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EXPLORING RESILIENCY AMONG FORMER FOSTER YOUTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Exploring Resiliency Among Former Foster Youth in Higher Education

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of Doctor of Educational Leadership

by

Cristina Camarena-Prieto

2021

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Exploring Resiliency Among Former Foster Youth in Higher Education

by

Cristina Camarena-Prieto

Doctor of Education

University of California-Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Robert Cooper, Chair

This study explores resiliency among former foster youth enrolled in four-year universities and seeks to understand what makes this unique population resilient enough to achieve and maintain academic success despite remaining underserved and largely absent from educational discourse (Johnson, 2020). The qualitative approach of this study involved a preliminary screening demographic questionnaire and choosing 11diverse students/youth formerly in foster care (YFFC) currently enrolled in campus support programs at three selective California 4-year institutions. Sample selection considered these important elements: students who (1.) identify as foster youth, (2.) are enrolled in their third year of college or beyond, including graduate school (3.) have a current GPA of 3.0 or higher, and (4.) have received one or more forms of support from college campus programs designed to help foster youth. Both recruitment efforts and data collection were done remotely due to pandemic restrictions.

The semi-structured interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and followed a 22-question interview protocol intended to explore research principles of risk and promotive factors that either hinder or foster adaptive behaviors as defined by Resiliency Theory. Questions were open-ended and separated into four sections: 1) Demographic Information, 2) Child Welfare Involvement, 3) K-12 Experiences, and 4) College Experiences. Based on the analysis of findings from the study's qualitative interviews, five themes emerged: 1) Resiliency 2) Systemic Barriers, 3) Systems of Support, 4) Helpful Adults, and 5) Navigating Higher Education. Study findings suggest that resiliency can be a naturally occurring phenomenon in the face of persistent assaults on development. It supports current research propositions that resiliency involves fluid processes and does not remain fixed or wholly tied to rigid risk and promotive factors or personal traits (Oshiri et al., 2018). Data suggest that child welfare involvement is often itself, a traumatic and prolonged experience with impermanence in the form of excessive school and home transitions, changing adult faces, and constant assaults on personhood. Additionally, the K-12 experience was commonly described as devoid of adequate academic support, mentoring relationships and college preparation programs. Data also revealed that the significant weight of ACE's suffered in care are often powerful enough to eclipse all other systemic barriers, including gender discrimination and racism. Furthermore, the data showed that the foster youth identity is often stigmatized and riddled with judgments and assumptions that stifle efforts on the part of foster youth to reach out and share their stories, as well as ask for help.

The dissertation of Cristina Camarena-Prieto is approved.

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2021

DEDICATION

Este trabajo es dedicado a mis abuelos, Carlos Partida y Margarita Valdovinos- Les agradezco el legado de integridad, humildad y ética laboral que nos han dejado a su estirpe. Gracias por guiar mis pasos y por protegerme como mis más amados ancestros. Mi mayor deseo es brindarle palabra escrita a todos sus anhelos. Hoy leo y escribo para ustedes.

A mi mama, Bertha Partida- Su enfoque en sobrevivencia me dio el lujo de enfocarme en actualización propia. Cuatro años se han convertido en toda una vida de estudio. Gracias por todo lo sacrificado entre nosotras y por bendecir todos los pasos de mi vida. Te quiero mucho, mamá.

For my son, Wesley Prieto- You embody all that is beautiful and resilient in the human Spirit. I love you more than I could ever wholly express and I thank you for being supportive and loving through this journey. This is for us, *mijo*.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Lastly, a big heartfelt THANK YOU to all of the participants of this study. I am honored to have heard your stories and consider it a blessing to have met you all. Your astounding resiliency has strengthened my resolve to keep advocating on behalf of foster youth everywhere.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Currently in the United States, there are nearly half a million children in foster care and approximately half, or 270,000 of them are school-aged (U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). It is established that children are removed from their families of origin due to extreme circumstances rooted in neglect, abuse, or abandonment, thus creating a greater risk of poor academic and social outcomes for this population (Drapeau et al., 2007; Johnson, 2019; Morton, 2015;Yi & Wildeman, 2018). Collectively, foster youth have a higher propensity for mental illness due to repeated traumas and commonly contend with homelessness too, as well as a higher incidence of criminal involvement, and greater high school drop-out rates (Beal et al., 2018; NFYI, 2011; Yi & Wildeman, 2018). Given the dismal statistics associated with the foster care experience, it is not surprising that many youth in care do not achieve their college dreams (Chism, 2020; Johnson, 2020). For those who do, it is only through great struggle and persistence. The low incidence of college completion among foster youth, however, is not due to a lack of desire to attend school beyond K-12 as multiple studies suggest that up to 84% of foster youth have an expressed desire to continue their education but lack the resources to do so (Beard & Gates, 2019; Jackson, Colvin, & Bullock, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Moyer & Goldberg, 2019).

This research explores the factors that contribute to resiliency among foster youth enrolled in four-year universities and seeks to understand what makes this unique population resilient enough to achieve and maintain academic success despite remaining largely absent from educational discourse centered around at-risk student populations and academic success (Johnson, 2020). Resiliency Theory is the lens through which youth formerly in foster care

(YFFC) college experiences are examined to better understand how this unique population overcomes adversity to reach academic success and general well adjustment. Although there are other indicators that help illustrate positive development among formerly maltreated youth, academic achievement is a powerful one, as it is a key contributor to future employment and financial independence (Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lépine, Bégin, & Bernard, 2007; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005).

Background of the Problem

Research overwhelmingly demonstrates that foster youth are more susceptible to experiencing a host of health, behavioral, and educational problems. According to The National Foster Youth Institute, foster youth register alarming educational statistics. These include being most likely to change schools frequently due to change in placements, being in Special Education classes due to a higher incidence of learning problems, attending low-performing schools, and graduating high school at only a 50% rate (NFYI, 2011). Additionally, in a recent study of over 350 youth (ages 15 or older), health and child welfare records were screened for those presently contending with health and mental illness and general high-risk status including but not limited to drug abuse and risky sexual behavior (Drapeau et al, 2007; Beal et al, 2018). Of all the screened cases, an astounding 41.6% had a mental health diagnosis such as depression and behavioral challenges, while 41.3% were identified as having chronic health issues including obesity and loss of vision and hearing. In addition to health issues, nearly 40% were identified as drug users and participants in risky sexual activity (Beal et al., 2018). Furthermore, data provided by The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP,2015) suggests that young adults who spent their adolescent years in foster care are far more likely to

face high unemployment rates, homelessness, and suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders (Morton, 2015).

Negative statistics associated with this population, hint at why so many, despite desiring a college education, never complete one. Despite the targeted help of laws designed to better address the needs of foster youth- such as the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2008), and the Fostering Connections to Success Act (2012) which respectively and in part aim to increase permanency and extend foster care beyond age 18, call for support of foster youth in higher education- the statistics remain grim (Beard & Gates, 2019; Johnson, 2019).   In fact, it is reported that only 3% of former foster youth enrolled in four-year colleges graduate, and only 4% enrolled in community college complete an Associate's Degree (Jackson, et. al, 2019). Of the multitude of challenges faced by foster youth transitioning into postsecondary institutions, the most common include a distinct lack of: help with the college application process, a general support system or supportive adult figures, academic preparation, financial aid, independent living skills, and mental health supports to help with the stressors that arise from the transition into college and young adulthood (Jackson, et. al, 2019; Schelbe, et. al, 2019). Furthermore, many YFFC also contend with mental and behavior disorders that persist well into adulthood and negatively impact postsecondary attainment (Dworsky, 2018). Exploring resiliency as the prominent force underlying the success of students coming of age within the foster care system is key.

What is Resiliency and Why is it Important to the Foster Youth Experience?

Resiliency is primarily defined as the ability of an individual to triumph over adversity, while resiliency in education is marked by an individual's ability to achieve academically despite

the presence of significant risk factors (Drapeau et al., 2007; Refaeli, 2017; Chism, 2020). Resiliency also refers to an individual's ability to adapt even after repeated exposure to tremendous challenges and attacks on their development (Weller-Clarke, 2006). Resiliency then hinges on a person's ability to persevere despite adverse conditions; this underscores the importance of focusing on foster youth, as they are almost constantly facing adversity. The seminal work of Benard (1991) draws a picture of resiliency that includes four key attributes: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and sense of purpose and future. Lovitt and Emerson (2009) suggests that foster youth who beat the odds by attending and completing college despite facing overwhelming challenges share the common experience of having at least one adult that was positively influential in their lives and all lived in supportive home environments where the foster parents offered encouragement and steadfast guidance. In general, research suggests that one of the cornerstones of resiliency-building is the presence of at least one supportive and consistent adult to facilitate assets that serve as protective factors along the way. This role can be filled by any adult that is significant and consistent in the life of a young person in need (Drapeau et al., 2007). A single supportive adult can thus play a key role in building protective factors that shield against the effects of risk factors (Todd-Barfield, 2004).

Todd-Barfield (2004) examines the potential impact of protective and risk factors among three and four-year-olds who have not yet manifested the long-term effects of either group of factors. The risk and protective factors outlined in her work expand on the often-abbreviated lists of factors offered by prevailing research on resiliency and help to create a complete picture of the elements that impact childhood development and whose influence reverberate into young adulthood and beyond. Although her research is with younger children, the risk and protective factors are applicable to all ages.

However, despite the valuable contributions of early resiliency research, current literature moves beyond simply identifying protective factors that serve to protect vulnerable youth from risk factors. The emerging belief about resiliency suggests that it is a process centered on the interplay between an individual's capacities and the risk factors they encounter. In other words, a developing human being is now more concretely seen as an active participant that both influences and is influenced by both risk and protective factors (Oshiri et al, 2018). Much of the former research on resiliency implied that adaptive processes are static, but it is increasingly evident that resiliency is a fluid process that fluctuates in strength based on an individual's ability to evolve and grow their capacities (Oshiri, et. al, 2018).

Understanding how resiliency works to serve maltreated youth is of paramount importance. Children in foster care benefit greatly from programs and systems that understand not only their unique needs but also their propensities toward specific risks, namely those that thwart efforts to succeed and pursue college dreams (Oshiri, et. al, 2018). If resiliency really is fluid, as prevailing research suggests, then it implies that the capacity for it can be built. Knowing how to strengthen the adaptive processes of vulnerable youth, can, in turn, help improve their academic and life outcomes. Similarly, any research inquiries into understanding what helps to build resiliency will be deeply useful in developing systems of support for foster youth on their educational journeys.

Gaps in Research

Much of the research conducted on foster youth focuses on early childhood experiences and on the multitude of negative outcomes that are associated with being removed from families of origin. There is little research that documents what happens to foster youth after they leave

the system, except to mention that this population is at an especially high risk of being unemployed, dependent on public aid, or homeless (Hines, et al.,2005). Specifically, the lack of reliable information on the postsecondary pursuits of foster youth is even more scant. The little research that is available suggests that foster youth who do pursue a college education, face a markedly greater risk of dropping out due to poor preparation (McNamara et. al, 2019). It is important to address this gap in research so as to better help those entering early adulthood and college, who continue to need support and help to eventually transition fully into adulthood and independent living. Important too, is the need for research to reflect that not all people who grow up in foster care fall prey to the trauma they suffered. Research that examines the success stories of foster youth who survived sustained hardship and maltreatment is vital in offering hope to current foster youth and informative to those seeking to help them, such as workers within the child welfare system, foster families, educators, and staff who run programs created to serve this population in postsecondary institutions (Hines, et al.,2005).

Nature of Project Investigated

This study was qualitative in nature and involved interviewing 11 YFFC's currently enrolled in three public California 4-year institutions. The data gained from in-depth interviews and the process of gathering the information gleaned from students at the three levels of higher education, endeavored to identify common factors that contribute to the subject's current success in college. Success was defined as academic achievement in the form of a 3.0 or higher GPA.

Research Questions

The noticeable lack of research into foster youths' experiences in late adolescence underscores the need for more knowledge in this field, in order to guide policy and programs that could help YFFC attain more successful adulthoods. This work directly addressed this

shortcoming by examining the educational development of college-aged foster youth, particularly the ways in which their resiliency shaped their pathways to postsecondary educational institutions. This examination was guided by the following questions:

RQ1: What factors do foster youth believe influence their resiliency in higher education?

a.   What personal strengths do foster youth identify within themselves that have helped them achieve college careers and academic success?

b.   What risk factors do foster youth most commonly encounter and what protective factors do they identify as being most helpful in overcoming challenges?

RQ2: What systems of support do foster youth in higher education identify as being helpful in developing adaptive behaviors, mindsets, and practices that lead to resiliency and to academic success?

Research Design and Methods

This research study was qualitative and was comprised of 11 in-depth interviews with YFFC currently experiencing success in college. A screening questionnaire was administered to ensure diversity among participants ultimately chosen for the interview process. Due to Covid 19 restrictions, all interviews were conducted via Zoom. The aim of the interview process was first, to identify what factors contributed to resiliency, allowing for academic achievement; and second, to investigate what sources and systems of support existed to nurture the perseverance necessary for college admittance, academic success, and ultimately, degree attainment. The gathering qualitative data through in-depth interviews resulted in richness and quality of information not likely to be captured through a survey or other quantitative methods.

Site Selection and Target Population

      The qualitative approach of my study involved interviewing YFFC youth currently enrolled in campus support programs at three California 4-year institutions. Interview participants were selected after completing a screening demographic questionnaire to ensure that participants met study criteria and the study would have a diverse group of participants. All participants were members of college programs designed to help meet the needs of vulnerable youth by lessening the impact of challenges as they transition into college. Interviewees hailed from a total of three campus support programs (CSP's) located on their respective college campuses. The first was the Rise Scholars Program at North Bay University, which is dedicated to serving foster youth by helping them navigate college systems and identifying resources, as well as providing snacks, free printing, a safe place to hang out, and field trip opportunities. Next was the Rigor Scholars Program at South Bay University, which targets foster youth and seeks to empower them through workshops, mentoring, tutoring, academic advising, seminars, housing, financial assistance, educational enrichment, and community building activities. Lastly, was the Halo Scholars Program at Apex University, which supports foster youth not only in academic achievement, but also in general wellness by providing mentoring support as well as a myriad of services designed to help students achieve self-sufficiency and long-term success. Directors from each of these programs were contacted for help in identifying and recruiting candidates that fit four criteria: (1.) identify as foster youth, (2.) are enrolled in their third year of college or beyond, including graduate school (3.) have a current GPA of 3.0 or higher, and (4.) have received one or more forms of support from college campus programs designed to help foster youth. Students were then incentivized to participate in 45-90 minute interviews conducted via Zoom video conferencing.

