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FORMER FOSTER CARE YOUTH PERCEPTIONS ON THE
EFFECTIVENESS OF INDEPENDENT LIVING
PROGRAM SERVICE

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

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

by
Sandra Lorena Guerrero
Amy Jean Mierzwik
June 2009

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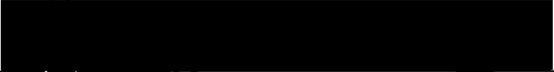
by

Sandra Lorena Guerrero

Amy Jean Mierzwik

June 2009

Approved by:



Dr. Janet Chang, Faculty Supervisor
Social Work

5/18/09
Date



Sally Richter, L.C.S.W., County of San
Bernardino Department of Children's Services



Dr. Janet Chang,
M.S.W. Research Coordinator

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine former foster care youth perceptions on the effectiveness of Independent Living Program (ILP) services. The goal was to examine participants' perceptions regarding: who informed the participants about ILP services, their level of participation in ILP, the participants experience with ILP, the skills they learned, the skills that were most helpful after the participants emancipated, the most helpful aspect of ILP classes, the least helpful ILP classes, the participants' biggest obstacle faced after emancipation, participants' suggestions to better prepare foster care youth for independent living, and any additional information the participants wanted to share. The study contains a literature review covering: emancipated former care youth, ILP policy and programs, emancipated foster care youth common problems, outcomes of ILP, and theories guiding conceptualization. The study also presents the detailed results of focus group analysis of qualitative data obtained from the participants.

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We would like to acknowledge our families for their support during the process of writing this thesis. We would also like to acknowledge our Professors who taught us everything we know about social work. We want to acknowledge our Advisor, Dr. Janet Chang for guiding us in the right direction. Lastly, we would like to acknowledge San Bernardino County Department of Children Services for supporting our research project.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this book to my family and friends. Thank you for all your love and support.

Sandra L. Guerrero

I would like to dedicate this book to my family who supported me through all of my adventures in life. I would also like to thank Steven Guisa, who helped and encouraged me to become the person I am today. Thank you for your unconditional love, support, and patience.

Amy J. Mierzwik

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

When foster care youth turn 18, it is perceived that they have reached self-sufficiency and therefore are emancipated out of the child welfare system. Each year approximately 20,000 of the 542,000 foster care youth nationwide emancipate out of the child welfare system (The Children's Aid Society, 2007). In addition, from June 2006 to July 2007, the number of foster care youth who emancipated out of the child welfare system was 4,725 in the State of California (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2006). It is known that children who are placed in the foster care system have experienced extreme hardships in their lives such as abuse, neglect or abandonment (The Children's Aid Society, 2007). Daining and DePenfilis (2007) found that most foster care children were placed in the child welfare system due to abuse or neglect; 62% were neglected, and 35% were abused, physically, sexually, or psychologically, and a small percentage were medically neglected. Ideally, given the difficulties former foster care youth have endured

prior to placement within child welfare agencies, providing them with increased moral and financial support should facilitate the transition into independent living (Frey, 2005).

According to Frey (2005), oftentimes former foster care youth exit out of the child welfare system without a family who they can count on for support or without the proper resources needed to live independently. Former foster care youth also struggle once they exit the child welfare system in finding and maintaining employment, primarily due to lack of training program preparations, apprenticeships, and internships (The Children's Aid Society, 2007). Research conducted on former foster care youth found that 12 to 30% were homeless; 25 to 55% were unemployed; 30 to 62% were uninsured; 32 to 40% were on public assistance; 31 to 42% were incarcerated; and 40 to 60% become pregnant within 12 to 18 months of exiting foster care (The Children's Aid Society, 2007). The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative [JCYOI] (2007) suggests that 58 % of former foster care youth had a high school diploma at 19 but when compared to the national average of non-foster care youth of 87 %, the former foster care youth were falling behind. Therefore, it is

not surprising that only 3% of former foster care youth age 25 and over have received college degrees, when compared to 28% of non-foster care youth (JCYOI, 2007).

In response to the high rate of homelessness, unemployment, and educational deficiencies with former foster care youth, in 1986 congress amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). By amending the Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, this allowed for federal monies to be allocated towards the creation of Independent Living Programs (ILP) in every state (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). ILP services were established to assist foster care youth ages 16 to 21 with their transition into independent living. Child welfare agencies are mandated to provide ILP services to foster care youth. According to the County of San Bernardino Children's Services Handbook (CSBCSH) (2007), the role of a child welfare worker within child welfare agencies requires that they begin working with foster care youth who are 16 years old. Child welfare workers act as case managers to foster care youth; their job duties consists of drafting a transitional independent living plan agreement with them (CSBCSH, 2007).

Despite the establishment of ILP, former foster care youth continued to struggle once they exit the child welfare system. So, in 1999, the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) amended past ILP legislation, amplified ILP funding, extended services for former foster care youth until the age of 21, and lastly allowed for more services, assistance, and activities to be provided for former foster care youth (Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2005). In theory the creation of ILP was supposed to increase positive outcomes for foster care youth once they exit the child welfare system. The research that exists regarding former foster care youth concentrates on the poor outcomes once they exit the child welfare system. There were some studies regarding success rates of former foster care youth due to their participation in ILP. However, these studies were limited and empirically based research available regarding the effectiveness of ILP services since the establishment of the 1999 FCIA is virtually nonexistent. Also, there were limited studies, which explored former foster care youth's perceptions regarding the effectiveness of ILP services.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research study is to assess former foster care youth's perceptions regarding the effectiveness of ILP services in San Bernardino County. The San Bernardino County's Department of Children's Services in collaboration with the Legislation and Research Unit and Quality Support Services (2008) reported that in 2007, 189 foster care youth emancipated out of the child welfare system. As some of the research suggests, when foster care youth participate in ILP services, the likelihood of successfully becoming self-sufficient upon emancipation is highly increased. It is believed that when foster care youth receive adequate independent living skill services as well as emotional support they will be more successful during their transition into adulthood. In looking at the research of child welfare literature, a problem of significant importance which requires the most attention is whether ILP services are assisting former foster care youth in successfully exiting the child welfare system. Given previous research which suggests that former foster care youth endure extreme hardships once they exit the child welfare system due to lack of adequate independency

skills, it is essential to further research the perceptions of former foster care youth regarding the effectiveness of ILP services. ILP services can play an important role in shaping the future of former foster care youth (Lemon et al., 2005).

In San Bernardino County, the Department of Children's Services (DCS) oversees ILP services. Foster care youth in the child welfare system must meet the following criteria in order to be eligible for ILP services: (1) youth was/is a court dependent (2) were/are in foster care at any time between the ages 16-19 (3) getting Kin Gap and/or wraparound services if they are/were in placement between the ages of 16 to 18 (San Bernardino County Department of Children's Services and Probation Department [SBCDCSPD], 2001). Not every foster care youth is eligible to receive ILP services. According to JCYOI (2007), although The Chafee Act created additional funds for foster care youth, it also stated that if foster care youth reunified with their families or if they were legally adopted or placed with legal guardians before the age of 16 they would not be eligible to receive ILP services.

ILP offer a variety of services to foster care youth, such as tutoring, GED preparation, higher education preparation, financial aid, scholarships, and transitional housing (SBCDCSPD, 2001). Also, foster care youth are prepared in areas such as budgeting, job search, locating community resources, and opening and maintaining savings accounts (SBCDCSPD, 2001). Other services provided by ILP are workshops and events in areas such as building self-esteem, short and long term goal planning, substance abuse classes, and family planning/parenting classes (SBCDCSPD, 2001). Finally, foster care youth can also participate in Independent City, which is held every year and consists of a mock city, where foster care youth can open a bank account, go on a job interview, find an apartment, and shop for groceries.

