau, 2015) and not enough placements available to them, there are many young people who are not getting their developmental and emotional needs met. Children can enter the foster care system from the time they are born until they are 18; some are able to stay until they are 21, if they meet specific requirements. In 2013 the median age upon entry into the foster care system was 6.4 years old. Forty-two percent of these youth are Caucasian and twenty four percent African American (childwelfare.gov). Of these 400,000 children, approximately 21 percent end up being adopted (childwelfare.gov). About 51 percent are reunified with their parents (childwelfare.gov), some age out and others remain in care. Some have argued that the foster care system is in crisis. While youth have a variety of experiences in foster care settings, previous research (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013) suggests that many of these youth are not being taught the skills they need to achieve successful (i.e. independent) functioning outside of the foster care system as young adults. Instead many have had to survive in their current situation and may not have been able to plan ahead. Many of these youth have experienced an original trauma or experienced neglect sufficient to be placed in out of home placements, such as foster care, kinship care or a group home. Foster youth are transferred from placement to placement throughout their adolescent years, adding more potential disruption and unknown change to what they have already been exposed to (ocfcpacourts.us, 2010).

The average stay for a child in foster care is twenty months, and the ultimate goal is to reunify the adolescent with their family, but that is not always a possibility. For a subgroup of young people, foster care is a system from which they, as adolescents and young adults, “age out.” In this context, they may be facing the loss of living with family members, uncertainty in relation to their future and, for some, mental health challenges that may or may not have ever been addressed. Each state provides its own foster parent training, with varying degrees of success. As children develop into adolescents, with older ages, they are faced with new challenges, such as how to get and maintain a job, how to obtain housing, how to create a budget or how to obtain needed services. According to one social worker in the foster care field (Rhonda Robertson, personal communication, September 23, 2015) maturity is one factor that can hold young people back from success as they age out of foster care. She stated that for an average 18 year old who has grown up with their parents in the same home, maturity is often lacking. For those in foster care, it seems to be potentially an even more complicated developmental leap. As evidence of this, it is estimated that 25 percent of adolescents who age out of foster care end up homeless within four years of exiting the foster care system (Association of Small Foundations, 2008).

There are eighteen year olds who have grown up in stable families who do not yet have the skills to face life on their own. Children and adolescents who go on to spend a period of their childhood or adolescence in foster care, start life with challenges due to abuse and neglect, and then to transition between homes and families, can make it more difficult to develop much needed life skills. Similarly,

within four years of aging out of foster care, 42 percent of youth have become parents themselves, fewer than half have graduated from high school, and only one percent go on to college (Association of Small Foundations, 2008). These are alarming statistics. There are programs in place that are available to help the aging out population. One specific program locally in Hennepin County provides rent as long as the youth are employed or furthering their education, as long as necessary. Other programs such as Connections to Success in the Twin Cities have achieved significant and positive outcomes. Countless young people do not know these types of programs exist. However, the experiences of youth *who have* participated in these programs suggest that they are often able to utilize this programming and find success in it. Such programming may suggest a model that others could emulate to better serve these youth. Existing research gives voice to youth who have aged out of foster care is now beginning to focus on how to assist young people in this important transition into young adulthood.

In the U.S. 55 percent of children in foster care are living without permanent families and are waiting for adoption (speakupnow.org 2014). Social workers have called for more focus on these older youth, in particular, and speak to the importance of providing support (both formal and informal) that will assist these young people in obtaining skills they need to be successful adults.

This qualitative research project took the form of a content analysis and explored a two-part question: (1) How do youth transitioning out of foster care define a successful transition, and (2) what supports do they describe needing from important people in their lives (e.g. from foster and/or biological families, from

professionals and from other interested and involved adults)? I sought a better understanding of what these late adolescents and young adults speak to needing as they transition into young adulthood in the context of exiting the formal foster care system to be well positioned for success? I initially defined success in this context as the ability to function independently, to be employed, to sustain housing, to contribute, to have a sense of belonging, and to have the ability to stay out of the correctional setting because this has been identified in the literature as a particular risk. That said, I listened closely for their own definitions of success. I explored this topic by way of a content analysis in which I analyzed the writings (for instance, memoirs and blogs) of both youth and adults in the position of supporting them to speak to the above.

## Literature Review

### Foster Care in the United States

The Department of Human Services defines foster care as 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom a state agency has placement and care responsibility. "This includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, childcare institutions, and pre-adoptive homes. A child is in foster care in accordance with this definition, regardless of whether the foster care facility is licensed and payments are made by the state or local agency for the care of the child, whether adoption subsidy payments are being made prior to the finalization of an adoption, or whether there is federal matching of any payments that are made (dhs.mn.us 2000)." The median age for a child entering foster care is 6.4 years old and the median age of children in foster care is 8.2 years old. Thirty-five percent of these children can expect to be in foster care an average from 1-11 months, while 27 percent can expect a stay of 12-23 months (Achhs.gov 2012). While this is an important system with its own strengths, some have accused the foster care system in the United States as one in a state of disorder as far as making sure youth are getting their needs met. One problem involves that of access currently in the United States. With over 510,000 adolescents in need of foster care system nationwide, and not enough placements available to them, there are children who are not getting even basic needs met. This is something that youth in this system have identified as a problem themselves as articulated in their writings. Of

the estimated 510,000 youth in foster care nationally, 52 percent are male, and 48 percent are female. To describe this population further, 42 percent are white, 24 percent are black, 22 percent Hispanic, 9 percent are multiracial and 3 percent are of unknown race or ethnicity (acfhhs.gov, 2012).