Research Significance

This research is significant because it is crucial to study what makes disenfranchised youth overcome incredible odds to achieve academic success and earn a college degree. Findings can elevate the conversations surrounding foster youth by providing a counter-narrative to the deficit-laden one that seems to be the norm. Foster youth can and do succeed in spite of incredible odds and it is our job to bring those stories to the forefront. Exploring factors that contribute to the resiliency of foster youth who have made it to college and are succeeding can provide a wealth of information on several levels. Study findings can potentially inform K-12 practices so that they are more aligned with the needs of the foster youth population; furthermore, they can inform targeted professional development for teachers who work with this population. Additionally, study findings can inform efforts to reform or abolish certain practices within the child welfare system and K-12 education. Lastly, identifying what is helpful to foster youth can aid in the development of post-secondary efforts designed for college recruitment and supporting degree completion for all students.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

The experience of being in foster care puts many youth at risk for mental illness, homelessness, poverty, and low educational attainment (Beal et al., 2018;Rome & Raskin, 2017; NFYI, 2011; Yi & Wildeman, 2018). As a result, they encounter significant barriers to attending and succeeding in college. Despite the many challenges faced by foster youth, research shows that more than 80% of them express a desire to pursue college careers (Jackson et al., 2019). Yet even with such an overwhelming majority seeking higher education, many foster youth's college pursuits are hampered by the lack of proper social support to follow through. Those who do

attain college admittance demonstrate a resiliency that enables them to surmount obstacles for the pursuit of academic achievement.

The central aim of this research is to explore factors that contribute to the resilience necessary for youth formerly in foster care (YFFC) to attain academic success in higher education. This population in particular, faces many obstacles that can potentially thwart their academic efforts and squelch their college dreams. In this chapter I discuss the relevant literature that informs, guides, and serves as the theoretical framework for the central inquiries of my research project. I begin by defining the term, "foster youth" and explaining the intended role of the foster care system in ensuring that children in out-of-home placements are safe and thriving. Then, I describe the impact of foster placement on the academic performances as well as mental and physical health of foster youth. Next, I present a brief overview of legislation currently impacting foster care populations in order to provide context and create a more complete picture of the issue. In the next section, I dive into Resiliency Theory, which is the theoretical framework for this study. I explain both the early research and current literature on the concept of resiliency, in order to differentiate between first-generation resiliency research and new findings. I then discuss the research on foster youth transition into higher education, and the obstacles they face both prior to and after college admission. Finally, I explore the role of campus support programs for foster youth.

Foster Care Placement and Its Impact on Foster Youth

Foster youth are defined as the group of minors who have been removed from their parents and placed in the care of eligible relatives, non-relatives, or institutions such as residential care or group homes for reasons related to maltreatment (Birneanu, 2014; Hogan,

2020). There are currently over a quarter million children in foster care in the United States, all

of whom are connected by the shared experience of being removed from their families of origin

(U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The

foster care system is primarily tasked with protecting children who are at risk of abuse but it is

also responsible for ensuring safe placement, seeking permanency such as adoption, as well as

facilitating the reunification process when possible (Hogan, 2020). It is worth mentioning that

despite permanency being the stated goal for all children entering the system, as many as 74%

stay in out of home care for multiple years (Massinga & Pecora, 2004). From the outset,

separation from family, which for many foster youth ends up being permanent, is an experience

steeped in pain and ongoing emotional scars; these experiences can have an enduring impact on

brain development (McCormick & Issaakidis, 2018). For these children, the stress response of

the brain becomes overused and therefore overdeveloped at the expense of other functions. In

other words, sustained trauma and the stress response it provokes underlies the emotional and

cognitive learning problems many foster children experience throughout their lives (Garcia, et.

al, 2012). Additionally, children placed in out of home care face the types of events that expose

them to higher levels of social, emotional and behavioral risk and can provoke violence

aggression and mental illness in adulthood (Birneanu, 2014). According to Munoz et al. (2019)

these types of childhood trauma is so widespread that it has risen to the level of being a public

health crisis. Added to this is the high incidence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's)

identified among youth in care. ACEs are traumatic events that can occur prior to being placed

in care within the biological family and during foster placement (Birneanu, 2014) and can be

experienced at both the family and community level. Respectively, these can include parental

alcoholism/drug abuse, divorce, neglect, sexual abuse, bullying and physical abuse (Bessy &

Gonzalez, 2018) as well as racial and ethnic discrimination and neighborhood violence (Lancaster et al., 2019). In addition to impacting mental health by producing higher levels of anxiety and depression among children (Lancaster et al., 2019), ACE's suffered prior to and during foster placement can produce a higher rate of emotional and behavioral problems, due in part to the initial trauma of abuse and neglect suffered prior to removal, then deepened by more trauma in care and the emotional toll of being separated from family (Birneanu, 2014; Kerker & Morrison-Dore, 2006; Lewis & Bullock, 2016). Furthermore, Beal et. al, (2018) establish that health concerns rise upon entry into the system and for many foster youth, persists into adulthood. Specifically, many children in custody experience a higher rate of illness than do their non-foster youth peers-- illnesses that include chronic conditions such as asthma, infections, neurological dysfunction, and frequent injuries (Beat et. al, 2018). Adolescents, and young adults that are emancipated, report general poor health, low quality of life, and increased risky behaviors that can lead to sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancy, and HIV contraction (Beal et. al, 2018; Rome & Raskin, 2017). Furthermore, emancipated foster youth experience morbidity rates related to imprisonment as high as 30% by age 21, homelessness rates as high as 24% by age 24, and substance abuse as high as 25% by age 26 (Beal et. al, 2018; Courtney,2009;Rome & Raskin,2017). Sadly, the outcomes among former foster youth who "age out" of the system, do not differ much. By 2014, more than 24,000 youth had "aged out" of the child welfare system, meaning they reached the age of legal adulthood and were thus considered independent (Rome & Raskin, 2017). The clear failure here, according to research, is that youth formerly in care are for the most part unprepared to go off into the world on their own. Unlike non-welfare involved peers, they do not have a network of support on which to rely and often end up running into serious challenges such as homelessness. A study by Dworsky et al. (2013)

revealed that as many as 46% of study participants had experienced homelessness at least once by the age of 26. The study further claimed that other risk factors such as being male, having mental illness, and having a history of placement stability and running away while in care, all increased the risk of homelessness after aging out of the system (Dworsky et al., 2013).

As can be expected, the emotional trauma suffered by many youth carries over into their academic lives (Morton, 2015). Research indicates that between 20%-52% of foster youth are classified as having either emotional or behavioral disorders (Lewis & Bullock, 2016). Being identified as having emotional/behavioral disorders profoundly impacts the academic performance of at-risk youth and is keenly illustrated by current graduation rates in the U.S. As of 2015, the national graduation rate reached over 80% while the graduation rate among children in Out-of-Home Placement (OHP) was a dismal 50% (Lewis & Bullock, 2016).

Given the alarming and disconcerting numbers, it is necessary to address the exponential rise in risk that occurs as soon as out-of-home placement happens for a child. The profound impact on mental and physical health along with the impact on learning cannot be overlooked especially for foster youth on the cusp of young adulthood. Furthermore, the cycle of poverty that many youth came from prior to system entry, and which research considers a significant risk factor and predictor of poor school performance, is exacerbated upon gaining independence (Wulczyn et.al, 2009). This is due in large part to child welfare's failure to adequately prepare foster youth in areas of independent living skills and financial literacy.

While the urgency of the issue remains imperative, there is encouragingly, a growing recognition of the unique challenges faced by maltreated children in the foster care system. Policies and laws that take into account the immediate attention this population deserves

have been passed within the last few decades. In the next section, I will discuss the goals and outcomes of these policies.

Policies Impacting Foster Youth

Research points to an emerging pattern of support and advocacy for foster youth which is aimed at creating opportunities and access to higher education with the long-term goal of improving economic and life outcomes (Hogan, 2020). The intent of legislative policies as they relate to foster youth, is to stabilize the educational lives of children by eliminating unnecessary school moves and establishing a level of continuity amid uncertain conditions (Clemens, et. al, 2017). Both the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (FCA) of 2008 and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 sought to facilitate school stability in order to improve academic outcomes for youth in out-of-home care. Educational stability speaks to not only reducing the amount and frequency of school moves but also to the need for smoother transitions when school moves are necessary (Clemens, et. al, 2017). Aside from fostering school stability, FCA specifically benefits foster youth transitioning into college by offering extended foster care through age 21 under AB 12, which created California's Extended Foster Care program. This way, youth are afforded the opportunity to increase independence and responsibility while still being fully supported through the process of transition into college and young adulthood (Merdinger et. al, 2005). FCA and ESSA have established unprecedented collaboration between child welfare and educational institutions and comprise the legislative framework that will inform all future endeavors to better serve foster youth. Additionally, in 1999, Congress passed the Foster Care Independence Act which dedicated funding to easing the transition out of foster care and into independent living. From this policy came the John H.

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Chafee Foster Care Independence Program and later the Chafee Educational and Training Voucher Program which provides financial support for educational expenses (Hogan, 2020).

Current research suggests that while increased policy-based supports are a step in the right direction, they often come in the form of single-issue or narrowly focused approaches to helping foster youth with their medical, psychological, financial and academic needs. Instead, findings point to solutions that target all needs simultaneously and in an integrative way (Hostinar & Miller, 2019). As mentioned before, the role of policies impacting foster youth is to stabilize the lives of children in transition because in so doing, their chances of developing resiliency in the form of adaptive behaviors will greatly increase their chances of future success. This linkage can be better understood by unpacking the evolving theory of resiliency.

Resiliency Theory

Resiliency Theory states that what matters most to human experience and well-being is not the specific set of challenges we face, but rather how we deal with it (Van Breda, 2018). Youth in foster care commonly face substantial challenges and for many, the traumas sustained in and out of state care represent insurmountable life-long struggles. The literature is clear about those able to overcome challenges and suggests that resiliency plays a key role among them. Essentially, Resiliency Theory provides the conceptual framework for a strengths-based approach toward understanding youth development and specifically, offers insight into why some maltreated youth grow up to be healthy, fully functioning adults while others do not. It is particularly important to understand the factors that contribute to YFFC thriving in higher education, so that efforts can be targeted to address the specific needs of this population.

Resiliency as a construct reaches across many disciplines but has been studied in educational contexts specifically, since the 1980's (Munoz et. al, 2019). Today, some propose that literature on resiliency is split between first and second generations of research with the former establishing the theoretical foundation upon which the latter has expanded (Oshri et. al, 2018). Others suggest that overall, resiliency research is a relatively young field of study that has not reached a consensus on whether to operationalize the general concept as behavioral outcomes or an ongoing process (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009).

According to Liebenberg and Ungar (2009), the evolution of resiliency research can be separated into different "waves". In the 1950's, the first wave focused flatly on outcomes of young people who survived great turmoil and on the role of their personal temperaments in achieving resiliency. The second wave however, expanded beyond individual temperament to argue that resiliency also encompassed the dynamic interaction between an individual and their environment. In the late 1980's and early 1990's, the literature evolved further to consider how young people's various internal and external assets allowed them to cope. Fergus & Zimmerman (2005) propose that the promotive factors that can counteract the effects of risk in an individual, are known as assets, or internal resources such as coping skills and competence. They also offer that external resources can have the same effect and identify examples of those as having a mentor, a supportive parent, or belonging to a community group that promotes positive development (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). More recent literature suggests that resiliency is heavily influenced by both a person's culture and the layered context of their individual existence (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Some researchers identify the construct as an individual trait, while others see it as an end-product, or a fluid process (Munoz et. al, 2019).

The early research focus on resiliency is centered broadly on at-risk populations and particularly in early childhood and the primary educational years of said populations. It also focuses on factors of resiliency and on *identifying* resiliency traits in individuals (Schofield & Beek, 2005). Other research aims to move away from definitions of resiliency as a static and individual trait-based phenomenon (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). An example of this being Schofield & Beek (2005), who focus on resiliency as being a set of processes and mechanisms related to *promoting* rather than merely identifying resilience.

It is important to note too, that for many years, foster youth have been clumped together with other at-risk populations without regard for their unique experiences and particular needs. Emerging resiliency literature's aim of centering the foster youth experience forecasts systemic changes that will surely benefit YFFC in higher education.

Risks and Protective Factors Underlie Resilience

The early work of Benard (1991) draws a picture of resiliency that includes four key attributes: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and sense of purpose & future (Benard, 1991). Lovitt and Emerson (2009) suggest that the foster youth in their study beat the odds by attending and completing college despite facing overwhelming challenges. One of the cornerstones of resiliency building is the presence of at least one supportive and consistent adult to facilitate assets that serve as protective factors along the way. All study subjects also shared the common experience of having at least one adult that was positively influential in their lives and all lived in supportive home environments where the foster parents offered encouragement and steadfast guidance (Lovitt and Emerson, 2009).

Earlier research focuses on early childhood experiences and their implications for resiliency later in life. Todd-Barfield (2004) examines the potential impact of protective and risk factors among three and four-year-olds who have not yet manifested the long-term effects of either group of factors. In her study, Todd-Barfield expands on the often-abbreviated lists of factors offered by existing resiliency research in order to create a complete picture of the elements that impact childhood development and whose influence reverberate into adulthood.

Table 1. Risk Factors and Protective Factors*

Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Trauma (exposure to violence and/or neglect and/or experience of early loss)	Warm, caring, nurturing, contextually and experientially rich, stimulating environment that provides opportunity for sensory experience and promotes attachment to caregiver
Poverty with associated chronic and episodic crises and stressors	Stability, security, and structure; low distress
Community risk	Safe community
Lack of prenatal care and/or poor prenatal nutrition	Good prenatal care
Substance abuse during pregnancy Close bond with primary caregiver	Close bond with primary caregiver who need not be a biological parent
Teenage parenthood	Parental competence/education

Parental mental illness	Supportive grandparents/supportive siblings
Parental substance abuse	Supportive teachers
Parental criminality	Successful school experience
Parents who have not experienced nurturing parenting	Parents with good parenting skills
Child Welfare Involvement/ Out of home placement	Stability: organized, predictable environment with clearly defined structure
Large family size (more than four children)	Small family size (less than four children)
Marital discord	Family harmony
Poor temperamental fit between caregiver and child	Personal characteristics of child: Low emotionality; active, alert, high vigor, drive sociability; easy, engaging temperament (affectionate; cuddly); self-help skills; above average intelligence (language and problem-solving skills)

Not intended to be in cause-and-effect or relationship order

Resiliency as a Process

The emerging belief about resiliency suggests it is a process driven by the interplay between an individual's capacities and the risk factors they encounter. In other words, a developing human being is seen as an active participant that both influences and is influenced by both risk and protective factors (Oshiri et. al, 2018). Much of the former research on resiliency

implied that adaptive processes are static but it is more and more evident that resiliency is a fluid process that fluctuates in strength based on an individual's ability to evolve and grow their capacities (Oshiri, et. al, 2018). Research by Hines et. al, (2005) furthers this proposition by asserting that an individual's weaknesses and protective factors tend to change with their developmental evolution. Resiliency among vulnerable youth, research suggests, has to be viewed as a multifaceted and dynamic system that both impacts and is impacted by an individual's development (Hines, et. al, 2005); and while risk and protective factors certainly play a role, they are not the only aspects of resiliency that merit deeper investigation.

Foster Youth Obstacles and Challenges in Higher Education

Given that foster youth face multiple socio-cultural disadvantages, it is easy to see why so many do not pursue postsecondary educational training. Research indicates that students with a history of abuse and trauma, including foster care involvement, tend to have the greatest difficulty with college adjustment, often reporting lower grade point averages and higher dropout rates than their non-foster care peers (Hogan, 2020). Statistically speaking, less than 5% of foster youth complete a four-year degree as opposed to 31% of the general population (Hogan, 2020), and only 4% enrolled in community college complete an Associate's Degree (Jackson, et. al, 2019). In addition, studies show that youth are more likely to drop out of college after just one year, than their low-income, first-generation peers with no child welfare involvement (Hayes-Piel, 2018).