The County of San Bernardino also hired three former foster care youth to act as peer and family advocates (PFA). PFAs provide social workers, supervisors, and the ILP staff with valuable information, which has led to needed improvements within the child welfare system (County of San Bernardino, Independent Living Program, 2008). PFAs are also instrumental in organizing events

and activities they feel would contain relevant information for youth in the child welfare system to understand. The most important aspect of hiring former foster care youth is that they are able to relate with youth who are currently in the child welfare system. Furthermore, the three PFAs are enrolled in college and therefore are prime examples that former foster care youth are capable of succeeding in life.

The PFAs played a vital role in recruiting participants for this research study. This study employed a qualitative research design. The San Bernardino County's Department of Children's Services in collaboration with the Legislation and Research Unit and Quality Support Services (2008) conducted a telephone survey of 200 foster care youth. The foster care youth needed to be at least 16 years old to be eligible to participate in the survey. The foster care youth were asked 86 questions regarding ILP services. The main objectives of this survey were to find out how much foster care youth knew about ILP services and to get their input about what they need for living independently after leaving the foster care system. This study employed the information gathered from this telephone survey.

Based on this telephone survey, questions were developed regarding former foster care youth's perceptions about the effectiveness of ILP services. The data was obtained through two focus group interviews. The sample size consisted of 12 former foster care youth who have participated in ILP in San Bernardino County and are 18 to 24 years old. The focus group sessions lasted up to forty-five minute and were held on three separate occasions after a scheduled PFA meeting. This research design was selected since the study focused on obtaining the subjective feelings of former foster care youth who have participated in ILP and their perceptions about the effectiveness of ILP.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

The findings of this study should help administrators and managers in improving or developing new ILP services. The services should help foster care youth gain the skills necessary to live independently once they exit the child welfare system. Knowledge gained from this study may assist in the development and implementation of programs, services, and resources which former foster care youth feel are necessary to help them

care youth successfully exit the child welfare system and become self-sufficient adults. Also, this information should be cost effective to administrators and managers because they will be able to eliminate programs and services which are not needed or desired by foster care youth.

Child welfare workers may also benefit from the findings of this study. If child welfare workers are aware of services, resources, and programs which are most relevant in helping foster care youth become more independent, then they will be able to refer their clients to those types of services. Furthermore, when child welfare workers begin to notice a difference in the success rates of former foster care youth, they will be more satisfied in their careers because they will know that they are making a difference.

The findings of this research study may contribute to the profession of child welfare by providing insight on the perceptions of former foster care youth regarding what they felt they needed in order to be successful during their transition into adulthood. The conclusions of this study should also be of importance to DCS in San Bernardino County. Since DCS in San Bernardino has

already expressed interest in assessing their ILP services, this study may be beneficial to their knowledge. In addition, this study could potentially assist in the implementation of new services and additional funding for the County. For instance, this study could assist in obtaining additional funding if success rates of former foster care youth improve. Also, DCS in San Bernardino County may utilize the findings of this study and recommend that all other child welfare agencies implement standardized practices and services when working with foster care youth.

Also, the findings of this study could benefit communities. If former foster care youth receive adequate services, they should have the skills needed in finding employment and therefore will be able to sustain themselves. So, this study could benefit communities by reducing the homelessness rates, unemployment rates, and incarceration rates of former foster care youth. If foster care youth are provided with appropriate ILP services, they will have the tools to be more successful. Lastly, this study will provide additional research to the body of existing knowledge regarding ILP services. This study may also generate further research by focusing

on the subjective feelings of former foster care youth regarding the effectiveness of ILP services.

The Generalist Intervention Model (GIM) can be applied to the findings of this study. When looking at the GIM, the findings of this study may be important when utilized during the planning, implementation, and during the evaluation of ILP services. In the planning stage, administrators and managers may want to utilize the findings from this study when they are planning services for foster care youth. Also, during the implementation stage administrators and managers could use this study's findings to implement services, which are going to be the most effective for foster care youth. Finally, during the evaluation stage administrators and program managers could evaluate their services based on what the former foster care youth reported as being the most effective services needed to achieve independence. The purpose of the research study is to assess former foster care youth's perceptions regarding the effectiveness of ILP services in San Bernardino County.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter covers professional literature on the outcomes of former foster care youth enrolled in ILP services. Research has indicated that most foster care youth are not ready to emancipate out of the child welfare system. Furthermore, this chapter examines research on emancipated foster care youth, independent living policy and programs, emancipated foster care youth's common problems, outcomes of ILP, and theories guiding conceptualization.

Emancipated Foster Care Youth

High rates of children entering the foster care system indicate high rates of youth who are aging out of foster care and becoming emancipated each year (Vacca, 2007). There are approximately half a million youth living in child welfare system with about 20,000 youth who will turn 18 years old and age out of foster care each year (USDHHS, 2006). The 20,000 youth who will age out of foster care may not be ready to transition to adulthood. Nevertheless, whether these youth in foster

care are ready or not to exit from the system, they don't have a choice due to their age. The following research indicates that many former foster care youth are unprepared for the transition to adulthood. Furthermore, research examines emancipated foster care youth, ILP policy and programs, common problems among former foster care youth, and research on ILP.

The child welfare system is supposed to be a temporary stop for families during the effort of reunification, permanency plan, adoption, and/or legal guardianship. Unfortunately, foster care youth are staying within the child welfare system rather than reunifying with their families before emancipation. In 2005, over 287,000 foster youth emancipated out of the child welfare system (USDHHS, 2006). After emancipation 54% reunified with their parents or primary caretaker; 11% lived with other relatives; 18% lived with their adoptive family; 4% stayed with their primary guardianship, and the remaining either ran away or transferred to another agency (USDHHS, 2006). Even though, upon emancipation many foster care youth are living with family members, their adoptive family, and or

primary guardian, many end up homeless shortly after emancipation (Vacca, 2007).

There is a high percentage of foster care youth who age out of child welfare system and are homeless regardless of previous living arrangements. Nationwide, there was approximately one to two million former foster care youth who are homeless or live in homeless shelters (English, 2006). In California, there is a high percentage of youth living in homeless shelters. At least 40% of former foster care youth have been or are homeless and/or living in shelters in California (California Department of Social Services, 2002).

Independent Living Policy and Programs

National attention is focused on youth who are exiting from the child welfare system because of the unique challenges foster care youth face by being in the child welfare system and their inability to integrate successfully into adulthood. Legislative acts have been created to ensure the safety of former foster care youth. Under the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Act in 1986, Title IV-E, services for former foster care youth began. In 1987, \$45 million was distributed between the states for

services for former foster care youth for ILP services (Child Welfare League of America [CWLA], 2008).

In 1999, The Foster Care Independence Act through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program provided \$200 million for former foster care youth over the age of 18 who emancipated out of the foster care system. In 2001, states received a new law under the Title IV-E to expand support with Medicaid for former foster care youth ages 18 to 21, which doubled funding for ILP services (CWLA, 2008). The Foster Care Continuing Opportunities Act (S. 1512) in 2007 extended coverage of Title IV-E for former foster care youth up to the age of 21 (CWLA, 2008).

ILP is a federally mandated program focusing on the needs of youth who have emancipated from the child welfare system. Each state is estimated to receive \$2,518 per former foster care youth receiving ILP services (USDHHS, 2006). ILP is dedicated to provide services to eligible young adults who are currently within or have emancipated from the child welfare system. To be eligible for ILP services youth must be within or have been emancipated from the child welfare system ages 16 to 21 for access to services. Foster care youth who are

transitioning to adulthood with the help of ILP are provided the resources to learn skills to become self sufficient upon adulthood.

ILP services are dedicated to helping former foster care youth succeed upon emancipation. ILP services include independent living needs assessment, academic support, housing education, management training, career preparation, health education, employment programs, vocational training, risk prevention, family support, mentoring, supervised independent living, housing financial assistance, educational financial assistance, and/or food assistance (Jim Case Youth Opportunities Initiative [JCYOI], 2006). ILP has a transitional living arrangement for supporting and preparing foster care youth for adulthood emancipation.