Similarly, every year an average of 20,000 youth age out of the North American foster care system to begin life on their own. This transition, while challenging for late adolescents and young adults in general is made even more so in that an estimated one third of foster youth do not have a high school diploma and of those who do 28 percent obtain their G.E.D. Fewer than 10 percent enroll in college and of that 10 percent, one percent receive a degree (Atkinson 2010). In addition to challenges related to continuing their education, foster youth are also 10 times more likely to be arrested than their peers of the same age, gender and race within three years of exiting the foster care system. (Aroma, 2010). More than 80 percent are unable to support themselves financially.

Recently there has been more focus on the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community within foster care. 23.8 percent of females in foster care and 10.2 percent have reported a sexual orientation in a category other than heterosexual. Thirty-eight percent of this population reported being put out of their homes due to sexual orientation (acfhhs.gov, 2012). Many LGBTQ youth face neglect or abuse from their families of origin because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. A recent study found that over thirty percent of LGBT youth reported an increase in physical violence from family members after coming out. Many states are focusing on this population, making sure there is support in place. Many

adolescents placed in foster care are placed with supportive, kind and loving families, while others may be facing a different type of abuse within the foster home or struggling with mental health problems of their own.

While the above statistics refer to the experiences of those in foster care broadly, some differences are especially notable for the “aging out” population: the youth who are exiting foster care to be independent at the age of 18. At the age of 18 adolescents in general do not all necessarily developmentally possess the skills needed to face life on their own. While youth have a variety of experiences in foster care settings, previous research suggests that youth are not always taught many of the life skills they need to function successfully, outside of this system as young adults. Instead many have had to survive in their current situation and may not have been able to plan ahead. Attachment theorists such as John Bowlby and more recently developmentalists such as Sroufe, et al. (2009) in their book describing a 40 year longitudinal study, have pointed to the importance of the developmental pathways that children get on early in life and to the notion of “developmental continuity:” that pathways often are continuous and become more difficult, with age, to deviate from.

For youth transitioning out of the system the world can be a scary place. Again, some youth aging out have great family support from their foster families. Others are left to be on their own, without a job or adequate skills or opportunities for further education and for meaningful employment. There are programs available to assist these young people, such as: Foster Club, YouthBuild and Foster Care to Success.

The only nationally representative study to date on the outcomes of youth who have aged out of foster care indicates that they experience numerous difficulties after leaving their care settings, including substance use (50 percent), involvement with the legal system (32 percent), and emotional problems (38 percent). Two thirds of 18-year-olds had not completed high school or obtained a general educational development (GED) certificate, 61 percent had no job experience, and 17 percent of females were pregnant (jimcaseyyouth.org 2016).

Federal legislation has created a framework for assisting youth who are aging out of foster care. The federal Independent Living Program (ILP) was initially authorized by P.L. 99-272 in 1985 under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act and was reauthorized indefinitely by P.L. 103-66 in 1993. The 1993 legislation authorized federal funding of \$70 million per year for states to provide services to youth between the ages of 16 and 18 to help them make the transition from foster care to independent living, distributed through the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). States were required to provide \$25 million in matching funds. States also may use additional dollars to fund services for youth in transition. According to a study by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), 35 states reported spending additional state, local, and private dollars for ILP services and 20 states reported receiving in-kind donations such as mentoring services, facility use for training, and books and school supplies (November 1999). Through their independent living programs, services provide help to prepare foster youth to live on their own. These services include mentoring, vocational training, training in daily life skills, and budgeting help as well as

assistance to help them attain their educational goals, and transitional services such as supervised practice living situations. States must provide written transitional independent living plans based on the needs of each youth ([thenightministry.org](http://thenightministry.org)). The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-169), which was later renamed the Independent Living Program as part of the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP), expanded eligibility for independent living services to youth ages 18 to 21 who have aged out of foster care and doubled the funding available to states to provide these services to \$140 million. States are required to contribute 20 percent in matching funds; however, many states have not drawn down the full amount of available federal funds because they have not contributed the full match amount (Massing and Pechora, 2004).

### **Foster Care In Minnesota**

In Minnesota approximately 2,000 youth age out of the formal foster care system each year (Children's Law Center of Minnesota, 2015). However, in Minnesota youth are eligible for extended foster care beyond the age of 18. The youth must be engaged in activities that will help them be successful adults. These youth must: be completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential, enrolled in an institution that provides post-secondary vocational education, participating in a program or activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment, employed at least 80 hours per month, or incapable of doing any of the activities described above due to a medical condition ([dhs.state.mn.us](http://dhs.state.mn.us), 2015). For youth who have this option available to them, an

assessment of their needs, goals and personal preferences are all taken into account to ensure the youth are successful. However, many of these youth do not yet have a plan in place for themselves, have little knowledge on how to obtain employment or how to rent an apartment. Minnesota Statute Section 260C.212 subdivision 1(c)(11) requires “an independent living plan for a child age 16 or older who is in placement as a result of a permanency disposition. The plan should include, but not be limited to, the following objectives: (1) Educational, vocational, or employment planning, (2) Health care planning and medical coverage, (3) transportation, including, where appropriate, assisting the child in (4) money management, (5) planning for housing, (6) social and recreational skills, and (6) establishing and maintaining connections (DHS, 2012)

Formal efforts to better support youth transiting out of care have begun to be made. For instance, a provision in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 gave states an option to extend eligibility for Title IV-E foster care for youth beyond age 18 until age 21.(ACF.ORG) The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-169) replaced the 1986 Independent Living Program with the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) and doubled the annual funds available to states from \$70 million to \$140 million. In addition, the law removed a disincentive for youth to accumulate earnings or other resources to assist in their transition to independent living. Eligibility for foster care maintenance payments under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act is based on whether the children’s original families would qualify for AFDC, as it was in effect on July 16, 1996. Under these rules, children could not

remain eligible for Title IV-E services if they accumulate assets of more than \$1,000. P.L. 106-169 changed this asset limit to \$10,000. The act also encouraged states to provide Medicaid coverage to youth ages 18, 19, and 20 who have emancipated from foster care.