Examining the K-12 experiences of foster youth can reveal insight into why they struggle in postsecondary educational settings. Foster youth experience far more hardship than their non-welfare-involved peers, often facing placement changes, new or ongoing emotional turmoil,

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physical health problems, and a lack of general consistency and support (Hogan, 2020). The

largest drops in state achievement tests occur in the weeks and months leading up to removal

from the family of origin, starkly exemplifying how family turmoil, domestic violence and

maltreatment all contribute to low academic achievement (Clemens, et. al, 2018). For many

youth in foster care, the separation from their families is permanent, leaving them in a state of

limbo for the duration of their K-12 experience, and often becomes the biggest reason for not

pursuing college goals.

     While some foster youth have support in their transition into young adulthood, many do

not. The hardships they navigated in K-12 are not constrained to that time period. Challenges are

long term and often cumulative; lack of support is intertwined and trickles into every aspect of

life, including academics. Historically, youth transition from the foster care system on their 18th

birthday, which is also the typical age for starting college. For many, "aging-out" is synonymous

with sudden homelessness and unemployment (Hogan, 2020). Many are not prepared for

independent living and are generally ill-equipped to negotiate housing, employment, and

mental/physical healthcare (Hayes-Piel, 2018; Rome & Raskin, 2017). For those who persist and

pursue college, the process is riddled with obstacles. One of the most common challenges

identified by foster youth is a lack of help with the college application process (Merdinger et. al,

2005). Many also contend with a lack of a general support system or supportive adult figures, as

well as a lack of academic preparation, financial aid, independent living skills, and mental health

resources to help with the stressors that arise from the transition into college and young

adulthood (Jackson, et. al, 2019; Schelbe, et. al, 2019). Additionally, many foster youth also

battle mental and behavior disorders that persist well into adulthood and negatively affect

postsecondary attainment (Cutler-White, 2018; Dworsky, 2018). Plainly stated, foster youth

enter college vulnerable, underrepresented and in dire need of the services offered by college campus support programs discussed in the next section.

Campus Support Programs

This section will examine college campus support programs that target foster youth and aim to address the population's unique needs as they transition simultaneously into young adulthood and college life. Youth who are close to exiting the foster care system face a unique set of challenges, one of which is navigating the college experience. As evidenced by academic literature on the foster care system, policies, and the limitations of both, many foster youth attending college lack the support system needed for success. This lack of support stems in part, from a limited understanding of the traumas they bring with them into college. The impact of Adverse Childhood experiences (ACE's) is profound and that impact must be better understood in order to build resiliency among vulnerable populations. Over 70% of all people experience one or more ACE's and still overcome their traumas to ultimately lead successful lives (Bessy & Gonzalez, 2018). This should be true for foster youth as well. Given that most children in the system have experienced one or more ACE's, it is reasonable to assume that they too can achieve success when given the support they need. This is precisely why exploring ways to increase resiliency of at-risk students, must become a focus, particularly during students' transition into college (Wilson, et. al, 2019).

Research suggests that it is imperative for colleges to create an environment that is conducive to building resiliency and retaining students who are traditionally associated with low completion rates, such as foster youth. According to Morales (2014), scholarships, bridge

programs, ongoing seminars, and learning communities can all be valuable additions to such an environment, but supportive efforts for vulnerable youth must also be available inside the classroom and lecture halls. Of key significance is the fact that even with a myriad of supports in place to support academic success, at-risk students could still be vulnerable in a multitude of ways (Merdinger et. al, 2005). Resiliency research privileges mentoring as a significant component of fostering resiliency and retention; studies such as Zimmerman (2014) posit that adult mentors as well as youth-oriented programs are key resources for supporting vulnerable youth.

Campus support programs for foster youth date back to the late 1990's when California State University-Fullerton in collaboration with Orangewood Children's Foundation, created the first foster youth-focused support program (Hogan, 2020). Many more programs have sprouted all over the nation since then. Collectively they play a crucial role in providing comprehensive services for foster youth in post-secondary institutions (Cutler-White, 2018). While there is no standard menu of services offered by all campus support programs, many typically help students with financial aid, housing assistance, academic advising, personal counseling, and mentoring (Hogan, 2020). Researchers have also identified five key characteristics of college support programs (Hogan, 2020)

1) Program affiliation (campus based or statewide),

2) Admission criteria (selective or universal),

3) Types of support (financial or only non-financial)

4) service provision (direct services or referral-only),

5)Administration (independent or collaborative program) (Hogan, 2020)

Highlighted within the literature about campus support organizations are programs like the Tallahassee Community College Fostering Achievement Fellowship Program which demonstrates exemplary leadership in attending to foster youth needs in areas ranging from financial support to career planning and boasts a record of successful college completion among its members (Cutler-White, 2018). Another example of a successful support model is the Wake Technical Community College Fostering Bright Futures Fellowship Program which partners with local nonprofits and businesses to raise money dedicated to providing housing assistance, home furnishings, transportation, child care, and even the professional attire for foster youth seeking employment (Cutler-White, 2018). Both the Tallahassee Community College and the Wake Technical Community College programs aim to provide multi-pronged help tailored to the specific foster youth population on their respective campuses. Research on retention of college students emphasizes the importance of these types of supports and also underscores the need for positive youth development (PYD), which offers foster youth the chance to develop a true sense of belonging, self-sufficiency, and self-empowerment (Cutler-White, 2018).

It is important to note that not all foster youth attending college will automatically receive services and that not all programs offer the same services or timelines of support. However, it is encouraging to see that since the first campus support program for foster youth opened, over 30 additional support programs have been developed in California alone (Hogan, 2020). Participants of this study hail from three public California 4-year institutions who all offer campus support programs all aiming to increase resiliency, secure retention, and improve life outcomes for foster youth through financial support, housing assistance, mentoring and capacity-building workshops.

There are currently thousands of young people in the foster care system and if we accept the disheartening statistics that drive the trajectories of their lives, we will be discouraged. It is important to find hope in the midst of the negativity associated with the foster care experience. The truth is that there are success stories among former foster youth and there is an increasing awareness of the needs we are tasked with meeting. Newer research on resiliency suggests that it is not a set of static characteristics, but rather a fluid process that can be learned and applied by anyone. Policies in recent years reflect a deeper understanding of how to better support foster youth as they transition out of foster care along with the recognition that help and mentorship is needed beyond the age of 18. Lastly, there is evidence suggesting an increase of campus support programs which points to rising numbers of foster youth pursuing their college dreams. It is the goal of this study to examine the factors that contribute to the resilience that make foster youth successful in postsecondary settings. It is a hopeful endeavor grounded in the belief that all youth, regardless of background, can succeed when given consistent and caring support.

Chapter Three: **Methodology**

There are nearly 300,000 children currently in out of home placement (USED and USHHS, 2016). The act of being removed from their families of origin, automatically places them at risk for mental and physical illness, homelessness, and low educational attainment (Yi & Wildeman, 2018; NFYI, 2011). Many foster youth experience traumas that prevent them from accessing internal and environmental resources that can help them overcome challenges, resulting in a tendency to abandon college ambitions. Research indicates that the low incidence of college pursuits among foster youth is not due to a lack of interest, for up to 84% have an

expressed desire to attend college, but rather due to a lack of needed resources (Beard & Gates, 2019, Jackson, et al., 2019; Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). It is important to note that for those who do make it to college, only 3% graduate from four-year institutions and only 4% complete community college degrees (Jackson, et. al, 2019). Since resilience is at the positive end of developmental processes that can occur when youth face chronic and severe exposure to environmental trauma, this research explores the factors that contribute the most to resiliency among foster youth enrolled in post-secondary institutions (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009).

Given the dire situation of low college attendance and aspirations among foster youth, there is an urgency to investigate how some youth do realize academic achievement. Resiliency is one crucial lens by which to understand how those in the foster care system overcome a multitude of disadvantages to access-as well as to excel in- academia. As evolving literature on resiliency theory demonstrates, it is possible for youth who face chronic and severe exposure to environmental trauma to build up their own capabilities in order to overcome challenges. Therefore, resilience can be a positive outcome of developmental processes. This research draws on this theorization of resiliency to identify what factors contribute to the successful academic performance of students from foster care backgrounds. By examining the experiences of foster youth enrolled in postsecondary institutions, this study seeks to investigate how these students cultivated and exhibited resiliency through adaptive behaviors and practices. This investigation is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What factors do foster youth believe influence their resiliency in higher education?

        a.   What personal strengths do foster youth identify within themselves that have helped them achieve college careers and academic success?

b. *What risk factors do foster youth most commonly encounter and what protective factors do they identify as being most helpful in overcoming challenges?*

RQ2: What systems of support do foster youth in higher education identify as being helpful in developing adaptive behaviors, mindsets, and practices that lead to resiliency and to academic success?

Research Design Rationale

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. While it is possible to conduct surveys asking students what makes them resilient, these surveys would not likely yield the kind of insights achieved by qualitative methods. By design, surveys do not typically ask open ended questions, and thus limit the possibility of drawing from respondents', in-depth explanations and views (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this reason, I have determined that a qualitative phenomenological approach is best suited to examine the foster care experience of the study's participants, as their intense, emotional experiences are best captured through personal, semi-structured interviews. The intention is to elicit information directly from participants about what factors and experiences have contributed to the resilience that led them to college and through their personal rendering, be able to glean new understanding of the lived experiences that contribute to resiliency (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Methods

Site Selection

To study the phenomenon under investigation, I selected three public universities located in California. The first research site is the Rise Scholars Program at North Bay University. Next, is the Rigor Scholars Program at South Bay University. Last, is the Halo Scholars Program at Apex University. While outreach was made to several private and public universities, the decision to focus on these was their responsiveness, demonstrated infrastructure to assist in recruitment efforts, and because they are representative of different regions of the state. Additionally, all three universities are selective institutions and offer the potential to yield strong resiliency data given that students must demonstrate the ability to not only be admitted, but to succeed in a competitive environment. Eliminated programs were ultimately not used because they lacked the infrastructure to support recruitment efforts overall, which was a key concern given the already limiting conditions of the pandemic.

All selected sites already have established campus support programs for foster youth and also yielded the highest responses to the initial screening questionnaire. The Rise Scholars Program at North Bay University, which is dedicated to serving foster youth by helping them navigate college systems and identifying resources, as well as providing snacks, free printing, a safe place to hang out, and field trip opportunities. Next is the Rigor Scholars Program at Southern Bay University, which targets foster youth and seeks to empower them through workshops, mentoring, tutoring, academic advising, seminars, housing, financial assistance, educational enrichment, and community building activities. Lastly, the Halo Scholars Program at Apex University, supports foster youth not only in academic achievement, but also in general wellness by providing mentoring support as well as a myriad of services designed to help students achieve self-sufficiency and long-term success.

Sample Selection

I used purposeful sampling to choose the sample population as this approach helped me obtain the best-suited interview participants whose insights helped me to better understand the phenomenon of resiliency (Maxwell, 2013). My selection considered three important elements: students who (1.) identify as foster youth, (2.) are enrolled in their third year of college or beyond, including graduate school (3.) have a current GPA of 3.0 or higher, and (4.) have received one or more forms of support from college campus programs designed to help foster youth. As the key gatekeepers, program directors were instrumental in helping me identify students who were not only eligible but also willing to participate in my study. A flier was disseminated to all program participants which allowed for wide outreach and yielded respondents from different ethnic backgrounds, ages, and years of study. Students who responded were asked to first complete a brief demographic questionnaire as a way of screening for interview candidates. The sample size was 11former foster youth in total. All participants were incentivized with a $30 Target or Amazon gift card.

Data Collection

Data was collected solely through Zoom interviews due to ongoing pandemic restrictions. In fact, the pandemic made both outreach and data collection difficult. Visiting programs and presenting in person was completely ruled out for safety reasons and therefore, recruitment was done completely remotely. Campus support program directors from the Rise Scholars Program at North Bay University, the Rigor Scholars Program at South Bay University, and the Halo Scholars Program at Apex University were contacted via email, phone and Zoom to discuss details and goals of my study. Program directors then disseminated my recruitment flier to program participants. Interested students then completed a brief demographic questionnaire

which served as a screening tool to ensure diversity among final interviewees. Once selected, potential participants were contacted via email and an interview was scheduled. Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and followed a 22-question interview protocol intended to explore research principles of risk and promotive factors that either hinder or foster adaptive behaviors as defined by Resiliency Theory. Questions were open-ended and separated into four sections: 1) Demographic Information, 2) Child Welfare Involvement, 3) K-12 Experiences, and 4) College Experiences. The semi-structured approach allowed for the opportunity to explore interview subjects' ideas and perspectives on resilience and lived experiences within the context of having been a foster youth (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interviews were recorded on Zoom and on computer audio with consent.

Data Analysis

All in-depth interviews were recorded by Zoom and by computer audio as back-up. Hard copies of the interview protocol were printed and annotated with observational notes during the interview. After the interviews were completed, they were submitted for transcription to Rev.com and transcripts shared with participants who were invited to review the content and given an opportunity to request changes or omissions. Transcripts were printed and read line by line to identify codes and themes. Dedoose was used to electronically analyze data and to help further identify patterns and relationships among phenomena (Lewins & Silver, 2009). Each interview transcript was read through to get a sense of the lived experiences of each person. Line by line coding followed and themes were extracted as follows: 1.) Overarching theme of Resiliency, 2.) Systemic Barriers, 3.) Systems of Support, 4.) Helpful Adults, and 5.) Navigating Higher Education.

Role Management

I introduced myself to campus support program directors as a doctoral candidate and researcher from UCLA. Through my position as principal investigator for this study, I reached out to program directors and requested their help in recruiting study participants. I made it clear that I regard their positions within campus support programs as crucial to my recruitment efforts. I shared my personal passion for working with foster youth as well as my intention to meaningfully contribute to the body of research on the foster youth experience and resiliency. I was able to establish a positive rapport with program directors by communicating via email, phone and Zoom and by making myself available for their inquiries and feedback. I interacted with study participants not only primarily as a researcher but also as an educational professional with experience and passion. Despite the fact that in-person interviews were eliminated as an option by the pandemic, I was still able to share about my personal connections with the foster youth experience at the end of each interview. All participants responded kindly to this and appreciated my transparency. In fact, the majority reached out post interview to thank me for the interview and wished me well on my doctoral journey.

Ethical Considerations

The primary focus of this study was to investigate the role of resiliency as a factor to foster youth success in higher education. While no major ethical issues were anticipated, caution was exercised by maintaining participant anonymity in the write up of the data from the demographic questionnaire. Pseudonyms were assigned to all student participants, institutions and campus support programs. It is expected that student responses will be helpful to future program development, as well as to addressing factors that impacted them during child welfare

involvement, K-12 and college. For this reason, their stories were protected in the interest of obtaining the best and most valuable data. Additionally, to mitigate the effects of emotional triggers that could potentially arise from reflecting on their lived experiences as foster youth, a list of free mental health support resources was provided to all participants prior to the interview. Interviewees were also informed of the anonymity of their responses and overall confidentiality of the study, which was protected through secure storage (e.g., saving in key places such as personal computer, storage cloud, and external drive).