Emancipated Foster Care Youth Common Problems

Morris (2007) conducted a qualitative research study which found that former foster care youth left the child welfare system with limited skills to care for themselves. The sample size for this study consisted of 16 emancipated youth between the ages of 18 and 25 years old. Non-probability sampling was utilized in this study.

The data was obtained through in-depth interviews. The study suggested that foster care youth were emancipated every year but are not adequately prepared to deal with the demands of adulthood (Morris, 2007.)

Morris (2007) found five major themes that emerged from the interviews with the former foster care youth. The five major themes that emerged were the following: it's from my past; no place to call home, broken promises, foster care system failed us, and ideas for change (Morris, 2007). Foster care youth reported that they were not taught basic skills such as the importance of good nutrition, sex education, and social skills (Morris, 2007). Furthermore, this study indicated that foster care youth did not receive adequate information about health care benefits and transitional services after a foster care youth emancipated (Morris, 2007). Morris (2007) suggested that a number of foster care youth were aging out from the child welfare system without sufficient training and furthermore, they lacked the advantages that come with having a strong family support system.

Moreover, youth in the child welfare system have psychosocial problems (Daining & DePenfilis, 2007).

Foster care youth who have been placed in multiple foster care homes have more mental and physical health problems than youth living in more stable placements. Most foster care youth are in the system due to abuse or neglect; 62% were neglected and 35% were abused; physically, sexually, or psychologically, and a small percentage were medically neglected (Daining & DePenfilis, 2007). Foster care youth 19-30 years old who aged out of foster care have two times higher rates of post traumatic stress disorder than veterans coming home from war (Pecora, Kessler, Williams, & O'Brien, 2005). Youth who are in foster care or child protective services have higher rates of behavioral problems (Daining & DePenfilis 2007).

Another problem experienced by foster care youth is insufficient education. Vacca (2007) conducted a research study focusing on why foster care youth were having a hard time graduating from high school. Typically, high school is harder for foster care youth to graduate because of their status in the foster care system.

Vacca (2007) explains foster care youth are having a hard time staying on task for high school graduation. Many foster care youth attend several high schools, experience class interruption during the change, have no

consistency in their education, lose focus on their education plan, see several counselors, receive several new teachers, experience a new sets of rules, and experience an unstable and unpredictable environment (Vacca, 2007). These youth in the foster care system are being set up for failure after emancipation.

Vacca (2007) evaluates the aftermath of emancipation; 12 to 18 months after leaving child welfare system, 25% will end up homeless, 34% will end up on welfare, 61% will have no work experience when they exit the foster care system, and only 41% will have a job after one year of emancipation. Many foster care youth who receive a high school diploma do not have the same financial and emotional support as non-foster youth (Packard, Delgado, Fellmeth, & McCready, 2008). These foster care youth are not as encouraged as general youth to participate in extra curricula activities at school. Youth in foster care are more at risk to not receive a proper education by being overlooked (Vacca, 2007).

A research study conducted by Geenen and Powers (2007) evaluated the perceptions of transitioning foster care youth, foster care parents, and child welfare workers during the transition of youth in the foster care

system into adulthood. This study was composed of 10 focus groups with 88 participants. The questions asked during the focus groups were open-ended. This way the participants shared their own perceptions. The questions asked during the focus groups mainly focused on how prepared youth are for adulthood, what is it like to transition, how prepared youth are during their transition, any formal transition plans for adulthood, and the contrast of youth in foster care versus youth not in foster care during the transition to adulthood (Geenen & Powers, 2007).

The 88 participants agreed on similar main topics. The key themes found were self-determination, coordination, relationships importance, family importance, normalizing their experiences in foster care, ILP, and disability issues (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Finding results showed that foster care youth in transition to adulthood were frustrated. The foster care youth and former foster care youth felt that they had no or limited time to learn skills of self determination but they were expected to take full responsibility over their lives even though they are unprepared (Geenen & Powers, 2007).

Foster care youth are supposed to take responsibility over their lives. Youth in foster care feel that the child welfare workers are not listening to them and disregarding their own input and opinions of their own lives (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Foster care youth feel that if they have more power over their decisions during the transition then they are going to have more power over their lives after the transition. The child welfare workers also stated that they would like foster care youth to make more decisions and take more ownership regarding their lives because after they emancipate the youth are in control over their lives (Geenen & Powers, 2007).

Mendes (2006) indicated that "inadequate support while in care, accelerated transitions to adulthood and lack of guaranteed assistance to help facilitate this transition" were factors which have led to problematic outcomes for emancipated youth (p. 123). Furthermore, former foster care youth leaving the child welfare system did not receive ongoing social, emotional, and financial support (Mendes, 2006). Also, this research suggested that many youth in the child welfare system have experienced inadequacies in state care as well as

poor-quality caregivers and constant changes of placement, schools, and social workers (Mendes, 2006).

Such overlooked foster youth are moved around to several different foster homes or group homes. About 20% are in the child welfare system longer than five years, which indicates that 30% of foster care youth will be placed in least three different foster homes (Atkinson, 2008). When foster care youth are placed in numerous placements, there is a higher risk for youth who emancipate out of the child welfare system to be in a state prison (Atkinson, 2008). Moreover, foster care youth who have been placed in many different foster homes have a harder time making friends and are without the proper social support as needed in adulthood (Vacca, 2007).

On the same theme, Samuels and Pryce (2008) conducted a qualitative interpretive study that explored the experiences of former foster care youth. The former foster care youth reflected from past experiences. The sample size of 44 participants was collected from three states. The participants were foster care youth who emancipated after the age of 18. The 44 participants completed an audio-taped interview that lasted

approximately one and a half hours. The main focus of this study was to evaluate youth perceptions regarding: society norms, life stages, and their own development after emancipation.

The results from this study indicated that these youth were conflicted between independence and dependence. The foster care youth felt powerless without any control over their lives, felt too dependent on the child welfare system, and felt they were on their own before emancipation occurred (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). The foster care youth believed that they had to grow up at an early age but did not feel confident when they emancipated out of the child welfare system. Showing psychological vulnerability was a risk to the foster care youth independence. These foster care youth felt that they did not show emotional pain, protected their identities, and protected their pride (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

When the 44 participants were asked what type of barriers they have in their lives, most of the respondents said that they were their own worst enemy and blamed themselves for not achieving their goals (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). The foster care youth have emphasized

that they have no support in their lives. This research shows that these youth are blaming themselves for not succeeding in life rather than blaming the lack of a support system and the lack of resources offered to the foster care youth (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Outcomes of Independent Living Program

In California, an evaluation was collected on the outcomes of former foster care youth in ILP services statewide. The ILP annual statistical report data was collected from October 1, 2006 through September 30, 2007. There were 44,572 foster care youth who were offered ILP services but only 31,819 received ILP services (California Department of Social Services, 2002). Furthermore, six months after emancipating from the child welfare foster care system, 8,059 youth received ILP service. Among youth after emancipation, 30,587 youth completed ILP services; 25,533 youth continued ILP services; 15,695 received a high school/GED diploma; 1,525 youth completed vocation training; 3,361 youth enrolled in community college; 1,108 youth enrolled in a university; 2,300 youth worked fulltime; 430 youth joined the military; 1,116 youth were unemployed; 6,151

youth living in ILP, and 1,772 youth were using other government assisted services (California Department of Social Services, 2002).

Within San Bernardino County, 3,804 foster care youth were offered services and 2,556 youth received services from ILP (California Department of Social Services, 2002). There were 2,556 former foster care youth who completed ILP services; 2,090 youth continued ILP services; 163 youth were enrolled in community college; 33 youth were enrolled in a university; 101 youth were unemployed; 325 youth were employed fulltime; 433 youth were employed part time; 48 youth joined the military; 655 youth were living in ILP, and 45 former foster care youth were using other government assisted services (California Department of Social Services, 2002).