### **The Importance of Mental Health**

While approximately one in five adolescents nationally will meet criteria for a mental health condition, foster youth suffer from more mental health problems than the general population. Support for this conclusion comes from data on their utilization of mental health services and research assessments of their mental health (Leslie, et al., 2000) who found that the total number of outpatient mental health visits increased with the age of the youth. This finding itself suggests that attention to mental health may be a particularly important one for youth transitioning out of formal foster care. Leslie, et al. (2000) also identified other variables that appear to be important, including male gender, and placement in a non-relative foster home. Given foster youths' exposure to a multitude of potentially adverse conditions and stressors, adolescents in foster care may also be at higher risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance use disorders (SUDs) according to Child Youth Services Review (2010). For those youth making the transition from foster care to independent living, the risk may be especially high. Exposure to stress becomes even greater, particularly for those who don't have the necessary social supports during this period of transition.

In the 1980's legislation introduced the Independent Living Program (ILP). This was the first policy to address the need of youth aging out of the system. These programs address the issues of job readiness and retention, housekeeping, health and nutrition, obtaining a high school degree, housing assistance and college entrance. (USGAO 1999 in Lemon et al., 2005). These are skills these youth would not necessarily have the opportunity of learning. The Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP), also a part of the independent living program, expanded eligibility for youth ages 18-21 to offer assistance to help youth obtain self sufficiency. It also provides vital housing services, providing vouchers for youth of the same age group. (naco.org) States are able to make their own decision if they would like to use funding for these services.

### **Success Stories from Youth in their Own Voices**

Despite these legitimate challenges, foster youth face, there is hope. In this study I hope to give a voice to the youth who have found success using both formal programs available, as well as by using their own skills, support systems and knowledge to find success on their own. There are many interventions aimed at supporting youth in making this transition that are demonstrating initial success. Two are particularly worth noting. First, the Foster Club offers a transitions toolkit, available for youth transitioning out of foster care. The *Transition Toolkit* includes planning worksheets, record keeping, detailed maps and resources on the topics of: finances, housing, jobs, education, transportation and life skills. Similarly, and on a local level, a Minnesotan program known as "Connections 2 Independence" has

achieved success in supporting its participants in both (1) long-term peer and adult relationships to ease and support this transition, and (2) points to successful outcomes, including significantly higher than average rates of college and university attendance (and graduation) than national averages. This latter program was founded by its executive director, Ms. Jessica Rogers , who serves as a role model of a successful adult who participated in the foster care system herself. The organization describes its mission as *one of offering “unique programming and advocacy for foster care youth, ages 15 - 21, to promote a successful and healthy transition to living independently as they reach adulthood* (Connections 2 Independence, 2015). This program identifies five primary foci it seeks to encourage: education, financial literacy, housing, employment, and personal wellbeing. The group seeks to collaborate between permanent placement providers, counties, and service providers.

**Conclusion:**

Success likely looks different for each individual. For the sake of this research project success is defined as youth describing in their stories having (or approaching and learning) the life skills necessary to become an independent adult, being able to draw on sources of resilience (internal and external), to maintain education, housing and employment, and a sense of wellbeing (the anchors articulated by the organization “Connections 2 Independence,” as well as the ability to avoid developmental risks such as incarceration. Youth aging out of foster care need life skills, and there are people and programs available to them, to assist them

in becoming successful. Although foster youth face many barriers, there is hope in finding success, and many of them do.

### Conceptual Framework

The framework that was utilized for this research project was Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents ages 12-18, as this is the age group closest to the ages of those aging out. Search institute is a longstanding and internationally known nonprofit research center and resource for matters related to youth development. Founded in 1958 by Dr. Merton Strommen, "the organization pioneered using social science research understand the lives, beliefs, and values of young people" (Search Institute, 2015). The institute has maintained this mission, giving attention to a number of topics with relevance to adolescents and to this study, including spiritual development, and to the importance of the parent-child relationship. In fact, a recent study from Search, points to this relationship as being even more predictive of several measures of adult success, being more powerful than variables such as socioeconomic status.

In the 1990s , Search released *The Troubled Journey: A Portrait of 6th to 12th-Grade Youth*, which introduced the framework of Developmental Assets. "Since 1990, studies of Developmental Assets have been conducted with more than 4 million young people across the United States. It also became the foundation for hundreds of community coalitions that formed in the 1990s to motivate individuals, families, organizations, and communities to work together to build Developmental Assets" (search-institute.org 2015). Search Institute has broken down the ages of adolescents into the following age groups: three-five years old, six to nine years old, ten to twelve years old and twelve to eighteen years old. The twelve to eighteen-year-old developmental assets is what this researcher will be focusing on for the

purpose of this research project. The developmental assets are, in general, divided into two categories: the first being (1) external assets, with overarching categories such as: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and the constructive use of time. The second category gives attention to (2) internal assets, which consist of things like: commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies and positive identity.

Children in foster care often have disruptions during these stages of development, potentially complicating the process of individuation and emancipation. However, as Search Institute found and reminds readers, these youth, like other youth, often possess strong sources of resilience, or what Rutter and others have referred to as a “self-righting” capacity. That is, youth are able to tap both internal and external sources of resilience to have good developmental outcomes, even in the context of adversity and developmental challenges. Rutter (2015) noted this was true for youth who had encountered even significant difficulties, referring to particularly resilient children and adolescents as “invincible kids”.