Credibility and Trustworthiness

The biggest threat to the credibility of this study is my personal bias. As a twenty-four-year veteran of the teaching profession within which I have taught many foster youth in K-12 settings, I clearly hold views and opinions that can influence this study. For this reason, I checked myself by reflexively commenting on my past experiences with foster youth in the classroom as well as my experience as a mother to a former foster child during each of the interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). My transparency helped establish trust with participants. In addition, I shared my interview protocol and requested feedback from both ELP faculty and one ELP alumnus who had been in foster care herself and worked in foster youth advocacy. Feedback from both of these sources helped ensure that my questions yielded the best possible data and were not skewed toward one particular outcome or narrative. I further checked myself by using standardized coding aimed at identifying non-bias-driven themes. Finally, I shared preliminary findings and themes with a trusted peer whose experience with foster youth not only helped identify my blind spots, but also challenged my assumptions in the interest of quality research. To further confront my biases, I conducted member checks to confirm that I understood participant responses as they were intended (Maxwell, 2013). The hope is that in the

end, it is understood that by keeping the sample size small, my study was able to avoid generalizing to all foster youth, opting instead to go in depth with a small number of them to truly capture their experiences—leaving it up to the reader to determine the extent to which findings apply to their contexts.

Study Limitations

One limitation of this study is choosing participants that were already participating in campus support programs designed to help them, and therefore were more likely to be aware of resources available to help them in academia. There was no comparison made to foster youth who are not campus support program enrollees. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic limited my access to a wider pool of potential participants and resulted in a smaller sample size than originally intended. The pandemic also resulted in my only being able to connect with students via Zoom, leaving me to wonder if more nuanced data could have resulted if I had been able to meet with students in person and talk more intimately about my personal connection to the topic. A final limitation is that participants only came from public universities and my study did not explore support programs in private institutions because they did not respond to outreach efforts.

Conclusion

Conducting a study that seeks to understand the factors that influence resilience among foster youth in higher education is a needed contribution to the body of literature focused on the foster youth experience. Gaining an understanding of how this population has adapted and persevered will add to the understanding of resiliency as a fluid process influenced by both risk and protective factors as well as the interplay between an individual and their environment. This study will contribute to existing research by using the voices of the foster youth to tell their

stories of resilience and through that, deepen the collective understanding of institutions, to better aid vulnerable students through stronger and more comprehensive support programs that not only foster academic success but long-term life outcomes as well.

Chapter Four: Analysis and Results

This chapter contains the results of the qualitative methodology study conducted to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What factors do foster youth believe influence their resiliency in higher education?

> *a. What personal strengths do foster youth identify within themselves that have helped them achieve college careers and academic success?*
>
> *b. What risk factors do foster youth most commonly encounter and what protective factors do they identify as being most helpful in overcoming challenges?*

RQ2: What systems of support do foster youth in higher education identify as being helpful in developing adaptive behaviors, mindsets, and practices that lead to resiliency and to academic success?

Qualitative data was collected from research participants through semi-structured interviews lasting 45 to 90 minutes, including time for follow-up questions and member checks. The interview protocol focused on the factors impacting participants' resiliency as current students successfully navigating academia at three selective institutions of higher education in the state of California. An initial demographic questionnaire was used as a

screening tool to ensure diversity among participants (See Tables 2-4 below). All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and later uploaded to Dedoose for coding and analysis. Each interview transcript was read through to get a sense of the lived experiences of each person. Line by line coding followed and themes were extracted as follows: 1.) Resilience, 2.) Systemic Barriers, 3.) Systems of Support, 4.) Helpful Adults, and 5.) Navigating Higher Education.

This chapter presents the findings from my study and is organized in sections as follows: tables of information, participant vignettes, themes & findings, and discussion around research questions.

Table 2 Participant Demographics

Name	Age (Range)	Pronouns	Race	Ethnicity	LGBTQIA+	English Language Learner
Sarah	18-20	She/her/hers	Biracial	Other	Yes	No
John	24+	He/him/his	Black	Black	No	Yes
Leonor	18-20	She/her/hers	Biracial	Other	No	No
Sam	24+	He/him/his	Biracial	Black	Yes	Yes
Leah	21-23	She/her/hers	Other	Asian	No	No
Dave	24+	He/him/his	Other	Latine	Yes	No
Megan	24+	She/her/hers	Biracial	Latine	No	Yes
Miguel	21-23	He/him/his	Other	Latine	No	Yes

Mayra	18-20	She/her/hers	Biracial	Latine	Yes	Yes
Rayne	24+	She/her/hers	Asian	Asian	No	Yes
Julie	24+	She/her/hers	Caucasian	White	No	No

Table 3 Participant Demographics II- Child Welfare Involvement (CWS)

Name	Age of Entry into CWS (Range)	Duration of CWS involvement (Range)	Number of Placements in CWS (Range)	Number of Schools Attended in K-12
Sarah	5-10 years old	2-5 years	1-3	4-6
John	5-10 years old	5+ years	6+	4-6
Leonor	16+	1 year or less	1-3	1-3
Sam	11-15 years old	5+ years	4-6	6+
Leah	16+	1 year or less	6+	6+
Dave	0-4 years old	2-5 years	6+	1-3
Megan	5-10 years old	5+ years	6+	4-6

Miguel	5-10 years old	5+ years	1-3	4-6
Mayra	0-4 years old	5+ years	6+	6+
Rayne	11-15 years old	2-5 years	6+	4-6
Julie	0-4 years old	5+ years	6+	6+

Table 4 Participant Demographics III- University Enrollment

Name	University	Year of Study	Current GPA (Range)	Campus Support Program (CSP) Participant
Sarah	Apex University	3	3.6-4.0	Yes
John	Apex University	Graduate student	3.6-4.0	Yes
Leonor	South Bay University	3	3.0-3.5	Yes
Sam	North Bay University	4	3.0-3.5	Yes
Leah	North Bay University	3	3.0-3.5	Yes
Dave	South Bay University	4	3.6-4.0	Yes

Megan	North Bay University	3	3.6-4.0	Yes
Miguel	North Bay University	4	3.6-4.0	Yes
Mayra	North Bay University	3	3.6-4.0	Yes
Rayne	Apex University	Graduate student	3.0-3.5	Yes
Julie	North Bay University	3	3.6-4.0	Yes

Vignettes

The following narratives outline salient details of my study participant's lives as they pertain to the foster care experience, schooling in both K-12 and higher education, and resiliency. Their collective experiences paint a powerful picture of multiple system barriers and what it means to embody resiliency in the face of them.

Sarah

Sarah grew up in various parts of the United States and was part of the child welfare system in several states before moving to California to study political science and public affairs with the eventual goal of becoming a lawyer. At the time of our interview, she was living out of state because reduced financial aid during the onset of the pandemic wasn't enough to cover rent in California. Sarah grew up in abject poverty and has experienced food and housing insecurity for much of her life. She entered into the child welfare system under kin-care as a baby and later experienced intermittent stays in both group homes and traditional foster care placements. Her

family of origin history is complicated and rife with struggle but she notes that her grandparents did maintain contact with her throughout and offered her support in the absence of her father, who was in prison and her mother, who struggled with addiction. Sarah's K-12 experiences were marked by frequent school moves and an absence of school-based mentors. Early on she clung to the assumption, that like many in her family, she may drop out of school, have children young, and simply settle into a low-paying job. She spoke at length about college being a foreign concept to her until she ended up at a high school with a college-going culture and the resources to match. It was then that she began to believe that maybe college could be an option for her. At this point, becoming the first in her family to graduate high school and the first to attend college, evolved into an empowering thought that helped her overcome the disadvantages of frequent school changes, learning gaps, and a lack of mentors. She credits one counselor with encouraging her to apply to as many universities as possible after being told by another that she only had "aptitude for community college". Now, entering her third year at Apex University, she is laser-focused on working hard and plans to pursue a law degree in the areas of foster youth rights and advocacy and voter rights for system-involved Americans. One of the most impressive aspects of Sarah's personality and heart is her desire to advocate and be of service to others.

<center>John</center>

John is presently a graduate student at Apex University pursuing a Master's degree. John's child welfare involvement began when he was nearly six and ended when he aged out at 18. He experienced both group homes and short-term foster placements until age 16, when a group home staff member became his foster parent and took him in and treated him as a son for the remainder of his time in care. Upon entering the system, John and his siblings were separated and lost daily contact with each other and with their mother, who was incarcerated.

John speaks with resignation about losing hope of ever being reunited with family, but is proud to say they have collectively forged strong family bonds in spite of years in separation. It was evident throughout our interview that John is naturally inclined to focus on the positive. He made a conscious decision as a young man to not live with hate or resentment and so, he focused instead on what went right for him in care, specifically, his relationship with his social worker and therapist, who were both genuinely invested in him. John's K-12 experiences were marked by numerous transitions between regular schools and those specializing in behavioral and/or learning challenges. In keeping with his positive disposition, John spoke of these experiences as ultimately being useful and instrumental in teaching him independence and providing him a space for emotional stability. He admits that the repeated cycle of "people coming into your life then leaving", was a depressing and traumatic aspect of being in foster care, but does not wallow in it. He also spoke of his physical disability and his learning challenges as a former special education student, but never once let either define him. For him resiliency meant simply surviving experiences as they came, until things got better eventually. John's interview ran the longest of all interviews and with good reason. He is a natural storyteller with the emotional intelligence and expansive spirit it takes to recount traumas and suffering with clarity and a sense of surrender for what has been beyond his control. He credits his approachable personality with attracting the support system he knows helped him to survive. John has already started his own organization focused on helping those who share his physical disability and plans to pursue a doctorate at Apex University in the near future. He will undoubtedly make a meaningful difference in the lives of others.

<div align="center">Leonor</div>

Leonor was extremely shy and did not turn on her camera during our interview. Instead, I listened to her soft voice from behind a screen image of an original drawing she made. She explained that art has helped her cope with the uncertainties of being part of the child welfare system and continues to be a soothing mechanism as she navigates academia. Leonor entered the system as a sixteen-year-old under Kincare and eventually resided permanently with an older sibling. She described being close to her mother but explained that during her time in care, she was not able to maintain contact with her. She experienced fewer school transitions than most other youth I interviewed but admits that the change of high schools late in her K-12 journey was exceedingly difficult. One major obstacle was experiencing a level of loneliness and anonymity within a much larger student body than what she was used to. Additionally, a marked absence of school-based mentors stood out for Leonor. She struggled to come up with helpful adults, mentioning only briefly that a coach helped her stay focused through running while a lot of the child welfare turmoil was going on. Another struggle was the lack of college preparation resources--which was something her own family couldn't help her with either, since no one had completed school prior to her. Leonor found both guidance and inspiration among her college-bound group of friends. She affirms that having a close group of ambitious friends helped her focus and ultimately got her to college. She also shared that her mother's advice to pursue an education so that she could achieve independence and have a better life, remained etched in her memory and served as motivation. Once in college, Leonor eventually transferred from one state university to South Bay University because the latter offered significantly more financial aid and overall support. She stressed that even during a global pandemic, South Bay University has gone above and beyond to keep students connected especially through services offered via campus support programs and TRIO/SSSP. She also added that receiving counseling services through the

university has made a powerful difference in her life and laments not seeking mental health services sooner. Leonor admits that there have been struggles as a woman of color in academia, such as being silenced and others not wanting to hear what she had to say, but feels that she has the resilience to overcome these and other barriers. She thinks of herself as resilient by default...because there "really isn't any other choice" but does believe that she can grow to be more resilient with time and experience. The most poignant thing Leonor said was in response to being asked to come up with one word to describe her future, and she said, "unsure"---and when asked why, she solemnly replied, "it doesn't feel concrete, or guaranteed".

Sam

At the time of our interview, Sam was preparing to graduate with a degree in Social Welfare. He experienced system involvement prior to being permanently removed from his home at age 12. He recalls at least seven different foster care placements and initially being separated from siblings but later reunited with them for a brief time. He shared that his siblings were adopted out and he was unable to see them for four years. When asked if adoption was ever an option for him, he said he never wanted it and instead pursued the legal guardianship route because it would probably be a better option for someone who might not be "adoptable" anyway. The only foster placement he considers positive was his final placement. This is where he felt supported and still considers them family. He laments that by the time he got to this family, a discussion about permanency seemed moot in the shadow of his approaching eighteenth birthday. Sam always knew he wanted to go to college, and his grandmother ingrained in him that he needed to go and that eventually he would probably have to care for at least one sibling who is disabled. In high school, his academic struggles belied his natural intelligence as he was able to quickly catch on and do well in adulthood, yet found it difficult to perform well among

high school peers, where his self-doubt, mental health challenges and unique learning style didn't fit the standard notions of a successful student. At the time of his high school graduation, Sam had a 2.1 and was not qualified to go directly into a four-year university. Instead, he settled into transitional housing and attended community college. He admits that at the time he lacked focus and direction and struggled to successfully navigate the rough transition into young adulthood. He eventually buckled down and transferred to North Bay University, where he found meaningful support from the university's campus support program (CSP). He credits some of his social workers, his grandmother and the director of this CSP for helping him to complete his studies. Sam communicates with a sincerity and candor that draws you in and it is easy to see that for him, resiliency has been rooted in self-reliance. The lack of overall support from adults and family structures has forced him to teach himself the small things we all take for granted. A powerful example of this was Sam teaching himself how to tie his shoelaces at the age of twelve and ride a bike at age 14. This simple statement poignantly illustrates the life of a boy left to fend for himself his entire life. It is not surprising that a pronounced aspect of Sam's interview was the urgency and sincerity with which he expressed wanting to help others. He plans to continue on to graduate school in pursuit of a master's degree but admits that he is worried about not having the financial support to complete his education. I asked Sam about resiliency once more at the end of our interview and his reply was, "every day you decide to live is... a resilient move". Sam is resilient for sure and he will undoubtedly change this ailing world for the better.

<div align="center">Leah</div>

Unlike other interviewees, Leah lived outside of the United States in her early childhood and attended both Arab and French schools abroad and experienced as many as eight school

transitions while with her family of origin. She entered into the child welfare system at age 16 while living in the U.S. and experienced multiple placement transitions while in care before eventually returning to her family. Leah described that the most difficult part of the constant transitions was the impact it had on her socially. She found it difficult to establish her identity and relate to others. Despite being away from them during her time in the system, she credits her parents for being her greatest source of support and guidance. For this, she expresses deep appreciation as it helped her get through several harrowing experiences while in care. Leah did not turn on her camera during our interview and I intuited a powerful and understandable, sense of self-protection and desire for privacy. She did emphasize that for her, attending college was a family expectation and the fact that there weren't mentors or programs that helped guide her, didn't matter much since she already had a plan to attend and nothing was going to deter her. She graduated early from high school, attended community college both in and out of California and later transferred to North Bay University. Leah has had to take a break from school due to chronic illness but remains focused on completing her studies. On a personal level, she credits her circle of friends and family, along with her proactive attitude for her success. Institutionally, she credits the campus support program and EOP services with providing needed financial support. When asked if she considers herself resilient, Leah asserts, "yeah, sure" and goes on to describe that for her, resiliency can be described as situational specifically, during instances of abuse. While she admits that experiencing severe traumas has had an impact, she has sought both mental health and spiritual help and does not feel broken down by them. She appears to maintain a level of detachment from her experiences, which seems to have helped her to not only survive, but to thrive as well.