San Bernardino County Department of Children's Services and Probation Department (2001) emphasize the importance of Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) within the county. San Bernardino County foster care youth receive rewards for graduating high school, scholarships for college tuition, tutoring, training for a drivers' license, housing and home supplies, and

financial incentives for participating in ILP classes (SBCDCSPD, 2001). After foster care youth have left the child welfare system, they have access to counseling, support systems, mentoring, networking, crisis intervention, housing assistance, medical benefits up to 21 years of age, and help with job placement (SBCDCSPD, 2001).

ILP services are a fairly a new concept. Studies and research have been conducted in determining the outcomes for youth transitioning out of child welfare system and into adulthood who have participated in ILP programs. Furthermore, former research has subsequently focused on the perceptions on services ILP provides. Recent research studies have been making efforts to identify the contributing factors to the success of former foster care youth in ILP services (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005). Nationwide, of foster care youth 14 to 15 years old, approximately 50% will have access to ILP services and foster care youth age 16 will have a 90% access rate to ILP services (JCYOI, 2006).

Geenen and Powers (2007) looked at ILP experiences. Many foster care youth had a hard time entering the ILP services. The foster care youth reported that there were

put on a waiting list to get assigned an ILP case manager (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Most of the foster care youth only participated in a few ILP classes and felt that the services were not meeting their needs for the real world (Geenen & Powers, 2007). The study showed that some of the participants and ILP providers suggested that foster parents could be trained in ILP services to help their foster care youth succeed after emancipation. The participants also suggested that ILP services could be terminated because foster parents would be training their foster care youth (Geenen & Powers, 2007).

Another empirical research study documents problems with emancipation among foster care youth and the benefits of ILP services. The Midwest study was a longitudinal study, which followed former foster care youth who had exited the foster care system one year previous to the study being conducted (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). The former foster care youth came from three different states: Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin. The Midwest longitudinal study utilized a survey design to collect their data. The first data set was collected between May 2002 and March 2003 from 732 youth who were 17 to 18 years old (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006).

The first data set consisted of 732 youth who were still in foster care and the first data set collected focused on interviews of the youth in foster care and their experiences which included: mental health, social support, substance abuse and victimization. The second study occurred between March and December 2004 from 603 of the 732 youth who were interviewed in 2003 (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Furthermore, the second study focused on some of the same issues, but was more directed towards their experiences since they were discharged from the foster care system. The Midwest study suggested that youth making the transition from child welfare system to independence were less likely to be employed (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006).

Additionally, many former foster care youth struggled with substance abuse problems and also struggled with mental health problems. This study suggested that states should consider allowing foster care youth to remain in the child welfare system past 18 years old and that by providing them with more ILP services, they would be more likely to succeed once leaving the child welfare system (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006).

Moreover, Mallon's (1998) exploratory study in New York focused on the improvement of foster care youth's ability of to be self-sufficient within ILP at the time of discharge from their placement. The sample size consisted of 46 African-American males. The researcher utilized a Life Skills Assessment tool to measure the level of self-sufficiency in youth prior to entering the ILP (Mallon, 1998). Therefore, baseline data were collected at the intake and then data were collected again when the youth graduated from the life skills program. Mallon (1998) conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with former clients of the ILP. The research, though not generalizable, showed the feasibility of accomplishing the primary aim of independent living services. Findings showed that there were ILP services that successfully prepare foster care youth for emancipation (Mallon, 1998).

On the same theme, Lemon et al. (2005) explored the benefits of ILP services. The data collected was through a self administrated mailed survey to former foster care youth. There were two subject groups: former foster care youth attending college in ILP services and former foster care youth not attending college. Statistics showed that

former foster care youth in ILP services became more successful. On the other hand, both former foster care youth in ILP and youth not in ILP felt that the child welfare system did not prepare them for college; of the respondents in ILP, 57.1% felt prepared for college when emancipating compared to 32.1% of non ILP respondents (Lemon et al., 2005). Conversely, 53.8% of ILP respondents felt happy with their current lives compared to 43.1% non ILP respondents who were not as happy with their current lives (Lemon et al., 2005). The research showed that foster care youth who participated in ILP services were more successful and prepared for emancipation than foster care youth not enrolled in ILP services.

Furthermore, Lemon et al. (2005) conducted a study on ILP services using an ethnographic analysis interviewing nine ILP coordinators in California counties. The two main areas of study were types of ILP services and the impact of the services provided by ILP. The nine ILP coordinators found two common themes: typical services and unique services. Typical services included instructions services, incentives earned by ILP participants, workshops, financial aid, college

applications, financial assistance, housing, food, and/or transportation services (Lemon et al., 2005). Unique ILP services included computer training, free computers after completing computer training, role playing activities, kin caregiver, pre-ILP programs, internships, apartment placement (with supervision), SAT preparation classes, and celebration events (Lemon et al., 2005). One major finding from the nine ILP coordinators examined was not only the need for ILP to focus on basic skills, but ILP services also must focus on the emotional needs of the foster care youth transitioning to ILP services (Lemon et al., 2005). This study indicates that ILP services played a significant role after foster care youth have left the child welfare foster system.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

The Ecosystem Theory helped guide this research proposal. The Ecosystem Theory focuses on the systems within the environment and how the systems affect people (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashmen, 2007). The Ecosystem Theory examines why people are doing what they are doing, and can be used to evaluate why former foster youth are having a difficult time during their transition from

child welfare system to adulthood. The Ecosystem Theory looks at the person in the environment. The child welfare system is the environment for foster care youth. The environmental factors influence the functioning of human behavior.

A research conducted by Mech in 1988 and restudied in 1999, led the way for future research regarding youth being independent after emancipation. Mech's (1988) research focused on needs-based research. The results showed that environment helps shape individuals. If the environment is unstable then the individual is going to be unstable. Therefore, foster care youth who have experienced trauma in their lives have to overcome their unstable environment.

Ecosystem Theory focuses on goodness of fit. Former foster care youth react to the environment around them. Mech (1989) stated that if environment is stable, individuals within that environment will also be stable.

Summary

Very little qualitative research has been conducted on the outcomes of former foster care youth enrolled in ILP services. Research has indicated that many foster

care youth are not ready to transition into adulthood, but there is little research known on the effects ILP services. Foster care youth are unprepared to transition to adulthood because of a lack of skills, psychosocial problems, disruption of education, and numerous placements. Overall, research has not shown personal improvement in the lives of the foster care youth after emancipation. Furthermore, research within the literature looks at emancipated foster care youth, ILP policy and programs, common problems among former of foster care youth, and research on ILP.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter employs a detailed description of research methods and procedures used in evaluating former foster care youth perceptions on ILP services. Specifically, this section covers study design, sampling method, data collection, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the perceptions of former foster care youth on ILP services within San Bernardino County. Research has suggested different outcomes of former foster care youth transitioning into adulthood, but research has been minimal when it comes to the outcomes of former foster care youth involved with ILP services. Getting the different perceptions of former foster care youth will hopefully provide additional information for foster care youth who have or will receive ILP services. By exploring the perceptions of former foster care youth regarding ILP

services, future foster care youth may receive improved services with ILP.

The type of research design this study employed was qualitative. This qualitative research using focus groups will solicited the opinions of former foster care youth. This survey obtained data by allowing the former foster care youth to voice their opinions during the focus groups. For this study, focus groups were the preferred method for qualitative study because participants share common characteristics that are relevant to this study. An interview guide was used to gather information. There were three separate focus groups based on open ended questions. Each focus group consisted of 3 to 6 participants. Each focus group data was transcribed and common categories, themes, and/or topics were identified to allow grouping and organizing of the data.

The limitations for this study were the small sample size and non probability sampling. Due to the small sample size, 11 participants, this study is not a representative sample of all former foster care youth in San Bernardino County. In addition, the sample strategies are convenience sampling; participants who were available for the study could be a limitation due to a small sample

size. Another limitation was interviewers' personal biased opinions which could lead to skewing the data. Lastly, interviewer influence was a limitation while gathering data within a focus group.