In keeping with the positive and strengths-based focus of this study, I chose these 40 Developmental Assets as sensitizing concepts to listen for in the stories and “voices” of the youth who relay their experiences in the sources (memoirs, video documentaries, and online sources) that I reviewed. With the recognition that 40 assets or sources of resilience are likely too many to focus on, I narrowed my focus to those related to adolescent’s ages 12 – 18. This age grouping, though, still

includes 40 distinct assets. I therefore listened and read with an eye for ways these youth talk broadly about:

- a. Internal assets (“inside” sources of strength) and external assets (ways in which others, professional, familial or other) help them in in this important transition.
2. More specifically, in relation to internal assets, I watched for examples of: positive identity, positive values, and social competencies. Among the 20 specific examples listed, I expected the following to likely be important:
    - a. Planning (having plans and a sense of future), responsibility, restraint (avoiding and abstaining from high risk behaviors), personal power, positive esteem, and a sense of purpose.
  3. In relation to external assets, I watched for examples of: empowerment, expectations, and support. Among the 20 specific examples listed, I expected the following to likely be important:
    - a. Adult role models, positive peer influence, high expectations, and youth as resources (you are given or participate in meaningful roles). Under the “constructive use of time,” I listened for the role of youth programs and creative activities in particular (participation in the arts and/or other creative activities).

Based on the literature, I predicted that relationships with other youth and with significant adults, would be important, as would internal values associated with being “forward looking” – that youth with a strong sense of purpose, identity, and sense of future would likely describe doing particularly well. I remained open, though, to other assets that might emerge in these youth’s stories and writing.

## **Methodology**

This project attempted to better answer the question: How do youth transitioning from foster care define and describe success for themselves, and what skills and supports do these youth describe needing in order to make a successful transition into early adulthood? The researcher explored this question using the method of content analysis, privileging and giving particular attention to youth perspectives on what “success” means to them, and to what they say about what they need, in their own voice, during what is a developmentally challenging period for any adolescent moving into youth adulthood.

## **Research Design**

The purpose of this study is to speak to a two-part question (1) how do youth aging out of foster care describe this experience of transitioning out of foster care? That is, how do they define success? (2) I asked about what skills and supports they describe needing in order to successfully transition to adulthood, from their own perspective and in their own words. The study used a qualitative approach and the methodology was exploratory, using data from articles, blogs, Internet sites and books. Searches regarding foster care were conducted through SOPHIA as well as the Social Work Abstracts database through the University of St. Thomas. Search terms that were used included central terms such as: foster care, aging out, mental health and life skills. I also met with a key informant, Dr. Katharine Hill, who has expertise in this area to ask about potential first-hand sources I could consult and

use to hear from these youth, in their own voice, using publicly available data. She recommended blogs, films, documentaries, and books that were included in my final sample as well.

### **Sample and Population**

The population I am interested in describing consists of primarily 18-21 year old youth who are currently or who have already transitioned out of foster care. I am interested in better understanding the experiences of those who are undergoing this important transition with the goal of better supporting them. To sample this group, I used sources such as memoirs, edited works, and online blogs, where these youth have shared their perspective and “voice” in relation to this experience. I had the chance to hear from youth who have aged out of the foster care system, and who have made public information available to view and or read. This researcher chose this method of sampling due to the fact that many foster youth who have aged out of the system are transient and difficult to reach. Since they are a potentially difficult population to reach, this precluded the use of in-person interviews for a pilot study conducted during a limited time frame and with a more limited scope. However, a content analysis like this does offer the benefit and strength of being able to organize for readers some of the common experiences and needs these youth express in a diverse number of sources. My goal was to pull narratives (i.e. stories) together and to listen for common themes. I listened especially for strengths and for those things that tend to correlate with successful adjustments for these youth.

### **Data Collection**

Information regarding foster youth aging out was collected through various resources. I used the Internet sites recommended by scholars with content familiarity and expertise in this area such as Dr. Katharine Hill (personal communication September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015). These include sources in which youth have given voice to their experience. These sources include Foster Club, memoirs such as *From Foster To Fabulous* (Ramaglia, 2012) and videos made available to the public such as *Aging out of Foster Care on PBS* and *From Place to Place* (Foster club). These videos are documentaries, which feature youth giving a voice to their experience of aging out of foster care from their perspective. Articles dated before 2010 were not used as the foster care system has had many changes over the recent years as far as legislation, and I sought the most current information possible for this project. I looked for narratives that speak to the most contemporary experiences I can. Data were not collected from sites such as YouTube and Facebook, due to the varied and unreliable nature of the sites, as well as the ever-changing information that is on the site. Websites that end in org, or edu were used, as the information tends to be more credible. In reading and viewing these sources, common themes were sought out. The written sources that I gathered were organized in a three ring binder, and labeled according to topic. I highlighted emerging themes using differently colored markers, labeling each. I also used colored tabs to mark those places where developmental assets (internal or external) are evident. I also took notes on the video sources I review, listening for emerging themes.