<div align="center">Dave</div>

Dave is presently in his final year of studying psychology at South Bay University. Dave's child welfare involvement began as a newborn when he was removed due to maternal drug use. His father was incarcerated and could not look after him either. After failed attempts at reunification, he was permanently separated from his family of origin and both he and his sibling were eventually adopted separately. He spoke at length about his adoptive family sharing both the positive and negative experiences that colored his life. He asserted that he was taken care of and that he had access to support services and a myriad of activities to help explore his interests but that financial support tapered off once he got older and appeared stuck in a pattern of enrolling and then leaving school, most of which was tied to mental health struggles associated with depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, ADHD, and PTSD. He explained that although he eventually ended up figuring things out for himself, it was a long and treacherous road to get to where he is. Dave is 29 years old and therefore not of traditional age for an undergraduate student. He is glad that the campus support program was still able to help him despite his age and credits them for providing consistent resources and support. He also added that he has finally been able to complete his undergraduate studies because he is now medicated and supported by a therapist, a psychiatrist, and a life coach. He described his ongoing struggles with mental health disturbances, substance abuse and behavioral issues as key obstacles to college attainment but feels he has grown by leaps and bounds and has been able to work around all obstacles. He knows he is extremely resilient and when asked why, he responded by saying, "I've been through so much and look how far I've come. I'm still here." At the time of our interview, Dave was a matter of weeks away from graduating. He plans to attend graduate school in pursuit of a degree in neuroscience.

Megan

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Megan is a 28-year-old psychology student in her third year of study at North Bay University. She first entered the foster care system at age 5 and remained until age 18. She recalls being in seven different foster homes and was also separated from her sibling in the process. She recounts one failed reunification attempt with her biological mom when she was in primary school and afterward never returning to or maintaining family ties with any relative. She believes this was probably for the best. Megan credits one set of long-term foster parents with impressing upon her the importance of pursuing a college degree and her last set of foster parents with helping her with college preparation, including the admissions and scholarship application processes. While in their care, she was able to open up a bank account and learn the basics of financial literacy as well as get her first car. Unlike other interviewees, Megan did not experience excessive school moves and maintains that her social workers made an effort to keep her in the same school and neighborhood whenever possible to minimize the challenges of moving. When asked about barriers that got in the way of college dreams, she quickly names the child welfare system as a huge obstacle given the negative experiences she lived through in care. In many instances, she explained, school was her saving grace--a place to learn and get away from whatever was happening in any given placement. As for school-based support, Megan asserts there was a lack of mentors to help guide her but instead attributes her college focus on her own motivation, having college-bound friends, and the encouragement of her final foster parents. However, despite having support for her college goals, Megan struggled to make a successful transition into young adulthood. She benefited from being a part of a transitional living program but found it difficult to juggle independent living, full time employment and a community college course load. Megan explained that it took her a few years to figure things out and declared that she would not have been ready for a four-year university right out of high

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school. Fortunately, by the time she was accepted to North Bay University, she was better prepared and much more supported in all regards. She shared that helpful adults have sprouted up everywhere and especially credits the director of her campus support program with heading the community of peers with whom she has found belonging and a sense of home. It is clear that this is monumental for Megan, who has protected her privacy all along. Being part of a community that shares many of her own experiences has positively enhanced her college journey. It was not surprising that Megan declined being on camera for our interview as she communicated an unspoken desire to remain anonymous through her soft tone and hesitancy to answer some questions in depth throughout our time together. This did not, however, get in the way of her candor and authenticity. All that she didn't say was understood through her quiet, yet palpable strength. In fact, a striking element of Megan's personality was her resolve to transmute her own traumas into love and service. She plans to pursue a PhD in psychology in order to help others and help fight the stigma associated with being a youth in care.

<p style="text-align:center">Miguel</p>

Miguel is a fourth-year Ethnic Studies and Film major at North Bay University. His journey into the child welfare system began when he was 10 and ended when he aged out at 18. He and his siblings were placed in Kincare, with a close family member, after losing both parents unexpectedly. Fortunately, Miguel and his siblings remained in the same family placement for the duration of their time in care. However, Miguel struggled in other ways. As a person of color living in a predominantly white city meant frequent profiling and harassment by local law enforcement. In fact, Miguel explained that his older brother became system-involved and the trajectory of his life was altered because of it. This informed Miguel's social consciousness around policing and discrimination. Additionally, the sudden loss of both parents

left a lot of in-family fighting in its wake and caused him to retreat inward, which led to patterns of self-isolation and not sharing his thoughts or troubles except with a therapist during a short, court-mandated stint in therapy. While his relative was able to provide for him materially, Miguel had no one to talk to about more private matters plaguing his day-to-day existence. With the memory of his mother's encouraging words, Miguel knew he had to attend college but worried about how he would finance it. Like many other youth, he experienced a lack of adult mentors to guide his college pursuits so he had to be self-directed and motivated to prepare for and apply to college on his own. Once at North Bay University, Miguel had a conversation with a professor who encouraged him to look into the university's campus support program. There he found the community he never knew he needed. Finally coming to terms with his foster youth identity, Miguel flourished and found his purpose. Today, he is a proud advocate of Latino foster youth in particular and has already begun a program to help combat deficit views of youth formerly in care. Miguel details his struggles with navigating both a cultural and foster youth identities and credits multiple helpful adults, including the director of his CSP with helping him through his college transitions and ongoing struggles. He is of the opinion that all foster youth are resilient. For him, being a first-generation college student, Latino, low income and a foster youth has become a source of strength from which to draw when meeting life's inevitable hardships. Miguel is an artist, activist and natural storyteller and he's got important work to do. Our interview left me inspired and in awe of his spirit, voice and heart of service.

Mayra

Mayra is currently a third-year student pursuing a degree in Applied Mathematics and Data Science at North Bay University. She plans on pursuing a graduate degree and eventually having a career in the STEM field. She entered foster care at birth due to maternal drug

addiction. Being born addicted to drugs put her at an early risk for a myriad of challenges including learning and behavioral issues. Mayra remained in care until aging out at 18. Her placements included traditional foster care, group homes, and even an adoption that later failed. She spoke with fierce honesty about child welfare system failures and a lack of meaningful supports throughout her life, stating that she never liked any of her social workers and felt they didn't like her either. Never having a consistent worker to bond with or help her, she looked to other peers in care for support and maintains that those have been the only lasting bonds from being in the system. Additionally, Mayra shared poignantly about being separated from siblings and never really having a chance to salvage a family tie. She recalls moving around constantly and often out of county, making it impossible for her to settle down anywhere. Also noted were the deleterious effects of multiple school transitions and lack of programs to help her through a learning disability, ADHD, and behavioral issues interpreted as "anger issues" by school professionals. Furthermore, she shared that any mandated therapy that she was ordered to attend didn't help because confidentiality was constantly broken and what she shared was openly talked about among the adults around her. She felt judged and discounted as both a foster youth and a special education student. She spoke with candor about the weight of the "foster kid" stigma that underlies her K-12 experiences and caused her to self-advocate and fight to be removed from Special Education by the time she was in high school. Mayra's K-12 journey has been one of struggle, as she asserts that she is "still not good at education" but her marked determination, self-advocacy and resiliency have put her in a better place as a college student. She is glad that now, she is open to therapy and feels much more supported by her AB12 social worker. Under this program, which she joined only recently, she is considered to be under extended foster care and thus benefits from several life sustaining resources, including a monthly

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stipend that helps pay for school. She also credits her campus support program with being

instrumental in providing stable housing, helping with navigating financial aid, and maintaining

access to a community of peers with similar lived experiences--all major factors in ensuring

retention and degree completion among former and current foster youth. Mayra also maintains

that having the support of the campus support program has helped mitigate the effects of

systemic barriers along gender and ethnic lines. Feeling discriminated against and being silenced

as a woman of color in STEM has not been easy but Mayra is tenacious and strong. These

attributes will prove to be helpful in breaking through these barriers and ensuring positive life

outcomes. When asked what advice she would offer other foster youth wanting to attend

college, she said plainly, "Don't let fear stop you. Seek resources. Keep pushing yourself." It is

clear that Mayra has beautifully embodied this advice.

<p style="text-align:center">Rayne</p>

Rayne entered foster care at age 12 and remained until age 17 with some breaks in

between. Her stays in care were out of state and included group homes, assessment centers and

mental health facilities. Rayne credits her social worker, which she had for almost her entire

time in care, as well as her therapist, who was "always on her side". She speaks with candor and

acceptance about her family of origin, stating that she was able to maintain contact with only

some members but not others. She laments not having much guidance or support for her college

goals because she surmised that most adults around her simply didn't know how to help based on

the assumption that "foster kids don't pursue higher education". Her father did encourage her to

attend but since no one in the family had gone to college before, Rayne had to make it happen on

her own with intermittent help from a high school counselor who helped some with her

application process. As a first-generation college student, she faced a lot of "firsts" alone,

including her current pursuit of a graduate degree at Apex University. The only significant source of support she currently counts on comes from her significant other and to a certain extent, the campus support program, which thankfully offers services to graduate students too. For Rayne, the graduate experience has been tough. Overall, she feels that there has been a marked lack of empathy and understanding from professors who she identifies as mostly older, white women who "look down on her" or think her less capable because she is a woman of color--a dynamic that was magnified under the stresses of a pandemic and online learning. Rayne describes being met with impatience when she didn't readily understand a task or needed more time to complete work. She describes that because she struggled through her undergraduate years too, having to work full time while keeping up with academics--that she developed a stronger voice and a bent for self-advocacy. She affirmed that while graduate school has been a challenge, she knows that she will succeed because she has been through struggle before and remains undeterred. For her, resiliency is the only way because the alternative is to give up and fail, which has never been an option for her.

<center>Julie</center>

Julie is a third-year student at North Bay University studying economics and public policy. She plans to make a meaningful contribution, through policy, to the upward mobility of foster youth. Julie explains her chaotic and traumatic experiences in the child welfare system with acceptance and honesty. Entering the system as an infant, and remaining until her late teens, she experienced multiple placements and even an adoption. Suffering abuse and the ensuing mental health challenges all became a part of what fueled her desire to want to do more for herself. She identifies her experience within a private foster care agency as the most supportive and helpful, as it provided her with some degree of stability through life skill training

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in the latter part of her years in care. She describes her K-12 experience as being fraught with painful transitions and recalls attending approximately eleven schools in total. Similarly, to other interviewees, Julie experienced high school against the backdrop of constant impermanence--always finding it difficult to make and maintain friendships and keep up academically. She pinpoints writing as a major deficit in her schooling and admits that it still presents as a challenge as a university student. She recalls her high school years with a tangible yearning for what could have been if in her environment she had had any adults or programs that spoke to her with a language of possibility about college or having a future at all. It was clear to Julie that at 18 she would be completely on her own and she was right. After attempting some community college, she decided instead to enlist in the military and completed a 20-year career, retired and then went back to school. She is clearly grateful for the opportunity to pursue her college dreams and especially appreciates that her campus support program extended the age of eligibility and can thus provide services to her and other non-traditional age students. Julie's most astounding attribute is the positivity and sweetness that remained after such a tumultuous upbringing. She is a mother now with several years between her and her child welfare experience, which gives her a depth and wisdom that is clearly rooted in her resiliency and natural bent toward positivity.

All participants detailed more than one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) as a result of troubled home lives, school experiences, and child welfare involvement. Additionally, nearly all struggled academically, mentally, and emotionally to varying degrees yet they all are close to completing college careers and excelling in academia. Their collective resiliency is nothing short of miraculous.

Theme One: Resilience

As a whole, the YFFC I interviewed were keenly aware of the astounding amount of obstacles they have had to overcome in comparison to their non-welfare involved peers. For some, resiliency has become a badge of honor--a recognition of their fortitude and grit. For others, resiliency is tricky and a word they would rather not have to be described by, considering its high cost. All interviewees described being resilient as the only choice they have had in the face of hardship since the darker alternative is simply to give up altogether. Sam poignantly elaborated on this point by saying, "I don't know. I deal with really severe depression and I feel like every day you decide to live, it's like ... You know? A resilient move." Rayne also suggested that being resilient is the only option because, "life is always going to be throwing something at you, whether you're prepared for it or not. I feel like successful people just know how to take those kinds of hits and get back up and still move forward from them...they'll carry on." Mayra echoed this sentiment by stating, "I like to consider myself resilient because I think instead of using the setbacks or the situations that are placed on my life as an excuse to give up, I'd rather use them as a weapon to make change in the future... Instead of giving up, I could just keep going. Even though it doesn't look like there's a light in the tunnel, you just keep going and keep going and keep going." Leah shared that for her too, resiliency was simply the only way. Doing well in school despite difficulties was an expectation-- the standard in her family. Failure was simply not an option. For others like Julie and John, resiliency is grounded in taking an adaptive and positive posture in life. Julie explained that for her, "...optimism was what allowed me to have that resiliency. I always think whether I learn from this situation, what won't I do again, what I could have done better, how can I go forward?" Similarly, John reflected on the "kind of person that I am, having the mind that I have, and understanding the opportunities, or

appreciating the opportunities that have been afforded to me, it keeps me forward-thinking, and allows me to like bounce back, or spring back, not just bounce back, but spring back really hard. And so, I would definitely say resiliency is one of my strongest traits." Both Julie and John's take on resiliency being tied to mindset, speaks to what early resiliency research identified as external and internal assets that heavily influence an individual's resiliency (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Like Rayne, Julie, and John, several others, expressed a powerful commitment to learn and get ahead, which coupled with support, no matter how intermittent, served as the internal and external assets upon which resiliency was built. Additionally, in several instances, resiliency was described as a fluid process that might ebb and flow in different situations, but overall continues to grow over time. Julie explained that, "You learn more and more resiliency. I think you grow your resiliency. Every situation you are challenged in, you grow a new aspect. You get stronger." This supports research by Oshiri (2018) and Hines (2015) which contends that resiliency is a fluid process that fluctuates in strength based on a person's ability to adapt and grow in their capacities and that those capacities change with a person's developmental evolution. Others spoke about resiliency through a different lens. When asked about resiliency being tied to success, Megan clarified that for her, "being successful isn't necessarily tied to being resilient. I think that there's a lot of privilege and good fortune that comes with people that are what people may consider financially successful... So no, I don't think that being successful necessarily means that you're resilient, and I think that people can be resilient without having a traditional route of success." It was evident that for Megan, resiliency has to be met with access and opportunity for it to translate to success. Sarah contributed her take on resiliency and asserted that she thinks "[foster youth] are naturally resilient. I think when we get put in situations, we find a way to get through. I know not everyone gets the opportunity to get through.

And I don't think that's a lack of resiliency. That's just not having fair circumstances." The

collective experience of all interviewees with the exception of two, was that not many

opportunities came their way early on and because of those defining struggles, they recognize

that support in the form of access has been what aided in their resiliency and drive to keep

persevering.

Findings

A nuanced understanding of resilience facilitated foster youth's ability to overcome

barriers. Resiliency was widely perceived by foster alumni as a non-negotiable posture if

survival is to be achieved. Framing resilience this way allows for a more nuanced and deepened

understanding of this phenomenon. While much of what was shared about resiliency can be

supported by up-to-date research, which proposes that resiliency grows in proportion to a

person's development and ability to adapt to changing circumstances (Hines, 2015; Oshiri,

2018), scholarship as a whole, doesn't often frame resiliency in the way it was presented by

interviewees.