Sampling

Participants for this study were recruited by the several after-care services within San Bernardino County. The after-care services were the Transitional Age Youth Center (TAY) and the Youth Empowerment Service Center (YES). The first focus group consisted of three participants from the TAY Center and the second focus group consisted of three participants from the YES Center. The last focus group consisted of six former foster care youth who are currently employed by the Department of Children Services (DCS) in San Bernardino County. The sample size for this study was 11 participants. The participants were former foster care youth over the age of 18 to 23. The sampling criteria consisted of former foster care youth who have or have not been involved in ILP services within San Bernardino County. There were three separate focus groups; each focus group had 3 to 6 former foster care youth

participants. For this study, there were no gender and/or ethnicity restrictions.

Data Collection and Instruments

The data for this study was gathered by way of conducting three focus groups, which were held on three separate dates. The focus groups were held on February 19, February 27, and March 6, 2009. The focus groups were unstructured with several guiding questions. The questions will be posed in an open-ended manner. By posing the questions in an open-ended manner, an interaction between the participants in the focus groups was increased. This study also utilized an interview guide approach. By utilizing the interview guide approach, it allowed the researchers to probe for further information if needed. During the focus groups, the former foster care youth were asked to answer questions regarding their subjective feelings about the effectiveness of ILP services. The questions were developed to ensure the participants were able to share their personal feelings regarding ILP services.

Participants in the study were asked who is informing foster care youth about ILP services and their

benefits. Also, this study investigated the level of participation of foster care youth in ILP services. By asking the former foster care youth to discuss their experiences with ILP services, this study hoped to generate valuable information which could potentially lead to improved ILP services. Assessing the skills learned by former foster care youth can also create valuable knowledge. This information can be used to create additional programs and or services determined by the participants in this study to be the most effective. This study examined obstacles faced by former foster care youth face once they exit out of the child welfare system. Lastly, the participants in this study were asked to share additional information which they felt would better prepare foster care youth for independent living. See Appendix A for Interview Guide.

Procedures

Kathy Watkins, the Legislative Program Manager from the Research Unit in San Bernardino County, was contacted to identify potential research topics and also prospective participants for this study. The second step in conducting this research study was to obtain consent

to perform this study from Department of Children Services San Bernardino County (DCSSBC) administration. A letter describing this research study was formulated and mailed to DeAnna Avey-Motikeit, the Director of DCSSBC.

Once research consent was granted from DCSSBC administration, the next step was to have access to the results from a previous telephone survey entitled "San Bernardino County's Independent Living Program Survey on Youth in Foster Care, which was conducted in May, 2008. This research study utilized the information gathered from this telephone survey to further explore areas of key findings and thus formulate open-ended questions. By contacting several after-care facilities in San Bernardino County and through on-going contacts with PFA, the researchers established rapport with the former foster care youth and participants for this research study were recruited. On-going contact with the TAY Center, the YES Center, and the PFAs facilitated the process of recruiting former foster care youth to participate in this study.

Once 11 participants were recruited for this study, they were invited to participate in focus group interviews. Participants were given a five dollar

Starbucks gift card as compensation for their time. Once this study obtained consent from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the focus groups were held. A location for the focus group interviews was selected with the participants' convenience in mind. The first two focus groups were held at the after-care centers. The last focus group was held at a DCS office in San Bernardino. Confidentiality was addressed as well as informed consent including participant consent to audiotape the sessions. See Appendix B for Informed Consent.

During the focus groups, the participants were offered pizza and refreshments. The first focus group took 15 minutes and 30 seconds. The second focus group took 17 minutes and the third focus group lasted 43 minutes. Both researchers involved in conducting this study gathered data throughout the duration of the focus group meeting. The data collection was completed by on March 6, 2009. Once the data was collected, it was transcribed verbatim and key themes were identified. Data analysis and synthesis of the data began in March 2009.

Protection of Human Subjects

Since this study's purpose was to generate further information through focus groups regarding former foster care youth and their perceptions about the effectiveness of ILP services, every conceivable measure was taken to ensure the protection of rights and confidentiality of all the research participants. The participants were given informed consent. Before the focus group began, the participants were told about the nature of the study and the duration of time the focus group will take to complete. Also, the participants were given detailed information about their rights to confidentiality. A debriefing statement was provided for the study participants after the focus groups were concluded. See Appendix C for Debriefing Statement. Furthermore, this study took every measure needed to ensure the participants information was kept confidential.

The personal information needed for this study was age, gender, ethnicity, and level of education. Participants were asked to fill out a demographics survey. See Appendix D for Demographics Survey. Any participant information which could potentially disclose their identity was stored in a locked box with restricted

access only for both researchers involved in conducting this study. Once the needed data was obtained, the participants were given a code and their identifying information was omitted from the field notes. Lastly, the overall findings of this research study were presented in a confidential manner and the tape-recording and field notes were destroyed once this study was concluded.

Data Analysis

This study employed qualitative data analysis techniques. First, the data from the focus groups was tape recorded. The tape recordings were transcribed verbatim in transcript form. There were two levels of coding. The first-level of coding identified meanings of common categories and assigned codes to common categories. A journal was used to record the codes to common categories. The second-level of coding identified similarities, differences, and helped detect relationships between common categories. The data common themes were identified by the researchers.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the methodology employed in this study exploring the perceptions of former foster

care youth on their experiences regarding ILP services.
This chapter covered study design, sampling methods, data collection, procedures, protection of human subjects, and lastly data analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

Chapter four presents the results of a qualitative data study obtained by three focus groups within San Bernardino County. These findings were analyzed to describe former foster care youth perceptions on the effectiveness of ILP services. Also, presented in this section is the demographic information of the participants.

Presentation of the Findings

Demographics

The study sample consisted of three focus groups with the sample size of 11 participants. The first focus group consisted of three participants, one female and two males. The second focus group consisted of three participants, all females. The last focus group consisted of five participants; three females and two males. The total sample size consisted of more females than males: seven females and four males.

A demographic survey was given to the participants before the focus groups were conducted. The male

participant's ages ranged from 18 to 23 years with the average age of 21 years of age. The female participant's ages ranged from 18 to 22 years with the average age of 19 years of age. Four of the participants, one male and three females overlooked the age question on the demographic survey.

There were four participants who were White/Non-Hispanic: one male and three females. There were three Hispanic participants: two males and one female. One female participant identified herself as other ethnicity and one female participant identified herself as an African American. One male participant identified as White/Non-Hispanic and Hispanic. Lastly, one male participant identified himself as an African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and other.

The participants were asked about their level of education. Out of eleven participants, five participants received some college education: two males and three females. Two female participants were high school graduates. Two participants had some high school education: one male and one female. The last two participants were one female who was a college graduate and one male participant who had a graduate degree.

Focus Group

The first question asked during the focus groups was who informed the participants about ILP services. Out of eleven participants, six participants, the majority, reported that their social worker informed them of ILP services. One participant responded by saying, "I learned it [ILP] through my social worker." Some participants reported they were informed about ILP services by different sources including a foster mother, probation officer, and aunt. Another participant said he learned about ILP services through his foster mother while another said her probation officer informed her of ILP services. The third participant reported that his aunt informed him of ILP services. However, one participant responded by saying "I never even heard about it [ILP]...I was only a foster child for I think three months, so I was never informed." The last participant said that she was not eligible for ILP because she was adopted when she was a teenager.

In regard to the level of participation in ILP service, three categories emerged from the participants' responses: highly involved with ILP services, moderately involved, and not involved with ILP services. Out of

eleven participants, six participants responded that they were highly involved with ILP services. One participant said, "I had a high level of it [ILP], I did everything possible that I could in ILP. I did the car match, going to college, doing career building sessions, going to the ILP activities, I did it all. I was very highly involved." Another category was moderately involved with ILP services. Two participants said that they were only involved for a short period of time, "I was only in [ILP] for one month." Lastly, three participants said that they had no involvement with ILP services. One participant said, "I was not in [ILP] at all" and another participant who was adopted as a teenager did not respond to the question.