## Data Analysis

After data are obtained, the researcher analyzed the data, focusing on themes that are consistent through the articles, books, interviews and websites. I analyzed the data in three primary stages. First, I used open coding. This means that I viewed the video resources (those I find online and the two primary documentaries), took notes, and read the written sources (books, stories, and memoirs), with an open mind, looking inductively at what themes emerge. Second, I used the strategy of selective coding (Padgett, 2008). This means that I went through the data again (reviewing my notes and key portions of the video resources), listening for developmental assets. I listened first for any ways the youth describe internal and external resources broadly. Finally, I took a last look for some of the specific assets I noted in the conceptual framework above, such as evidence of themes related to purpose, personal power, and important adults. Themes and subthemes were labeled. I anticipated potential themes being organized according to potential subheadings such as:

How youth describe this experience

How they describe success here

What they say they need from themselves (skills) and from others (supports) to succeed

Internal sources of resilience (assets)

External sources of resilience (assets)

Exceptions or “negative cases” (examples that “don’t fit” the majority)

**Strengths and limitations**

Strengths of this study include things like: hearing first-hand from these youth in an uncensored way, hearing from a hard to reach group, without the bias or filter of my going in with my own research questions. This is “original” data, coming from primary sources. Potential limitations may include my hearing disproportionately from those with “success stories.” That is, I expect that young people who have experienced a degree of mastery and success will write about it in venues such as Foster Club. As an example, one source I used is “From Foster to Fabulous.” Having written and published a memoir suggests a strong sense of agency and a positive experience. This kind of publication bias is a risk in quantitative studies as well. Similarly, it may be that young people, who have had a more difficult experience, may be less likely to be in a position to write about and to reflect on such experiences yet. However, in the age of social media, this remains to be seen.

**Protection of Human Participants**

This research was exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in that it did not involve the researcher having any direct contact with human subjects. I did not interview youth directly, but simply read and viewed publicly available materials. The study’s design can be thought of as a qualitative, secondary data analysis. To build in an added layer of protection, I only accessed publicly available sources. That is, I did not read or share narratives that might not have been put online in more private mediums (people who wrote with the expectation of privacy). I did not use online sites that require a membership or the need to sign on privately. I as the researcher did not contact foster youth or foster alumni directly to obtain

information. These design considerations were reviewed with my research committee and well to help anticipate and to reduce any potential risks.

## **Results**

The sources reviewed pointed to several themes related to resilience. Adolescents and young adults transitioning from care spoke to both internal (sources within themselves) and external (people who were supportive and helped them to transition smoothly). Through the interviews, stories, memoirs and blogs I was able to capture the individual stories of foster youth who had aged out of the formal system of foster care. The sample I used consisted of publicly available sources, such as Foster Club, Connections 2 Independence, online interviews, memoirs such as From Foster to Fabulous, and documentaries related to this topic.

Through the interviews, stories, memoirs and blogs I was able to capture the individual stories of foster youth who had aged out of the formal foster care system. The sample consisted of publicly available documents. These sources revealed both successes and challenges faced by these young adults. The dominant themes I found clustered into three primary categories: resilience, stability, and support. I will speak to each below.

### **Sources of Resilience**

In general youth spoke to external sources of resilience such as having a support system. Many of the stories that involved a successful transition revolved around having at least once person who believed in the youth and displayed support by being emotionally or physically there by the youth as they transitioned into independence. For instance, Heather, a young woman who had aged out of the foster

system describes having her baby sister reenter her life as a primary source of resilience. She writes on the Foster Club blog “To me resiliency is having the strength to overcome obstacles and challenges that get in the way of a person being successful. One of the only reasons that I was able to continuously be resilient at such a young age was because whenever I looked around me, no matter what else was going on, all I saw was my baby sister. One of the things she did when I looked at her was to smile with such a cute baby smile that always made my heart tingle. Her smile made me fight harder for her to make sure she always had everything she needed.” Another youth wrote on a blog for Adopt Us Kids about what gave him resiliency and helped him transition to independent living after foster care. He describes having a support system as something that helped him, as well as a very supportive foster family, and people who didn’t give up on him on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. This need for support is also the first item listed on the 40 developmental assets for 12-18 year olds. Having a good external support system is clearly important to youth and was described by many across the sources I reviewed. Heather also reports her foster family showed her that she was wanted and that helped her reach her goals. Many of the stories involving resiliency mentioned and spoke to the importance of having siblings together or at least steady contact with siblings. Interestingly, Heather described her younger sister as both an external source of resilience (someone she sought to help) and as an internal source of resilience (as someone she internalized and sought to serve a parental role for).

Similarly, I came across the story of Kim on Childrensrights.org, who

describes foster care as a primarily positive experience, describing it as “nothing short of amazing.” She had entered at the age of 15 after years of name-calling, physical fights and chronic homelessness. She was placed in a home for adolescents with substance abuse problems. She described this as a blessing. She could finally see what a “normal” family was like. This included things like regular dinners and sports on the weekends. Eventually she ran away because she could not “handle” the stability and this healthy environment. She described it as too foreign to her. She ran away. At 19 she found out she was pregnant and that was enough for her to start making changes for the better. She finished her GED and enrolled in college. She wrote that she was not going to allow her child to grow up in the same situations she did. She found an internal source of resiliency in becoming a mother. Kim states, “ Yes, I have been in foster care, yes I have been to jail. I have done drugs. I have hurt people. That doesn’t define me. I am beautiful, I am strong and I can do anything I put my mind to, and I have” (year, page) This also speaks to other internal assets such as positive identity, values and social competencies which all played a part in Kim’s success. Like Heather’s story above, she found imagining herself as a parent or assuming a parental or helping role, as having something to give (a sense of purpose in the language of Search’s Developmental Assets), as strong sources of resilience. Kim has since graduated with a social work degree and is currently licensed to offer a therapeutic foster home and has even adopted her foster child at 5 years old. She encourages foster care providers to be patient with their youth, encouraging them and telling them they have the power to change the world. This sense of agency and of purpose: of having power and something to give

emerged as another theme. On a blog for Children's Rights, Catherine, a former foster youth writes about various foster homes she had been in: a total of fourteen. She describes being so medicated that her endocrine system has been damaged. She spoke of abuse, neglect, mistrust and exploitation. This came from within foster homes that are meant to be a refuge from the trauma she experienced at home. Catherine states, " I left the bitterness and anger behind. Going through foster care made me want to help others who are still there. I am an advocate for foster youth. I provide a voice for legislators and other professional to hear. It takes courage to talk about the dark times. If you are having experiences like I did, I want to remind you that foster care does end someday. You can take control of your life and learn from it."