Theme Two: Systemic Barriers

Systemic barriers were widely addressed in all interviews and spanned across the child

welfare system, K-12 education, higher education systems, and the stigma associated with youth

in care. The most common barriers identified were 1) poverty, 2) the child welfare system, 3)

the K-12 experience, 4) academia, and 5) attitudinal barriers. It is worth noting that surprisingly,

gender discrimination and racism did not take center stage during interviews. It was evident that

while several youth experienced racism and discrimination along gender lines, those experiences

did not come across as more impactful than the experience itself, of being in the system. It

appears that for some, despite being members of historically marginalized groups, the experiences due to this were at least in part eclipsed by the foster youth identity. Some of the interviewees recall being treated differently due to both gender and race, like Mayra who explained her experience with a high school counselor, "I'm a female of color and he kept trying to tell me to just go to community college, which there's nothing wrong with community college. That's not what I'm saying, but it's just, you telling me that that's the only place I should apply." After having fought her way out of Special Education and numerous other hurdles, this felt limiting to her. Leonor and Rayne both spoke about feeling aware of how they were perceived as women of color in academia too---Specifically, being discounted or underestimated in academic settings due to their ethnicity and gender. Others like Miguel described incidents of police profiling and growing up with the grim warning that as a Brown youth, he would inevitably be profiled and harassed by police or worse.

Poverty

Poverty is a powerful risk factor that has clearly impacted the lives of most study participants. For many, socio economic struggles in early life directly contributed to the maltreatment that led to both the removal from family of origin and to school struggles. This supports what research has proposed for many years; that poverty, along with low parental education, has an adverse effect on cognitive development and long-term school performance (Wulczyn et. al, 2009). Sarah, for example, considers poverty a constant reality in her life as she was raised in a family who navigated the unique circumstances of the rural poor. Being geographically isolated, she explains, also meant that they were sharply cut off from access to even the most basic resources and adds that "...when you are from a rural area, you have a lot

less access than people in urban ones. I know that there's urban poor, don't get me wrong, but you're probably going to have access to a bus line. There are more resources and organizations in urban areas, there's more shelters for homeless people. There's more things. There's libraries." For Sarah, poverty exacerbated the already difficult terrain of being a mixed race, queer woman living in an under-resourced community.

Additionally, poverty is an ill that plagues many foster youth for a lifetime and is closely tied to other negative life outcomes such as mental illness, homelessness and low educational attainment (Beal et al., 2018; NFYI, 2011; Yi & Wildeman, 2018). Upon exiting the foster care system, many of the study participants were left to fend for themselves with little to no support. For all but three, direct entry into a four-year institution was simply not a reasonable goal given the sharp focus needed to just survive the transition into adulthood. For those who did pursue even a community college career, it was clear that finances were a top concern and one of the main reasons why the road to a four-year institution took years. Miguel also emphasized what a daunting endeavor it was to face the financial expense of a four-year university and added that being low-income only made the first-generation, Latine experience tougher, "... the idea of college was kind of scary to me because I didn't have any income, I didn't really know what financial aid was. I didn't know how to navigate scholarships and all of that." For others like Julie, who waited until after finishing a 20-year military career to pursue her college dreams, the strain of financial worry persisted and made her do an "extra three years to get the boost and the veteran's aid so that I can do this, because I couldn't do it without it. I couldn't even afford to live in California, my own home state, without it. It's that bad."

Child Welfare System

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Another common barrier that arose during interviews is the child welfare system itself. For the majority of the program participants who spent years in care, the system seemed to have left more wounds than it repaired. Foster care is intended to be temporary and focused on reunification of families and or finding permanency such as adoption (Hogan, 2020). Instead, thousands of youth remain in the system for the duration of their childhood and age out at 18, never achieving permanency. Megan explained what the foster care experience was for her, "I think it was having bad or negative experiences in foster care, within the foster care system itself. That was definitely a large setback for me that I had to overcome eventually, or work around, but it was definitely a setback." For others like Julie, being adopted at one point didn't feel like a happy conclusion to her foster journey. In many ways, the environment was still unhealthy and burdensome. She adds, "There wasn't any support at home. Nobody helped me do my homework. I had to take care of the daycare and the other foster kids, because they took care of foster kids. That was my priority as the oldest daughter, and to keep the house clean and to make dinner and help my sister. All of that fell on my shoulders." For participants like Sarah and Dave and Leah, the foster experience was riddled with abuses and keenly explained by Sarah, "psychological and emotional things that happen to you. You know, a lot of people lose hope... the type of resiliency that has to be employed, is nowhere near the same as it is for most other groups." Another troubling pattern particular to the child welfare system is the high number of transitions young people are expected to roll with unfazed. Over half of all study participants were in care for over five years and the majority of these experienced six or more different placements. Additionally, half the participants attended at least 4-6 different schools while in care. Mayra described the frustrating delays involved in a typical transition, "I remember the transitions because I didn't go to school. In the transition [process], when you move to a new

facility, they wouldn't let us go to school. They would have to observe us before we were able to go to school, or they would constantly pull us out of school to go to court. So, I feel like the transitions were really bad because I would lose a month, or more." For Mayra in particular, the transitions served as convenient excuses to explain away the academic troubles she was having in schools. She blames the constant moving around for how long it took to identify her learning disabilities and wishes she would have received help sooner. Similarly, Sam described his transitions as all being "pretty rough... I had to start from scratch every single time." For others, transitions amplified the already lonely and isolating experiences of perpetually "beginning again" as John explains, "[Transitions] were really tough because it's just a cycle of people coming in your life and then leaving. And it's just a continuous experience. And so that creates a lot of psychological strain just because you feel like you build a foundation and then it just gets torn down so quickly. And then you get this sense of feeling, okay, how am I going to be able to cope and do this again?" The transitions have a traumatic effect on their own, but several interviewees also spoke of foster system employee apathy and carelessness. For some, transitions were at least kept within the same county so that sibling communication could still happen if living separately, but for others, the decisions to remove from a placement seemed random and the often-stark difference in environments, coupled with sudden cessation in communication with siblings, was cruel. Another aspect of worker apathy seemed to be tied to not sharing information about resources and therefore reducing access to potentially helpful programs for foster youth approaching adulthood. Mayra shared that she didn't find out about AB12 benefits until after arriving at her current institution—a disturbing fact since AB12 went into effect in 2012. John agrees that services are not uniformly available nor to the same extent across different counties and considers this to be a "set-up for failure." Depending on the county,

social workers appear to be gatekeeping access to services that stand to provide needed supports to all foster youth. Lastly, for many youth in care, the traumas sustained in placement, necessitate mental health treatment through therapy. While this makes sense in theory, therapy is often court-mandated and the providers are constantly changing making it difficult to build a bond with a therapist. This results in youth becoming closed to the process, rendering it useless in the end. For youth like Mayra, the personal information shared during sessions wasn't always kept confidential and she found that her private business was shared in mixed company, making her feel exposed and judged. To the contrary, John and Julie both had positive experiences with therapy but are keenly aware that good therapists and the conscientious social workers that ensure their services, do not exist for every foster child.

The K-12 Experience

The reality of transitions between homes is inextricably tied to struggles in the collective K-12 experience among interviewees. For more than a few, school was an arena they were left to flounder in as teachers and other professionals viewed them through a deficit lens. For Mayra, the "whole experience at the schools-- they just assumed I was really behind because of how much I was moving, so I didn't get diagnosed ... I have dyslexia, and I didn't get diagnosed until they tested me... but it took until I was in fifth grade for them to find that out because they assumed I was behind because of school changes rather than there was something wrong." For others, the latter part of the K-12 experience, when college should be a common topic of discussion, was instead devoid of guidance, mentorship, and overall encouragement for the future. Julie characterized the experience as having "no opportunities, so I think that I didn't get

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the right skills and definitely wasn't given vision to go to college. There really was no discussion

of the future. What are you going to do with your life? There was no discussion of that." Others

describe being flat-out discouraged from pursuing 4-year college careers and instead being

pushed to only look at community colleges despite the demonstrated potential for more. And yet

for others like John, the K-12 experience had a more insidious effect "especially as a Black kid,

you feel like people are just going through the motions and getting you by rather than uplifting

you and building you. I don't think people recognize how hard I had to work to make people

believe that I'm this type of [hardworking] person because growing up in group homes and foster

care and being a part of this special education system and having IEPs. My association and my

identity to academia was just never very high. In fact, I felt very inferior." Notably, there were

instances of success when facing K-12 systems and one of those is Mayra's experience of having

to self-advocate to get the desired services she needed and ultimately deciding that Special

Education was not serving her needs. She explains that by "advocating on my behalf when I

found out I had dyslexia [and] was legally illiterate, that was a big one because the placement I

was at didn't really want to help me. There were nine of us in the house, so they weren't going to

help me improve my reading skills. I really, really worked hard to get the education to even get

out of that process. You can test out. I worked really, really hard to get where I was."

Academia

A common thread among most participants was the poor experience and preparation in

K-12. For many, pursuing a university career right out of high school was simply not realistic

given the significant gaps in learning, lack of guidance, and lack of access to college preparation

programs in high school. The majority of interviewees attended community college first and

took years to find their way to a four-year institution. For this group especially, the journey into

academia proved to be overwhelming and at times desperately lonely and confusing. For Julie, it felt like she was, "coming from behind" and always playing catch-up. Rayne and Mayra expressed similar sentiments as they too felt behind in one way or another and did not always feel understood by professors. Academic struggles for these women seemed compounded by microaggressions and judgments about performance within very toxic and competitive academic spaces. For Sam, the world of academia felt like a foreign experience in which he observed peers simply carrying on conversations with professors and discussing ideas and theories he knew nothing about. For a while, he felt that he just had to make things up in order to keep up. For him and Miguel, the constant need to code-switch in order to make themselves more palatable to others was an exhausting and defeating endeavor.

Attitudinal Barriers

Attitudinal barriers grounded in stigma toward foster youth were also mentioned among study participants. Megan expressed that, "I think that people that grow up and live in the foster care system, they may deal with identity issues or issues of self-esteem.", something that Sarah expanded on too, "I think kids in foster care, we all have to use resiliency in a way that other groups don't, it's just the way it is, when you get ripped out of your home, if you never even had a home to begin with, having to deal with an organization, institution that is not for you, you're going to be dealing with people that think of you in a certain way. You're not going to have the opportunities." Like Sarah, others felt that how they were perceived by others ultimately influenced how they perceived themselves. Megan further elaborated on this point by explaining that she, "[thinks] that for former foster youths that were in the foster care system, there is some stigmatization about being in that system. I think that people have a tendency to make assumptions about your background or your lifestyle, especially if you're not considered normal,

or not traditional. I think that that's been a barrier that I think a lot of us face. And I think yeah, it's something that we have to overcome and get through, and I think a lot of us feel the need to defy it and to prove people wrong. That can really motivate some, and it can be really hurtful and damaging." The stigma associated with being in care, weighed heavily on others like John, who says the fear of being perceived as "someone who needed extra help" prevented him from asking for disability supports. He also explained that, "in the foster care system we don't expect these youth who demonstrate such resilient behavior to be super-duper successful or productive people within society." He is not wrong. As others shared, low expectations of foster youth seemed to run rampant among school professionals tasked with educating and guiding this population. Self-perception for many, became an issue to grapple with long after their time in care ended. Miguel reflected on this and astutely asserted that he thinks, "everyone has the ability to be resilient. And I think everyone and anyone has the ability to be successful...But I think sometimes the systems around us prevent us from reaching that consciousness and allow us to really feel comfortable with our identities and with ourselves." This hints at the power that stigma about the foster care experience has on its alumni and the insidious way in which it takes root among the collective foster youth identity.

Findings

Data suggest that foster youth's negative experiences stem from the systems that are meant to help them in their formative and most vulnerable years: the child welfare system and the K-12 system. The systemic barriers that repeatedly surfaced during interviews underscore the need for a multi-system overhaul. Specifically, child welfare involvement should not be an experience that children have to heal from just as the K-12 experience shouldn't be the place where negative self-perceptions are sown. The significant weight of ACE's suffered in care

cannot be underestimated as often they eclipse all other negative experiences and systemic barriers, including gender discrimination and racism. Furthermore, the data revealed that the foster youth identity is often a costly label in that it usually comes with judgments and assumptions that stifle efforts on the part of foster youth to reach out and share their stories, as well as ask for help. Finally, access to programs and services including mental health supports are needed across the board and to the same extent for all foster youth. A uniform menu of services and programs does not currently exist and it should.

Theme Three: Systems of Support

A common thread across all interviews was the lack of consistent support in their K-12 experiences. Having several gaps in support made them all appreciate the programs that appeared on their paths and served to ease the transition into young adulthood and college. Of these, the campus support program was named as the top source of support.

All study participants emphasized the crucial role that their respective campus support programs provided them. The program that was most lauded was the one at North Bay University which is led by a director who consistently went above and beyond the call of duty to provide support in a myriad of ways. Of the most crucial support was the work realized to expand the service age to include older students. Through the campus support program's efforts, the university was able to recognize that many foster youth are not of traditional age when entering a 4-year university. The majority of the interviewees were in fact significantly older than typical college students but needed equal and sometimes more support in navigating college both socially and academically. Notably, programs such as TRIO and EOP, played an important role in the retention and success of former foster youth at all three institutions from which study

participants hailed. EOP, which is under the TRIO umbrella, is immensely important to former

foster youth as it is specifically designed to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds such

as having low socioeconomic status and being first-generation, which foster youth tend to fall

under. Specifically, students like John, Mayra, and Julie, were encouraged to seek support for

learning differences under this support service. John reflected on his experience as a returning

college student in need of support, "I had to really like to fully commit, more so than when I was

younger. I had to be all in, I had to go to tutoring, I had to go to the writing center, I started

English 10. I was like 25 years old in English 10. And it's like, I put in the work and I developed

the skills and, along the way, I developed strategies and tools, technology, that allowed me to not

only be effective, proficient, but like excel, really strongly. Knowing that I have these visual

impairments, I have to do things differently. I have to understand, "Okay, what technologies are

available for me so that I can cope, keep up, and surpass, or at least keep up with my

classmates?".

Other systems of support mentioned by interviewees were the mental health services

offered through the university. Many foster youth contend with mental health disturbances

stemming from their time in placement and having access to ongoing treatment in the form of

therapy is key to their success in school. Yet another system of support noted by interviewees

was the unique sense of community support created when peers of similar backgrounds are

brought together. Several described the experience of having shared journeys with peers as

literally life-saving. For youth like Miguel, the CSP not only transformed him mentally and

emotionally, but academically too. Speaking to this point, he adds, "I didn't participate in

discussion section [in classes]. I completely avoided office hours. I was purposefully not trying

to bring any attention myself. And now I, after being part of the ███ program for a few years, I get all my [classes] in, I'm sitting at the front now. I feel more comfortable with who I am."

Findings

Data demonstrated that the role of the campus support program is to be a clearinghouse for all key supports associated with college. The lack of support systems common among foster youth in K-12, made the support given in higher education through both campus support programs and policies under service programs like TRIO, even more meaningful to foster youth retention and success in higher education.