The participants were asked about their detailed experience with ILP services. There were two categories that emerged from the participants' responses regarding experience with ILP: experience with ILP was valuable and experience with ILP was not beneficial. Out of eleven participants, six participants felt that the experience with ILP helped them once they emancipated out of the child welfare system. When asked why the experience was valuable, one participant mentioned "They taught us how

to get ready for life after you are out of the system.”

Another participant stated that ILP taught him the skills needed to obtain and maintain a job.

Conversely, two participants felt that they did not benefit from ILP services. One participant felt that he got into ILP services late and was unable to take advantage of the services provided by ILP. The participant stated that he had a hard time transitioning from ILP to life after emancipation. Another participant had a similar experience, “I was jumping around to different foster homes to different group homes and they would have to transfer to different locations [for ILP classes] like Rancho to San Bernardino to San Bernardino back to Rancho.” The participant emphasized that she was not getting the proper ILP services because she was moving from one location to another. Three participants had no experience with ILP and they felt that they would have benefited from ILP services if the county had offered ILP services.

Several categories emerged regarding skills learned in ILP classes. The categories were: practical skills and no involvement with ILP services. As far as hard skills, five participants mentioned that they learned money

management, balancing checkbooks, resumes, and mock interviews. One of the participants mentioned because he was involved with hard skills class, "I know how to balance money, what to spend, what I need to spend it on, and what not to spend it on." Three participants responded regarding learning soft skills in ILP classes. One participant stated that she learned "Life skills, getting a job, food, and housing." Three participants did not answer the question because they had no involvement with ILP classes.

Participants were then asked what skills learned in ILP classes were most helpful after emancipation. Overall, all the participants agreed that the skills they learned helped them after emancipation. The main category regarding skills they learned which helped them after they emancipated out of the child welfare system was money management. Over half of the participants reported that the skills learned during the Independent City event were beneficial. One participant mentioned that she learned money management during the Independent City event. She mentioned that she still uses the money management skills learned even after she exited out of the child welfare system. Another participant reported

she felt it was significant for her to see former foster care youth at the event. She reported that, "Former youth were there performing, talking about their inspirations, and telling their experiences about coming out of the system" and this was an inspiration to her. Another participant stated, "It's the number one program that I recommend especially if you are going to emancipate [soon]."

Moreover, one participant responded, "[Life skills] overall [were helpful after emancipation], helped me get through life a lot more easier than how I was getting through it. It just really helped me stay on my feet." Another participant responded that money management was most helpful for him after emancipation because "I lived in the dorms, [learned] survival skills, learn[ed] money [management], and how to live on [my] own." The third participant responded that "Being able to count my money because I was not able to count my money. It helped me a lot because I can do it [count money] now." Lastly, most of the respondents agreed that money management was most helpful for them after emancipation. One responded said that being able to learn how to "Make a shopping list and learned how to shop" was most helpful for her when she

exited out of the child welfare system. Additionally, one participant mentioned that all the skills he learned were helpful after he emancipated, "They all were, they all helped." Three participants did not respond to the question due to their lack of involvement with ILP services.

Participants were asked what aspects of ILP classes were least helpful to them. Two participants reported that ILP classes were overcrowded. One participant reported, "I think also they're a little too crowded sometimes, I know it was my experience when I was going. I want to go and learn. It's distracting to have them there giggling, making jokes, and being rude. Also, I think they need to have smaller classes so they can control the room." In addition, another participant agreed by stating, "It was out of control, it was too crowded, and you get more distracted" by the others in the class.

One participant reported that the ILP classes were boring. He mentioned, "I went every year to the ILP classes, it was boring most of the time. I know that there were certain classes that were more interesting than others due to the presenter." A second participant

reported that one of the classes she attended was not helpful to her at all. She stated, "I could still remember until this day, it was consumer awareness class. I did not get anything out of that class. So why am I here?" While another participant reported that, the ILP classes "Were all redundant to me."

On the contrary, another participant felt that all ILP classes were helpful to her, "No, they were all helpful." Lastly, two participants felt that they did not have enough experience with ILP classes to express their concerns with ILP classes that were least helpful. One participant reported, "It's hard because I got involved with ILP late, I didn't get to experience all of them" and another participant stated, "I could not really say least because I was not really there."

The participants were asked what their biggest obstacle was after emancipating out of the child welfare system. Three categories emerged from the findings: obstacles with families, obstacles with health care benefits, and obstacles with finances.

Most of the participants seemed to feel that family involvement or lack of involvement was an obstacle in their lives after emancipation. One participant discussed

his concern with not having a biological family involved with his life after emancipation. He stated, "I do not have a family. I did not have anyone to help me. I had to jump out there on my own. I was homeless for a while." While another participant said her main concern after emancipation was to find a place to live, "Figuring out where I am going to live, what I am going to do." Additionally, the third participant stated, "I was happy that I was going to emancipate but to me it was a feeling of not belonging anywhere or to anything now."

Another participant expressed her concerns regarding her biological family, "Dealing with my family with the way they are. This is my biggest obstacle and it is still my biggest obstacle today." A second participant stated concerns with reconnecting with her biological family, "It was more of a stressful situation trying to say I know I am 18, I need to make my own decisions, let go of my biological family and move on." Additionally, a third participant stated, "Families are supposed to provide information to lead you through life, show you how they did it, show you how to utilize different things in your community. But we don't have parents like that."

The second category regarding obstacles after emancipation was related to their health care benefits not transferring once they emancipated out of the child welfare system. Three participants discussed their concerns with health care benefits. The first participant stated, "I think another obstacle is medical insurance. It seems they cut [my benefits] off all the time." While another participant mentioned, "I have been without medical insurance for a year and a half because I turned 21." The third participant stated he had no healthcare benefits because it took him two years to get his Medi-cal transferred after he emancipated.

Lastly, three participants reported their biggest obstacle was related to finances. The first participant reported, "For me it's financially. I think financially it gets hard." While the second participant agreed by saying, "Of course financially, going to school [cost money], but that is life." Whereas, the third participant emphasized that he had to drop out of college due to lack of finances, "I had to leave school because I could not afford the train ticket, books, and rent. That was my biggest issue."

Furthermore, the participants were asked for suggestions to better prepare foster care youth for independent living. There were three categories that emerged: have proper resources, access to aftercare services, and offer ILP services to everyone. Three participants suggested that foster care youth have not been given the proper resource to emancipate. The first participant said, "To help find resources, I know there is not a lot of resources out here but at least try to help us find stuff." While the second participant agreed by stating, "I think the biggest thing they could do is prepare you by making sure you have all your documents and making sure you have everything in line so it's a smoother transition to aftercare." Moreover, the third participant suggested, "You know one thing that ILP can probably do is teach the youth how to get a hold of some type of low income insurance. ILP should create a workshop to show you how to obtain low income, no income insurance, or how to apply for it or who to go to [for insurance]."

The second category that emerged from the participants was to help foster care youth connect with an aftercare services or have a worker after they

emancipate. Three participants agreed that foster care youth should either have an aftercare worker or be connected with aftercare services. One participant suggested, "Go to aftercare and get the help that they [foster care youth] need. I am where I am today because of the aftercare worker that I had." While the next participant responded by saying, "If we had someone [aftercare worker] there that would make sure we were getting to where we needed to get to, that would be good." The third participant stated, "I think transitioning housing placement is great but I think that they should extend the time on the transitioning housing placement. Also, more youth should be able to get a room because its only 36 beds and 300 youth emancipate a year." The same participant emphasized that, "Once you emancipate, you done have the luxury to fail."