In all of these stories above, youth describe the power and importance of someone who shows the youth support as a source of resilience. This is true to the Search Institute's criteria of support: family support, positive family communication, adult relationships, caring community, neighborhoods and schools.

### **Stability as a Source of Resilience**

As a negative case, foster youth described having multiple placements while growing up as something that made it difficult to age out due to the earlier lack of stability. Amy, a youth who had many placements from the time she was five years old until she was 12 years old stated on the Foster Club blog that having a stable family from 12-18 helped her stabilize and made her feel like she could finally focus on life after foster care. Her family helped her apply to colleges and assisted her throughout her college years. She made this statement "I would like to read you two

definitions of one word the first is: to make strenuous or violent efforts in the face of difficulties or opposition, the next is: to proceed with difficulty or with great effort.” She described school as her safe haven. Amy went on to work for Project Everlast, an initiative that strives to find permanent connections and stability for youth aged 14-24 who are involved in the foster care and juvenile justice system.

Another young man wrote, “My friends, this is the definition of my life and many peers in foster care. My life has been a series of making violent efforts and proceeding with great pains in the face of difficulty and opposition. From as far back as I could remember I struggled: from the kids on the playground making fun of me because I was fat; to the peer pressure in high school; to the struggle of defining myself from a moral standpoint now that I am a young man.” This quote is from a young man named JJ, who shares his story on the Foster Club website. He describes his childhood as having included abusive parents, alcohol and being separated from his siblings. He credits his resiliency to his grandparents who eventually took him and his siblings into guardianship care. JJ stated that his case is considered a successful all the way around. He then goes on to say “ this is why:....kinship placement, my three younger siblings and I were able to stay together, and adoption by my grandparents was the end result.” In so doing, JJ describes kinship care and the ability to stay with his biological family as an example of an experience of stability. The reoccurring theme among these stories includes this sense of having a good support system. These youth spoke to the importance of support and of continuity. Each spoke to needing ongoing support that precedes and extends beyond the transition as important sources of resilience. In terms of utilizing

professional supports, accessing agency service and social workers for support has also helped many foster youth obtain the skills they needed to age out successfully across the sources I reviewed. This emerges in and supports the importance of programs like Connections 2 Independence, that seek to provide both support and stability for youth experiencing this transition beyond age eighteen.

Youth reported that it isn't uncommon that once they transition successfully, that they returned to the agency that helped them so much, sometimes to volunteer, and sometimes to work. This might be described as an additional expression of a sense of purpose: of having something to give. It was described by those who went on to do so as empowering. The Search Institute lists the sense of empowerment as a developmental asset.

In one interview featured by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a foster youth named Victorious, who had completed his transition to independent living, stated he would have really benefitted from learning more basic life skills. He spoke to needing information about things like how to rent an apartment, how to get a bank account, and how to write a resume, stating these are practical things that young people are often taught in the context of their families. When this earlier precondition of stability is present, youth like Victorious described being able to focus on learning, versus simply surviving.

### **Support in the Service of Learning Life Skills**

One of the most common themes among the interviews, websites and

memoirs was the importance of support. Foster youth stated time and again that if they had someone who supported them, the transition was easier and much more successful. This sense of the importance of support can also be found in documentaries I viewed such as ReMoved, where a girl named Abby finally found a supportive foster home that eventually brought in her baby brother. The two children remained together in the same home until reaching young adulthood. Support as a source of resiliency is also a common theme in the book *From Foster to Fabulous* (2012) by Helen Ramaglia. Helen did not point to one specific source of resilience but many different events and people who contributed to her life story. Ramaglia wrote a memoir in which she told her story of coming of age in foster care. She describes her life having been affected by physical, emotional as well as sexual abuse. Her story started when she was young, when her mother passed away from a terminal illness and her abusive father was raising her and her siblings. She lived in a number of foster homes. Helen even moved to Holland with her aunt and uncle who she was living with at one time. She was able to graduate at age sixteen from high school and was married at seventeen. She stated that after graduation, she didn't know who she belonged to or where she belonged or what to do next. Her fiancé was in the Army and she was a 17-year-old married young woman without a job, and no driver's license living in a small town. Helen stated that "foster children have major gaps in their life skill abilities, so skills that other teenagers acquire by this age are skills that foster youth have no knowledge of, as was the case with me" (page number here). The author's young marriage was over soon after having her daughter Tanya, in relation to whom she states, "my life

began the day I gave birth. I vowed to God that she would not live the life that I lived.” Helen continued to make what she described as poor decisions with men and had multiple abusive relationships. She would move around, and have her daughter live with relatives so she would be safe. There was a lack of stability. At age 35 she asked, “how do you mend a broken life?” She was still learning all the skills she had needed years earlier. Eventually Helen was able to find steady work, gain confidence and eventually find a great man who she married and is still with today. She has two successful biological children who she is very proud of and is now a foster parent to two boys who she is in the process of adopting. Helen fostered a little girl named Ellen, who had many behavioral challenges and was often violent with the other children in the house. The realization that Ellen was benefitting more in her previous foster home with only one other child was described by Helen as a difficult realization to have. The decision to have Ellen go back to her previous family was heartbreaking, but the Ramaglias reached the conclusion it would be best for everyone, and much safer for the two young boys at home. Helen and her husband are in the process of adopting the two boys they fostered.