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Theme Four: Helpful Adults

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Research by Lovitt & Emerson (2009) reminds us that one of the cornerstones of resiliency building is the presence of at least one supportive and consistent adult to facilitate asset-building. This assertion helps to put the astounding lack of overall helpful adults and mentors among those interviewed for this study, into sharp focus. Although some YFFC describe a smattering of helpful adults throughout their lives, most characterize their time in care as devoid of consistent adult guidance and mentorship. For the lucky few who had helpful adults around, the experience was short-lived but impactful nonetheless. For several interviewees, the most crucial adults came in toward the end of their time in care or once enrolled in college. John shared that at 16 he was taken in by a male worker at one of his placements and described it as a father-son bond, which paired with a positive relationship with his social worker, made for a profound impact even if only for the last few years of his time in the system. Similarly, Megan described the relationship with her final foster family as caring and supportive, so much so that years later, she still maintains a family bond with them. Others like Rayne, shared a nurturing relationship with both her social worker and her therapist while in care. Dave also added that for

him his high school teachers provided safe spaces for him to simply exist and saved him from having to interact with peers with whom he lacked comradery. In contrast, for Mayra, a potential for a caring and reciprocal connection with a helpful adult didn't come until she was in college in the form of her AB12 social worker. In a similar way, Leah found more meaningful connections in college with both the CSP director and several professors who became academic and career mentors. This is something she found valuable as she plans to continue on to graduate school and sees networking as a crucial part of professional growth. Miguel also connected with professors who helped him academically but also encouraged him to become more comfortable with his foster youth identity and embrace his Mexican culture through literature and art. He attributes his personal growth and the flourishing of his creative expression at least in part, to these relationships.

It is evident that entering academia marked a shift for several participants in the area of helpful adults and mentorship. It is unfortunate however, that this shift didn't occur sooner while participants were still in care. The clear absence of consistent mentoring relationships and helpful adults is devastating given that research overwhelmingly privileges the role of mentors in the success of foster youth and considers it one of the greatest contributing factors to school retention (Lovitt & Emerson, 2009; Zimmerman,2014). There is presently no formal mentoring program offered uniformly to foster youth in K-12 settings, and due to both the constant moving around and the stigma attached to being in placement, many foster youth never actively seek the helpful adults they invariably need to achieve better academic and social outcomes. For many, the helpful adults that do arise in K-12 seem to do so by chance and only happens for some. Lastly, there seems to be a shift that occurs upon entering college at a university that houses a campus support program (CSP), for these service entities seem to be the clearinghouses for all

other services needed to survive and thrive in academia, not the least of which is mentoring support.

Finding

Research suggests that sustained mentoring relationships are crucial for foster youth but the data of this study suggest that a single supportive relationship with an adult, no matter how brief, can still play a major role in fostering resiliency too.

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Theme Five: Navigating Higher Education

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Many welfare involved youth leave the system with unresolved traumas, little to no resources, and no knowledge on how to live independently. This was true of the bulk of participants in this study. Entering college and taking on the task of navigating academia proved daunting to even the better prepared among them. For several participants, the college experience was made more challenging by being first-generation, being older than traditional college age, being part of a historically disenfranchised group, having a history of learning disability, coping with chronic illness and having mental health challenges. Additionally, having a long history of being left to flounder, created a tendency toward self-reliance that often got in the way of asking for help in the context of academia. For Rayne, who is a graduate student, the energy it takes to contact a professor and ask for more time on an assignment, was often not worth the response as she felt looked down upon for struggling and needing help. Another challenge she explained revolved around seeking academic support from the university's resource center and finding that despite needing help keeping up, she didn't quite qualify for any modifications. Academic struggles also posed a challenge for others like Julie, who found herself having to completely change the way she learned a specific subject. For her, the

availability of learning disability services was hugely beneficial and key to her progress. Sam explained his academic struggles in the context of his socio economic and racial background. He grew up a poor, queer, and Black foster youth, which in academia translated into a gaping disconnect between he and his non system involved peers and even with his non-Black partner who had also been in care. When he compared his lack of academic knowledge and language to that of his partner, he felt the disparate journeys they had experienced were amplified by academia's privileged lens. Navigating academia proved challenging to Miguel too, who grappled with Imposter Syndrome and at least initially felt completely out of place at his university due to how culturally and economically different his upbringing had been to that of peers he encountered.

Findings

Navigating academia for YFFC's cannot be a successful endeavor without the coordinated efforts of campus support programs, institutional supports through policy and professors working together to deliver proper resources, access and opportunities. For those struggling with Importer Syndrome, or becoming aware for the first time of the glaring differences along class and gender lines amplified by the rampant privilege in institutions of higher learning, adjusting to university life can be both triggering and intimidating. Retention and eventual degree completion cannot only hinge on the campus support program, but on relationships built with professors too. Professors who recognized the need for mentorship among their students were instrumental in easing anxieties associated with navigating college culture, academic rigor, and self-expression. Having the support of CSP and professors, gave former foster youth the courage to use their voice, for the first time in some, and bolster an already existing tendency toward self-advocacy in others.

Research Question Discussion

Early on in the data analysis, it became clear study participants perceived resiliency as both an externally and internally supported phenomenon. For example, the overwhelming majority of interviewees named their respective campus support programs as a major source of socio-emotional support for their college journey and as the strongest external element underlying their resiliency. CSP's vary between campuses, but the ones that served this study sample seemed particularly strong and responsive to the needs of their students. One of the most meaningful sources of support came in the form of housing assistance. Nine of the eleven participants cited housing insecurity as a chronic issue post foster care, and one that persisted in college. Attending universities that provided housing funds and even hotel vouchers when they were displaced between school breaks or during the Covid pandemic, was profoundly helpful to students. For many, having the worry of housing eliminated, freed them mentally to better focus on school and other important matters. Aside from housing, each CSP also offered funds for food, books, and even help with basic toiletries or small furnishings for dorms or apartments. Another meaningful service provided to participants on all campuses was access to academic testing, tutoring and advising to keep them on track to graduate, keeping their core aim of college retention as the focus. A particularly impactful resource mentioned by all participants was the safe space and sense of community provided by their CSP. All participants in my study were first-generation college students and had absolutely no idea what to expect in academia. North Bay University's CSP director was especially lauded for providing mentoring support and creating a network for students to support one another through the daunting transition into college life and in some cases into young adulthood. The majority of participants considered their CSP community as a "home" and credited the socio-emotional support they

received, beyond just mental health services, as a powerful contributor to their perseverance and resilience. For many, the CSP community was the first time they felt a genuine sense of belonging.

Every study participant demonstrated a high level of self-awareness and ability to self-reflect. A notable common thread was a possessing of a wistful acceptance of circumstances beyond their control and a keen focus on forging a better path than one solely left to chance. They all expressed the psychological toll tied to their child welfare involvement but also demonstrated great fortitude in the face of it. All self-identified as being determined, resilient and having a significant degree of emotional intelligence, and self-belief.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) are experienced at much higher rates by the foster youth population, putting them at the highest risk of all for poor mental health and chronic disease as well as poor academic, social, and economic outcomes. Every study participant experienced at least 2 or more ACEs in their early youth. More than one participant had a parent with mental health issues and/or substance abuse, making them the catalyst for child welfare system involvement. Some identified child welfare involvement itself, as the greatest assault on their development as much of the negative that happened in their lives, stemmed in one way or another from system sponsored traumas. Systemic dysfunction, lack of adequate services, lack of consistency or continuity of services between counties (in California), meaningful interventions in crisis, and rampant worker apathy were all cited by the majority of participants as child welfare system failures. The K-12 schooling experience was considered ill-equipped to effectively meet the needs of foster youth as deemed by all but two interviewees. Especially noted were instances where school transitions were made without regard for timing or convenience to the youth. A complete absence of college preparation programs was also a

common mention. Access to any information that could support the fragile transition into adulthood or college was markedly absent in all but two instances among the interviewed. Palpable judgment and stigma for being a "foster kid" or having an undesirable family of origin, weighed on several participants and prevented them from seeking help within the school environment. Mental health challenges were also a common risk factor. It is understandable that the trauma of multiple ACE's would impact mental health, but the absence of adequate and continuous treatment was also an aggravating factor. Astoundingly, the most cited deficiency was the lack of a consistent mentoring presence of a caring adult. While some participants had those experiences in some seasons of their foster years, none had them consistently, and found themselves learning to self-advocate while nurturing the few systems of support that sprouted along the way. Some of the protective factors mentioned was having adult guidance while in care, even if only briefly. Where college preparation in K-12 was concerned, several participants cited teachers, counselors, social workers, therapists, and foster parents for helping to instill the possibility of college and later to guide the college application process itself. It is important to note that college preparation supports were not consistent across all participant experiences, and were definitely not uniformly available to all students, nor to the same degree.

Resiliency through adaptability was a common thread found in all interviews. In fact, resiliency was perceived as a non-negotiable posture for success. Whether it was remaining focused in the midst of child welfare turmoil or making the transition from K-12 to college, all study participants showed a remarkable tendency toward adaptive behaviors. Some interviewees credit foster parents with helping to prepare them for adulthood and the college application process. Once in college, all participants credit their respective campus support program with

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providing them with the essentials needed to survive and of these, financial assistance was the most important form of help received. Eliminating the worry over having food or housing insecurity was noted as a powerful contributor to successful progress in school. Considering that many former foster youth experience post-care housing insecurity, the fact that CSP's work so hard to eliminate this and other significant barriers to learning, is extremely important. Additionally, CSP's and institutional support through TRIO and EOP programs was cited multiple times as a significant factor in supporting resiliency. AB12 benefits which extends foster care benefits to age 21, along with the recent extension of CSP benefits to older students was also noted as a key contributor to student success. Helpful adults in crucial roles within academia were mentioned as well. Without the guidance of CSP directors and the mentorship of professors, many YFFC wouldn't be as successful as they have been. Furthermore, the importance of mental health services was noted as an often-used tool for surviving uncertain times during the pandemic as well as for addressing past traumas. For several participants with learning disabilities, simply navigating the academic rigor of their respective programs wouldn't be possible without academic accommodations provided by their institutions. Lastly, being of limited financial means is common for former foster youth and thus the steady financial support that extends past tuition assistance, is a key piece in helping nurture the resiliency needed for degree completion.

Conclusion

The lived experiences of Youth Formerly in Foster Care (YFFC's) were starkly revealed through the semi structured interviews conducted over Zoom. Participants shared openly about their time in the child welfare system, K-12 schooling, and academia. Many found that in the midst of these experiences, they simultaneously grappled with mental health challenges, learning

differences, and self-perceptions around the foster youth identity. For many, this pattern continued into college and became more complicated by financial and housing insecurity. Despite a myriad of challenges, however, all youth demonstrated incredible resiliency that supported them throughout their time in care and continued into college in spite of lacking powerful protective factors such as mentorship or sustained and supportive adult guidance for more than just short periods of time throughout life.

The data gathered from the personal rendering of each foster youth experience, serves to expand the research base about this unique population and their interest and pursuit of higher education. Above all, the findings point to the urgent need to draw the foster youth population out from the penumbral corner where it has been relegated by research, and be addressed as its own discrete group with unique needs worthy of being met. Specifically, the gathered data shows that while all participants consider themselves resilient, they are weary from navigating systems that by and large ignore them and stigmatize their foster care identity. Additionally, it is clear that uniformity of services and access to them need to be made a priority to all foster youth so that the chances for college attainment and life outcomes are improved from the moment they enter state care. The findings of this study were organically gathered through the narrative rendering of each person's story and serve as the foundation for implications in policy and practice described in the concluding chapter of this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Implications

Data associated with foster youth is disheartening. The overwhelming majority of foster youth in care despite wanting to attend college, do not--and for the few who do make it, the chances of successfully completing a college career are low. The unique set of circumstances

faced by children in care all but ensure a future riddled with challenges including higher incidences of poor physical and mental health, homelessness, low socio-economic status and overall negative life outcomes. Research has found time and again that foster youth success often hinges on the quality and consistency of mentoring relationships and opportunities found at the intersection of access and support. This study addressed the following research questions with the aim of examining the resiliency factors that contributed to former foster youth success in higher education:

RQ1: What factors do foster youth believe influence their resiliency in higher education?

> *a.   What personal strengths do foster youth identify within themselves that have helped them achieve college careers and academic success?*
>
> *b.   What risk factors do foster youth most commonly encounter and what protective factors do they identify as being most helpful in overcoming challenges?*

RQ2: What systems of support do foster youth in higher education identify as being helpful in developing adaptive behaviors, mindsets, and practices that lead to resiliency and to academic success?

The theoretical framework that guided this study is Resiliency Theory which posits that human beings possess the ability to not only bounce back from challenges but to adapt to changes in their environments. Resiliency as a research topic originated in psychology but has now for several years made its way into the nexus of educational research, bringing with it a new awareness of the singularities within the foster youth population. New body of research has also expanded on the notion that there is a human tendency to grow the capacity for resiliency as

influenced by personal development and environment. The key contribution of said research is the assertion that resiliency is comprised of dynamic and fluid processes that can be nurtured in all people through protective factors such as consistent mentoring and support, in the case of maltreated youth in care. The study focused on information gleaned directly from semi-structured interviews which revealed key findings summarized in the next section.

Summary of Findings

Based on the analysis of data from the study, 5 important themes emerged: 1.) resiliency, 2) Systemic Barriers, 3) Systems of Support, 4) Helpful Adults, and 5) Navigating Higher Education. Findings by theme are summarized below:

Resilience

A nuanced understanding of resilience facilitated foster youth's ability to overcome barriers. Resiliency was widely perceived by foster alumni as a non-negotiable posture if survival is to be achieved. Framing resilience this way allows for a more nuanced and deepened understanding of this phenomenon. While much of what was shared about resiliency can be supported by up-to-date research, which proposes that resiliency grows in proportion to a person's development and ability to adapt to changing circumstances (Hines, 2015; Oshiri, 2018), scholarship as a whole, doesn't often frame resiliency in the way it was presented by interviewees.

Systemic Barriers

Data suggest that foster youth's negative experiences stem from the systems that are meant to help them in their formative and most vulnerable years: the child welfare system and the K-12 system. The systemic barriers that repeatedly surfaced during interviews underscore the need for a multi-system overhaul.

Systems of Support

Data demonstrated that the role of the campus support program is to be a clearinghouse for all key supports associated with college. The lack of support systems common among foster youth in K-12, made the support given in higher education through both campus support programs and policies under service programs like TRIO, even more meaningful to foster youth retention and success in higher education.

Helpful Adults

Research suggests that sustained mentoring relationships are crucial for foster youth but the data of this study suggest that a single supportive relationship with an adult, no matter how brief, can still play a major role in fostering resiliency too.

Navigating Academia

Navigating academia for YFFC's cannot be a successful endeavor without the coordinated efforts of campus support programs, institutional supports through policy and professors working together to deliver proper resources, access and opportunities.

Research Question Discussion

A notable aspect of resiliency is that it is widely perceived by foster alumni as a non-negotiable posture for survival. It repeatedly appeared in the data analysis as a naturally occurring phenomenon that simply is the only choice in the face of daily assaults on a person's development and humanity. The systemic barriers that surfaced suggest that child welfare involvement is often itself, a traumatic experience filled with painful impermanence in the form of excessive school and home transitions, changing adult faces, and constant assaults on personhood. Additionally, the K-12 experience as a whole was devoid of both adequate

academic supports, mentoring relationships and college preparation programs for the majority of participants. Data also revealed that the significant weight of ACE's suffered in care are often powerful enough to eclipse all other systemic barriers, including gender discrimination and racism. Furthermore, the data showed that the foster youth identity is often stigmatized and riddled with judgments and assumptions that stifle efforts on the part of foster youth to reach out and share their stories, as well as ask for help. Finally, access to programs and services including mental health supports do not exist across the board and to the same extent for all foster youth. A benefit that one child may receive in one county may not necessarily be offered in another, for example. Data seems to shed light on why community college attendance is a common starting point for YFFC prior to transferring to a 4-year university. Often, they lack the preparation and grades to go directly into university due to gaps in learning, multiple school transitions, lack of guidance and college preparation supports. These reasons can clearly be tied back to both child welfare and K-12 system failures.