Lastly, the third category that emerged from the participants responses was ILP services should be available to everyone not just foster care youth. The first participant suggested, "I would say instead of just having the ILP process for just foster kids, have it for anybody that needs it or want the training." While a second participant agreed by saying, "Same here, I wish

everyone knew about it [ILP services]." Four participants did not respond to the question due to their agreement with the responses of the other participants.

The final question the participants were asked was if there was anything else they would like the researchers to know. There were three categories that emerged from this question: offering ILP services at an earlier age, offer more ILP services, and have more former foster care youth work for the county. Two participants agreed that ILP should be offered at an earlier age. The first participant said, "The biggest issue I think is the age because it [ILP] can start at an earlier age. It really should start at like 12 or 13 years old to be giving them the right tools that they need so by the time when they are 18 they have made a connection with the worker and they're fully ready to emancipate. It would be more beneficial." The second participant was in agreement with the first participant by saying, "[The] age is really too short [for ILP], you are just out there [after emancipation]. If you [ILP] could teach me a little earlier, I would have liked to have learned even more."

The second category to emerge was for ILP to offer more services for foster care youth. Three participants discussed their feeling about ILP offering more services. The first participant stated, "I just wish there was more services especially with housing and financially. That is the main thing that all teenagers need after they are 18." While another participant said, "I wish there was more help with housing and financial. Maybe other supports that we need like Medi-cal, dentist, or stuff like that. It would be helpful to have somebody to show us how to get that [resources]." The third participant responded to the question by saying, "Even they [ILP] should have more services to help young teen girls that have kids because I have a daughter and there was nothing they could do for me."

Conclusions

For various reasons the participants suggested that San Bernardino County should have additional former foster care youth, such as Peer and Family Advocates (PFA). As one of the participants indicated, "They can relate to us, you know, [PFA] because we're in the same situation." An additional participant affirmed, "Yes, I think there should be more PFA's." One of the

participants felt it was important for foster care youth to have someone who they can connect with. He mentioned, "When they hear it come from someone their age [PFA], they understand it more. They feel more emotionally attached [to PFA]. They have someone [PFA] to relate to them and have someone to talk to." Lastly, one of the participants stated, "ILP is awesome and it should never be discontinued."

Summary

This study set out to identify former foster care youth perceptions on ILP services. The findings from the focus groups conveyed the following results. Foster care youth were informed about ILP services through various sources. They were social workers, a probation officer, relatives, and through a foster parent. However, it was found that not all children in the foster care system were eligible to receive ILP services due to several reasons. One participant was adopted before she turned 16 years old and therefore she was ineligible to receive ILP services and another participant did not qualify because she was only in the foster care system for three months. Most of the participants felt that their experience with

ILP services and the skills they learned were beneficial because it helped them better prepare for emancipation. The participants identified several skills learned through ILP services: money management, job preparation, and being able to balance their checkbooks. They also identified the Independent City event as being instrumental in helping them prepare for emancipation. The participants acknowledged that they learned money management skills during the Independent City event.

Although the participants reported that ILP services were beneficial, they also mentioned various aspects of ILP services, which were not helpful. They stated that the ILP class were too crowded, the classes were boring, and too redundant.

As far as biggest obstacles the participants faced once they emancipated out of the child welfare system, they identified several obstacles: reconnecting with their biological families, not having healthcare coverage, and enduring financial difficulties. The participants suggested that foster care youth can better prepare for emancipation if they had the proper resources, access to after care services, and if ILP services were offered to everyone. Lastly, the

participants mentioned that ILP services should be available at an earlier age, more ILP services should be offered, and more former foster care youth should work for the county.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter will explain the findings, limitations, and recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research. Additionally, it will discuss the results of the study as it relates to the information provided in the literature review.

Discussion

This study set out to identify former foster care youth perceptions on the effectiveness of ILP services. The findings from the three focus groups with eleven participants conveyed the following results: social workers, probation officer, relative, and a foster parent were identified by the participants of who informed them of ILP services. In addition, the participants stated that the skills they learned in ILP were beneficial for them after emancipation. Furthermore, money management, job preparation, and balancing checkbooks were identified by the participants as the skills they learned in ILP services. Some of the participants also identified money

management skills learned at the Independent City event helped them to prepare for emancipation.

Moreover, the participants identified ILP services which were least helpful to them. The services were classes were too crowded, boring, and redundant. Furthermore, the participants identified obstacles they faced after emancipation. The obstacles were reconnecting with their biological families, not having healthcare coverage, and enduring financial difficulties. The participants identified proper resources, access to after care services, and offer to ILP service to everyone as ways to better prepare foster care youth for emancipation. Lastly, the participants suggested ILP services should be available at an earlier age, provide more services, and have more former foster care youth work for the county.

The majority of the participants were well educated. Most of the participants were high school graduates. Out of eleven participants, five participants indicated that they had some college experience. One participant reported that he was a college graduate and one participant conveyed that she had a graduate degree. This information is inconsistent with a previous study

conducted by Vacca (2007) which suggested that foster care youth have a hard time staying on task for high school graduation. Furthermore, Vacca (2007) found that graduating from high school is harder for foster care youth due to multiple disruptions in placements while in the foster care system.

The study found that half of the participants reported that their social worker informed them about ILP services. The findings of this question is consistent with previous research conducted by Geenen and Powers (2007) which indicated that foster care youth felt that child welfare workers need to listen to them and become more involved.

When the participants were asked about their detailed experience with ILP services, out of eleven participants, six participants felt their experience with ILP services helped them prepare for life once they emancipated out of the child welfare system. The findings of this question can be compared to a previous study conducted by Lemon et al., (2005) which found that foster care youth who participated in ILP services were more successful and prepared for emancipation than foster care youth not enrolled in ILP services.

This study found that the skills they learned in ILP classes were helpful for them after emancipation. All of the participants felt that the ILP classes they took did help them after emancipation. The findings from this study are consistent with Mallons's (1998) research, which stated that ILP classes successfully prepare foster care youth for emancipation.

This study also found the obstacles faced by the participants once they emancipated out of the child welfare system. The obstacles were dealing with their families, lack healthcare benefits, and financial difficulties. Most of the participants felt their biggest obstacle after emancipate was lack of involvement and support from their biological families. The participant's responses were consistent with Morris (2002) study which suggested that foster care youth emancipating out of the child welfare system lacked the advantages that come with having a strong family and a support system.

In addition, another obstacle the participants faced after emancipation was lack of healthcare benefits. These findings were consistent with Morris (2002) study which indicated that former foster care youth do not receive adequate information about health care benefits during

and after they transition out of the child welfare system.

The participants in the study suggested changes to better prepare foster care youth for emancipation. The findings of the study indicated foster care youth need to be given proper resources, have access to aftercare services, and offer ILP services to youth currently in or out of the child welfare system. The participants' responses regarding foster care youth having access to aftercare services are consistent with Courtney and Dworsky's (2006) study. In this study, the researchers recommended that states should offer ILP services for every foster care youth past the age of 18 (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006).

The participants were asked for any additional information they would like the researchers to know. Most of the participants agreed that ILP services should offer more classes to youth in foster care. The participants felt more ILP classes would be helpful in preparing foster care youth for emancipation. The findings of this research are consistent with the study conducted by Lemon et al. (2005) which suggested ILP needs to offer

additional classes for foster care youth in order to help prepare them for emancipation.

Limitations

This research project identified several limitations. First, due to the small sample size, the findings cannot be generalized to a larger foster care youth population. Also, since all three focus groups were conducted in San Bernardino County, other foster care youth were not given an opportunity to share their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of ILP services.

Another limitation was the sample size consisted of predominantly female participants: seven female and four males. Due to lack of permanency of the population's living arrangements once they exit out of the child welfare system, the researchers found it difficult to locate this population. In addition, the researchers found the participants had a difficult time getting to the after care services where the focus groups were held. This was due to transportation, timing, and weather.

Furthermore, one participant left halfway through the focus group and did not answer all the questions during the focus group. Due to the similarity between two

questions on the interview guide, during the focus groups, the participants answered both questions the same. In addition, a bias in the study could be some of the participants are currently employed by DCS. Lastly, another limitation was some of the participants left missing data on the demographic survey.