Hearing the story of someone in foster care at a young age of three, listening to the trauma endured and the constant changes through life into adulthood and back into the foster care system- except this time on the other side, is very intense. Helen Ramaglia did not specifically point to one thing or a series of things that lead to her resilience. As the story unfolded each life event contributed to her resilience. This raises an interesting question about the meaning youth make in relation to their experiences as a potentially important moderating variables. Her daughter’s

birth may be one of the most profound things leading to resiliency as well as her faith in God. This sense of being changed by the birth of a child is a theme that emerges across the stories I reviewed. Ramaglia's transition out of foster care was more challenging; she struggled with life skills, relationships and trying to figure out who she was. Today she is an avid speaker on behalf of foster children. She is also the founder of Fostering Superstars, an organization that teams up with many other organizations so that more of foster youths' needs are met, not just some of them. Helen's life has been a struggle but she continues to find her way as well as who she is, and in the mean time she has found happiness and love.

### **What do Foster Youth Describe Deeding from Professionals?**

The Foster Club website offers insight from youth who have transitioned from foster care to more independent living. One youth named Victorious was featured on this website. He stated that he needs support and encouragement from his social worker. He went on to state that it would be helpful if the foster system "set us up with a network of people" who seek to support these youth. Another youth on this same website suggested a mentor as another important support, whether formal or informal. There are specific programs that provide mentoring services for youth. Usually a volunteer is matched with a youth. Some youth describe having a social worker as a main support system, or even the agency they work with, as primary sources of support in helping to transition smoothly.

### **What Helps and Hinders this Transition for Youth?**

Across these sources, youth described many barriers they face when transitioning to independent living at or around the age of eighteen. Having a strong

support system helps tremendously, providing someone they can trust and count on. The hindrances can include many things such as lack of supports, lack of education and lack of necessary life skills. When youth perceived themselves as facing these challenges alone, or prematurely on their own, they tended to describe feeling and using language to express a sense of being “lost in the world” and ended up describing not making progress towards their goals, because they were not sure where to start. Examples include Helen Ramaglia’s story, when she finished high school at the age of 16 and was married at 17. She stated she felt lost and didn’t know who she belonged to, where she belonged or what to do next. She described a sense of being prematurely on her own, before she was developmentally ready.

### **Summary**

The most common theme among the interviews, websites and memoirs in relation to tapping one’s own resilience and in making a successful transition was the importance of this sense of stability and support. Foster youth stated consistently that if they had someone who supported them, the transition was easier and much more successful. They described receiving supports from both professional and personal sources such as their local agencies that provide supports for transitioning youth, caseworkers even other foster youth. Many agencies that provide services to this population have case workers assigned to each youth, and those workers often end up being significant people to these foster youth.. They describe developing very meaningful, healthy, and supportive relationships. Finally, the importance of youth having both personal and professional supports, and their need to experience a sense of agency, of something to give, all point to the

importance of organizations in such as the GLBT Host Home Project (McTeague, 2015) that pair youth with families not only for housing but for (1) ongoing relationships where the youth actually choose the family (vs. the other way around), and of the importance of organizations and agencies that serve youth beyond age 18.

## Discussion

The goal of this content analysis was to obtain information as to what foster youth need in order to transition to independence successfully. Online interviews, blogs and memoirs were used to obtain information from the youth, in their own voices, speaking directly to what helped or hindered their success of transitioning into greater independence. One of the major themes that developed throughout the research was the need for support. Many of the interviews and blogs spoke to the need for support from just one person in the youth's life. Youth described finding support through other foster youth, agencies, social workers and of course their foster families and from their biological families. There are many state specific agencies that provide mentors for youth aging out. Foster Care to Success is one specific agency that matches mentors with youth and provides emotional support for youth as they apply to college, as well as supports them through their college journey. The importance of having a strong, lasting bond with someone was very beneficial as these youth transitioned to independence.

Another theme that emerged was the sense of purpose that emerged in caring for another person, such as a younger sibling. If foster youth were placed with a younger sibling, or remained in contact with them after aging out, the youth were often able to find a sense of empowerment and resiliency, an internal and external developmental asset. The memoir of Helen Ramagia is an example of this (as well as others mentioned in this research project). Helen struggled after aging out and even well into adulthood. She reported lacking this steady source of support,

but when her daughter was born soon after she married, Helen found empowerment in wanting to care for her newborn child.

Stability was similarly a prevalent theme that emerged throughout the research. Youth spoke about how stability played a key role in a successful transition. Many interviews and blogs made mention of how many placements youth had been in, and youth who had few placements and more stability found success in knowing they belonged somewhere and with someone. Youth who had been in multiple placements described that they had more challenges in achieving a sense of belonging, making it hard to find support. The youth who mentioned this are still young, but adults such as Helen stated they still struggle with achieving this sense of stability.

### **Relationship between Conceptual Framework and Findings:**

In the beginning stages of research, the researcher chose a select few developmental assets from the Search Institute that I assumed would be common themes in the findings. The developmental assets that were selected were as follows: (internal assets) positive identity, positive values and social competencies as well as having a sense of future, responsibility, restraint, positive esteem and having a sense of purpose. The external assets I chose to focus on were: empowerment, expectations and support, having an adult role model, positive peer influence, high expectations, constructive use of time and having other youth as resources. After completion of this content analysis, it was clear that youth found success in accessing a number of external assets. They spoke about support, empowerment and having an adult role model as the key factors in their success. Youth described

possessing many of the internal assets, often in the external assets such as an adult role model. If youth had a stable foster care experience as well as an adult role model they seemed to describe possessing a positive identity, restraint and having a sense of purpose. These variables appear in their accounts to “travel together.”