Recommendations of Policy, Social Work Practice, and Further Research

Ideally, the findings of this study can be utilized to help guide the Department of Children's Services (DCS) who oversees ILP in San Bernardino County. It is hoped that the data gathered from this study will assist in the evaluation of current services and in the development and implementation of additional programs, services, and resources for all foster care youth who reside in San Bernardino County. Recommendations for policy change can be made based on the participants' responses regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of ILP services. The recommendations include offering ILP at an earlier age, making ILP mandatory for all youth in the foster care system, having a medical liaison, creating additional services, hiring additional former foster care

youth as county employees, and finally extending ILP services until youth reach 21.

Youth in the foster care system must be enrolled in ILP services at a younger age, such as 12 years old. If youth in the foster care system were enrolled in ILP services at a younger age, they would be given an opportunity to learn the skills necessary to live independently once they exit the child welfare system. Furthermore, ILP services should be mandatory and available to all youth in the foster care system because they all need job preparation, money management skills, assistance with locating community resources, and opening and maintaining bank accounts. Currently, if youth in the foster care system are adopted or if they return home before their 16th birthday, they are ineligible to receive ILP services. However, this population of youth should be offered ILP services because it would be beneficial for them. Additionally, ILP services can be created to help foster care youth; these services should allow the youth to practice using independent living skills. For example, during the Independent City event, the participants reported that they enjoyed the event because they were able to participate in mock job

interviews. The youth would benefit from classes where they can learn and practice using independent living skills in a real life experience rather than sitting in a classroom for hours.

Another recommendation for policy change concerning ILP is to create a position for a medical liaison. The medical liaison would assist foster care youth in accessing medical benefits, explaining medical coverage, and ensuring that they keep their medical benefits at least until 21 years of age. Moreover, former foster care youth should be encouraged to work for the county as mentors and social workers. Former foster care youth can be a valuable asset to the county because they are experts in issues concerning youth in the foster care system. Lastly, ILP services should be available to youth who have emancipated out of the child welfare system past their 18th birthday.

Recommendations for social work practice can be made based on the participants' responses regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of ILP services. The recommendations are extended involvement with foster care youth, creation of a position for a foster care youth expert, and employment of multidisciplinary team meetings

for every foster care youth. Once youth exit out of the child welfare system, most social workers terminate the relationship. However, social workers should be encouraged to keep in contact with former foster care youth because they can provide further assistance with accessing services, resources, and programs. Once the youth have emancipated out of the child welfare system, social workers should maintain contact with the youth in order to ensure that the youth have successfully reconnected with their biological families.

Another consideration for social work practice is to increase social worker knowledge regarding resources, services, and program availability for youth in the foster care system. Social worker knowledge regarding resources, services, and program availability can help foster care youth transition successfully out of the child welfare system. Additionally, multidisciplinary team meetings should be held at the age of 16 for every foster care youth in order to provide the foster care youth assistance. During the multidisciplinary team meetings, social workers should address issues regarding resources, education, preparing legal documents, health benefits, assessing life long connections, and life

skills. The primary goal of a multidisciplinary team meeting would be to ensure foster care youth are adequately prepared for emancipation. Being knowledgeable about the effectiveness of current ILP services can lead to changes in policies and practices among social workers in San Bernardino County. Further research can expand the knowledge necessary in the creation of a comprehensive program, which would address all issues concerning foster care youth's needs.

Conclusions

This study examined foster care youth perceptions regarding the effectiveness of ILP services within San Bernardino County. Three focus groups were held in order to obtain former foster care youth subjective perceptions about ILP services. The participants identified several suggestions to better prepare youth in the foster care system for emancipation. The suggestions included beginning ILP at an earlier age, extending ILP services past 18 years old, and offering more ILP services. Overall, the participants in this study mentioned the skills they learned through ILP services helped them once they emancipated out of the child welfare system. Most

participants learned about ILP services from their social workers. However, they also noted that their social worker could have been more involved in helping them develop necessary skills. Acquiring knowledge about former foster care youth perceptions about current ILP services is necessary in order to improve service delivery targeted towards foster care youth. This study allowed former foster care youth to have a voice.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

Who informed you about ILP services?

What was your level of participation in ILP services?

What was your experience with ILP services?

What skills did you learn in ILP classes?

Were the skills you learned helpful after emancipation?

What aspect of ILP classes was more helpful to you?

What aspect of ILP classes was least helpful to you?

What was the biggest obstacle you think you faced after you emancipated out of the child welfare system?

What changes would you suggest to better prepare foster care youth for independent living?

Is there anything else you would like us to know?

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent

The study in which you are being asked to participate in is designed to explore former foster care youth perceptions about the effectiveness of Independent Living Program services (ILP). This study is being conducted by Sandra Guerrero and Amy Mierzwik, students within Masters in Social Work under the supervision of Associate Professor Janet Chang, Department of Social Work. This study has been approved by the Department of the Social Work Sub-committee of the Institutional Review Board, California State University of San Bernardino.

In this study, you are invited to attend one of two focus groups consisting of 6 to 12 other former foster care youth who participated in ILP services in San Bernardino County. You will be asked to verbally respond to questions regarding your experiences, skills, level of participation, and future changes regarding ILP services. The focus group should take about one to two hours to complete. All of your responses will be held in the strictest of confidence by the researchers. Your name will not be reported with your responses. All data will be reported in group form only. You may receive the results of this study upon completion after September, 2009 at the Pfau Library, California State University San Bernardino.

Your participation in this study is totally voluntary. You are free not to answer any questions at any time during this study without penalty. When you have completed the focus group, you will receive a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail. In order to ensure the validity of this study, we ask that you not discuss this study with other participants. You will receive a \$5 gift certificate from Starbucks for spending your valuable time to participate in this study. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you as a result of participating in this study.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Professor Janet Chang at 909-537-5501.

By placing a check mark in the box below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and that I understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate. I also acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

Place a check mark here

Date

APPENDIX C
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Debriefing Statement

Thank you for participating in this study conducted by Sandra Guerrero and Amy Mierzwik, MSW students. The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of ILP services in San Bernardino County through the perceptions of former foster care youth. The conclusions of this study will hopefully provide more insight on the perceptions of former foster care youth regarding what they felt they needed in order to be successful during their transition into adulthood. In addition, it is hoped the conclusions of this study could potentially assist in the implementation of new services and additional funding for the County.

All data collected will be kept confidential and anonymous. The results of this study will be available in the California State University, San Bernardino Pfau Library after September 30, 2009. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this research project you may contact my faculty supervisor, Dr. Janet Chang at the CSUSB Department of Social Work at (909) 537-5184.

Thank you again for you participation in this research project.

APPENDIX D
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Participant Demographic Survey

Gender: 1.) Male _____
2.) Female _____

How old were you on your last birthday? _____

Ethnicity: 1.) African American _____
2.) Asian/Pacific Islander _____
3.) Hispanic _____
4.) White/non-Hispanic _____
5.) Other _____

Level of Education:
1.) Some High School _____
2.) High School Graduate _____
3.) Some College _____
4.) College Graduate _____
5.) Graduate Degree _____

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES PAGE

This was a two-person project where authors collaborated throughout. However, for each phase of the project, certain authors took primary responsibility. These responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. Data Collection:

Team Effort: Amy Mierzwik & Sandra Guerrero

2. Data Entry and Analysis:

Team Effort: Amy Mierzwik & Sandra Guerrero

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:

a. Introduction and Literature

Team Effort: Amy Mierzwik & Sandra Guerrero

b. Methods

Team Effort: Amy Mierzwik & Sandra Guerrero

c. Results

Team Effort: Amy Mierzwik & Sandra Guerrero

d. Discussion

Team Effort: Amy Mierzwik & Sandra Guerrero