### **Implications for practice**

The findings suggest that professionals working with foster youth need to have a good understanding of what foster youth have been through, including prior to and during their time in foster care. Youth need support, guidance and direction, sometimes more others of the same age might. These youth have not always had the stability that allows a young person to develop and learn the life skills that are needed to live successfully on their own. Victorious, mentioned above, stated he just needed to learn some life skills. Some of the youth contrasted surviving, versus thriving, and spoke to the importance of learning life skills (e.g. budgeting, resume building, etc.) before they are expected to live on their own. Agencies that assist youth with various things during and after transitioning out are also a key factor in a youth’s success.

Programs that are available include models such as Foster Club, Connections to Independence and Foster Care to Success. Connections To Independence is an agency in Minnesota and states on their website that “C2i prepares youth for living independently as they get closer to reaching adulthood and aging out of the foster care system. Participants are between the ages of 15-21 and focus on a healthy mind, body, and soul approach to learning independent living skills. Youth are assigned an Independent Living Skills Counselor (ILSC) who they work with until they exit the

program. Working with the same ILSC helps establish stability, trust, and a genuine caring and healthy relationship with an adult. Relationship development has been C2i's key to success and great outcomes.(c2iyouth.org 2016).” Here again the theme of the importance of stability appears even in their program description. Youth as well as foster families need to be aware that programs such as these exist, so they can be accessed. These programs seem to offer a tight fit with the needs youth in my sample described.

Social workers in the foster care field are potentially extremely busy with the number of foster care placements there are (in Minnesota alone there are over 2,000 youth who age out, annually). I was unable to speak with anyone who is currently in the field, personally, due to my study not involving human participant interviews, but my content analysis pointed to the importance of mental health being addressed for these individuals as many of them have experienced trauma in their lives.

As a researcher, searching for information on agencies that help youth, I found it very difficult to navigate the system. Using the Internet and talking to social workers, I kept hearing there was a lot of help and assistance for youth. Although I did find some agencies, it was a difficult search. This invites empathy for a foster youth or foster family searching for this information on their own and finding success in doing so. The area I focused on was the Twin Cities. This raises the question of what resources rural agencies have and what challenges they may face in accessing resources to assist youth once they age out. This rural focus would make for an interesting future study.

Foster care, especially the 18- 21 age group, is receiving some attention on the policy level. Statistics are challenging for these young people and legislators are taking notice. The Children's Bureau notes post-secondary educational funding that is available, stating "The Educational and Training Vouchers Program (ETV) for Youths Aging out of Foster Care was added to the CFCIP in 2002. ETV provides resources specifically to meet the education and training needs of youth aging out of foster care. In addition to the existing authorization of \$140 million for the CFCIP program, the law authorizes \$60 million for payments to States and Tribes for post secondary educational and training vouchers for youth likely to experience difficulty as they transition to adulthood after the age of 18. This program makes available vouchers of up to \$5,000 per year per youth for post secondary education and training for eligible youth." (2016) Sadly, many states are not taking advantage of this extra funding. This could be because many are unaware it exists.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

One of the biggest strengths of this research project is that the information was gathered from youth themselves, via public forms of communication. The researcher did not contact youth directly because they are an often transient and potentially vulnerable population, thus making it difficult to be reached. This study focused on the voices and perspectives of youth who had transitioned successfully (success being defined by the youth themselves). One of the limitations of the study was the potential to gather biased information. The researcher obtained information via the internet, various websites, blogs and books of my own choosing. These stories, by nature of their being published and publicly available, may

constitute a “population within a population.” Although interviewing foster youth who had aged out of the system would have been very interesting, it would have added more steps and potential difficulty to the research. This researcher did not need to obtain IRB approval since there was no direct communication with human participants, however since I was not given information from direct sources, I was left to my own to gather and interpret the data I found, though I reviewed emerging themes with my project’s chair.

### **Suggestions for Future Studies**

It would be interesting to conduct further research as to what contributes to a successful transition. The questions I would like to have answered as a researcher are: 1. How youth find out about agencies that will help them transition easily by teaching life skills, providing financial support or providing a mentor. 2. If youth know about these agencies, why or why are they not utilizing their services- more specifically why wouldn’t they take advantage of the help that is available? And 3rd, what do agencies do to make youth aware of the services provided. It seems like many youth do not know how to access services on their own. I was told that in Minnesota youth are mailed a letter before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday explaining extended foster care, eligibility guidelines and what services are available in the transition stage. I would like to know how many of these letter actually reach the foster youth. I would also like to see what one of these letters looks like, and possibly add it to the research project- so it is available for other researchers to view. It would be interesting to know more about how youth receive and experience these letters.

For future research, if time permits this researcher suggests speaking directly to foster youth who have aged out of formal foster care and perhaps about what their adult relationships look like with their foster care families. It would be beneficial to try and reach out to youth who had more challenges in navigating this experience, asking what resources they were aware of, and if they were aware of any- what might have prevented their accessing those resources and what might help them going forward.

### **Conclusion**

This research project proved to be very eye opening. As I read blogs, listened to interviews and watched videos seeking information, I was moved by the stories these young people told. As I focused my resources and research I came across many success stories, many of which were used in this project. The stories of resilience and success were inspiring, but it became clear even after these positive stories that many of these young people are still left to figure out much of “life on their own.” Learning more about life for foster youth has motivated me to become and agent of change for this specific group. Hopefully I can take the knowledge I have gained and make a difference in the lives of foster youth.

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