Another key finding was the lack of consistent helpful adults or mentorship. For many, the helpful adults that do arise in K-12 seem to do so by chance and only happens for some, not all youth. However, there was a notable shift that occurred upon entering a university that has an active campus support program (CSP) and it was rooted in finding consistent support, mentorship, community bonding, and a place where a myriad of services could be accessed readily and without judgment. In addition to the CSP, data also pointed to the role of professors who took the time to develop relationships with students and therefore helped nurture academic and social growth, along with personal expression.

Implications for Policy & Practice

Participant interviews revealed a series of multi-system failures suffered by foster youth. Because of this, the findings of this study will be helpful to practitioners not only within the child welfare system, but professionals within K-12 and higher education. Specialized and targeted assistance benefiting foster youth in K-12 is key to ensuring that access meets support for all youth and particularly for those expressing a desire to pursue college careers. The first step in achieving this is to eliminate the obstacles to college. The current system of support framework in K-12 is known as Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and it calls for interventions for all who need them within general education. Unfortunately, this is not a federally mandated framework and thus leaves too much to the discretion of individual districts and school site teams who don't always design plans with foster youth needs in mind. What does this mean for foster youth already floundering in the school environment? It means they continue to fall through the cracks. Furthermore, for foster youth on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), this means they are left out of MTSS support services completely and left to rely only on what the local governing Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) provides under "related services". Under MTSS, school districts and site teams should provide specific services that at least in theory meet the needs of all students, however, most fail to fully implement thorough multi-tiered interventions that cover academic, socio-emotional and behavioral services that are adequate in meeting the needs of foster youth. A key recommendation would be to implement explicit service plans within the multi-tiered system of supports that are robustly designed to serve often maltreated and traumatized foster youth through trauma-informed practices led by trained counselors (Martinez et al., 2019). Another recommendation would be to educate teachers about the impact of ACEs through professional development aimed at not only

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deepening empathy and understanding among educators but also reducing the stigma associated with the foster care experience. This recommendation extends to Teacher Education Programs too. It is clear that teachers are critical to the successful implementation of trauma-informed classrooms, but are often under-prepared to successfully navigate the stresses of teaching children with unique socio-emotional needs (Brown, et al., 2020). The obvious remedy would be to require that trauma-informed practices be explicitly taught in credentialing programs and not just left to chance. Addressing the needs of foster youth should be intentional and targeted and it begins with adequately preparing educators. Lastly, it is imperative that there be a uniform menu of basic services that is offered to all foster youth. On college campuses, the campus support program (CSP) serves as the clearinghouse for this, but in K-12, there is no such entity. Sure, high schools often have college and career centers that address job and college search student inquiries and offer other services such as mental health counseling through sub contracted agreements---but what if all of these were offered in the form of campus support programs located on all high school campuses? What if foster youth could move from school to school and still have the same access and level of services afforded to them? The consistency of this alone would make all the difference for foster youth in transition.

Further Research

Available research suggests that foster youth who pursue a college education, face a significantly greater risk of dropping out due to poor preparation (McNamara et. al, 2019). This is precisely why more research needs to focus on the root cause of poor preparation. It is crucial that any new light shed on this topic, view poor preparation as a systems deficit and not a personal one. Ill-prepared foster youth are simply a symptom of widespread system shortcomings and research needs to reflect this. Specifically, new research examinations need to

delve deeply into the way services are offered to youth. For example, AB12-related services, which extend the foster youth age from 18 to 21, are federally funded resources yet, the majority of study participants who would have qualified for it, did not know about it at all and said they were never offered the option as their 18th birthday approached. While transitional housing was offered to some, it only lasted one year. This is tragic considering that in this study, nearly all interviewees suffered from housing insecurity at one point or another in their young adult lives, which subsequently affected their focus and ability to enroll and succeed in college. Next, future studies would be wise to examine the combined role of K-12 and child welfare systems on the life trajectories of foster youth. Based on this study's data, the impact of only one of these underserving a child can be devastating enough, but to have both systems doing the same is a recipe for failure. Excessive school transitions, worker apathy, and lack of access to services from the child welfare system have a compounding effect when paired with foster youth stigma, failure to identify learning and behavioral needs in a timely manner, lacking mentorship, and offering little to no college preparation supports or programs in K-12. Lastly, research that examines the way in which mental health services are delivered to foster youth, could stand to spark the needed conversation around this issue. Of the members of this study, only two found counseling helpful while in care and not coincidentally, they both had the same therapist for a prolonged period of time, which allowed for trust and relationship building. Of the remaining participants who received court-mandated therapy, none saw the value in it as the service provider often changed or the confidential nature of what was shared was broken. The traditional model for therapy within child welfare seems to treat the child as the problem to fix instead of as a symptom of a greater ill or system dysfunction. Given that mental health is key to successful life outcomes, it should take center stage when developing service plans for maltreated youth.

Conclusion

Findings of this study suggest that more can be done to serve foster youth at every level. It is fair to say that this responsibility falls on multiple systems, collectively. The child welfare system and K-12, are the two entities most impacting the lives of children in care. The events that occur in care determine to a great extent, the life trajectories of foster youth. When this is juxtaposed with the statistics associated with foster care alumni, it is easy to see the correlation. In short, child welfare and K-12 should not be systems that already maltreated youth should have to survive. It should instead be a collaborative effort that earnestly and intentionally works together to heal children and prepare them for the best possible futures. Part of this is being dedicated to on one hand strengthening resiliency development, while feverishly working to dismantle failed systems on the other. Foster youth ended up in state care through no fault of their own and shouldn't be made to feel broken. Extra resources should be assigned to this unique population for the simple fact that they need it and these resources should not be increased or diminished based on where a child resides, how "bad" their family of origin was, or what color they are. A uniform menu of basic services should be offered in all states and all foster youth who want to know about college should have the chance and financial backing to pursue that dream. It is appropriate to close this study by sharing some of the words that came to mind for each interviewee as they considered their future:

Leonor

"Unsure. I'm not sure. I just... I think overall as a person, it's kind of hard for me to visualize a future. Yeah, it just doesn't feel concrete, or guaranteed."

Rayne

"Happiness. I think in my future that I would be okay with being financially secure and having nice things. But to me it's like, *Am I happy in my career, in my personal life and with the people around me?* That would be really more important to me than anything else.

Leah

"Peace. And I think it comes to mind because I think I'm just very not chaotic, I don't yell, I don't shout. I like peaceful harmony through the mediator in all situations. And that's what gives me the most tranquility and happiness in life."

Mayra

"Independence or financial independence. I want to be completely not reliant on other people. It's my money, it's my clothes, it's my ... I bought my first bed, and I was so proud of myself. Other people were buying other things, and I was like, "This is my bed. It's mine. I own it. You can't take it away from me."

Megan

"Well, hopeful because I'm excited to see what's to come in the future and the results of everything that I'm doing right now. I'm very hopeful."

Julie

"It's uncertain, like what if I don't wind up working with foster children after all of this? This was the whole thing I wanted to do. What if I wind up working in labor and wages? What if I want to move closer to my children, and that shuts out those opportunities? Then I'll have to choose something else. At this point, I'm really uncertain."

Sam

"Chaotic."

John

"Prosperity."

Miguel

"Hope. I love the idea of loud expression, of pushing back, kind of spitting back and throwing back. And I think that word 'hope' holds all those ideas in one word."

Sarah

"I think really the word that comes to mind is advocacy or giving back, because even if I never end up finishing a law degree, even if I can't do this and that, I want to be able to make things better for other people in some way no matter what that looks like."

RECRUITMENT LETTER

University of California- Los Angeles

Identifying Resiliency Factors Among Foster Youth in Higher Education

My name is Cristina Camarena-Prieto and I am a third-year doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership Program (ELP) at UCLA. My dissertation, *Identifying Resiliency Factors Among Foster Youth in Higher Education* is a qualitative study that seeks to understand the factors that contribute to Youth Formerly in Foster Care (YFFC) resiliency and its impact on college attainment and success. The goal is to address the gaps in research that exist for this population and to better inform services offered to foster youth in both K-12 and post-secondary settings to improve academic and life outcomes.

My study will answer the following research questions:
1. What factors do foster youth believe influence their resiliency in higher education?
    a. What personal strengths do foster youth identify as attributable to their college careers and academic achievement/success?
    b. What risk factors do foster youth most commonly encounter and what protective factors do they identify as being most helpful in overcoming challenges?

2. What systems of support do foster youth in higher education identify as being the most helpful in the development of adaptive behaviors, mindsets, and practices that lead to resiliency and academic success?

I am particularly interested in interviewing current college students attending a 4-year university (UC, CSU, or private), who are presently or formerly in foster care and are now in at least their third year of college or beyond and on track to graduate, and hold a 3.0 GPA or higher.

If you would like to participate in this study, please complete the attached Demographic Questionnaire and submit via Google Forms. After screening you will be notified if selected to participate in the interview process. Please keep in mind that if you are not selected to participate in the interview, your Demographic Questionnaire responses will be permanently erased from all storage spaces. If you are selected, the interview will last 45-90 minutes, including any additional contact needed for clarification. All interviews will be conducted on Zoom and you will be compensated with a $30 gift card to Target or Amazon upon completion of the interview process. All interview responses and participant identities will be kept confidential. All participation is voluntary. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

If you have any questions about this study, please email the Principal Investigator, Cristina Camarena-Prieto, at: ccyogalove@gmail.com.

Link to **College Youth Currently or Formerly in Foster Care Demographic Questionnaire:**

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1JdLQbFYJ2lefoqrTe72MwZxP_X-mG40D-vTMLdJjOWc/edit

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

College Youth Currently or Formerly in Foster Care Demographic Questionnaire

If you would like to participate in this study, please complete the attached Demographic Questionnaire and submit via Google Forms. After screening, you will be notified if selected to participate in the interview process. If you have any questions about this questionnaire, please email the Principal Investigator, Cristina Camarena-Prieto, at:
███████████████████

* Required

1. Your initials *

2. What are your pronouns? *

Mark only one oval.

   She/her

   He/him

   They/them

   Other (please specify)_____

3. What is your age? *

Mark only one oval.

   18-20

   21-23

   24 or older

4. What race do you identify with? Check all that apply. *

Mark only one oval.

   Black/African American

   Asian

Caucasian

Biracial/multiracial

Other: (Please specify)_____

5.   What ethnicity do you identify with? Check all that apply. *

Mark only one oval.

Black/African American

American Indian or Alaska Native

Latine/Hispanic

Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

Asian White
Other: (Please specify)_____

6.   Are you a member of the LGBTQIA+ community? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

7.   Is English your first language? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

8.   What college do you attend? *

Mark only one oval.

University of California- Los Angeles

Other 4-year college/university: (Please specify)_____

9.   What year of college are you in? *

Mark only one oval.

3rd year

4th year

Other: (Please specify)_____

10.   What is your current GPA *

Mark only one oval.

3.0-3.5 GPA

3.6-4.0 GPA

Other: (Please specify)_____

11.   Have you received support from any of the following campus programs at your school site? (Support can include: tutoring, college and career guidance, housing assistance, grants, financial support, workshops, etc.) * *Mark only one oval.*

Guardian Scholars Program- UCLA

I have not participated in a campus support program.

Other: (please indicate program)_____

12.   How old were you when you first entered the foster care system? *

Mark only one oval.

0-4 years of age

5-10 years of age

11-15 years of age

16+ years of age

13.   How many years were you in foster care? *

Mark only one oval.

Less than one year

2-5 years

5+ years

14.   How many different schools have you attended in K-12? *

Mark only one oval.

1-3

4-6

6+

15.   How many different home placements have you experienced? *

Mark only one oval.

1-3

4-6

6+

16.   Are you an emancipated youth? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

Not sure

17.   If selected, are you willing to participate in an interview via Zoom about your experiences as a current or former foster youth enrolled in college? *Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

18.   Contact information: Please provide your email address if you would be willing to participate in the interview process. All selected participants who complete the interview process will receive a $30 gift card to Target or Amazon. Thank you!

INTRODUCTION

Cristina Camarena-Prieto (Principal Investigator), from the Educational Leadership Program at the University of California, Los Angeles is conducting a research study. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are *a Youth Formerly in Foster Care (YFFC) enrolled in college.* Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT A RESEARCH STUDY?

·   *Someone will explain this research study to you.*

·   *Whether or not you take part is up to you.*

·   *You can choose not to take part.*

·   *You can agree to take part and later change your mind.*

·   *Your decision will not be held against you.*

·   *You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.*

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH BEING DONE?

This qualitative study seeks to understand the factors that contribute to Youth Formerly in Foster Care (YFFC) resiliency and its impact on college attainment and success. The goal is to address the gaps in research that exist for this population and to better inform services offered to them in both K-12 and post-secondary settings.

HOW LONG WILL THE RESEARCH LAST AND WHAT WILL I NEED TO DO?

All potential participants will need to take a brief demographic questionnaire (5-10 minutes in duration). Responses will be screened then participants will be selected for the interview phase. If chosen for the interview, participants will take a total *one 45–90-minute virtual interview session through Zoom with possible follow up contact for needed clarification.*

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- *Fill out a brief demographic questionnaire, sent to you in the recruitment email and/or flier, through Google Forms and if chosen for interview you will then:*

- *Participate in one 45–90-minute virtual interview session through Zoom with possible follow up contact for needed clarification.*

ARE THERE ANY RISKS IF I PARTICIPATE?

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts for this study.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS IF I PARTICIPATE?

Individual participants will not directly benefit from this study.

This study may contribute to the body of research focused on foster youth and college attainment and success.

What other choices do I have if I choose not to participate?

Your alternative to participating in this research study is to not participate.

HOW WILL INFORMATION ABOUT ME AND MY PARTICIPATION BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

The researchers will do their best to make sure that your private information is kept confidential. Information about you will be handled as confidentially as possible, but participating in research may involve a loss of privacy and the potential for a breach in confidentiality. Study data will be physically and electronically secured. As with any use of electronic means to store data, there is a risk of breach of data security.

Use of personal information that can identify you:

Identifiers in interview data will be replaced with pseudonyms. All participants will be given a pseudonym and personal identifiers will be removed from the data and kept on a separate password-protected software document.

How information about you will be stored:

All data will be stored on password-protected software.

People and agencies that will have access to your information:

Principal investigator will have access to the data from this study for five years.

The principal investigator and authorized UCLA personnel may have access to study data and records to monitor the study. Research records provided to authorized, non-UCLA personnel will not contain identifiable information about you. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not identify you by name.

How long information from the study will be kept:

Data from this study will be kept for five years on password-protected software.

USE OF DATA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Your data, including de-identified data, may be kept for use in future research.

WILL I BE PAID FOR MY PARTICIPATION?

Participants who are chosen for interviews will receive a $30 gift card to Target or Amazon as a thank you for their participation.

WHO CAN I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

The research team:

***If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can reach out to the principal investigator, Cristina Camarena-Prieto, at ccyogalove@gmail.com or faculty advisor to the study team, Dr. Sandra Graham, at** graham@gseis.ucla.edu*

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: (310) 206-2040; by email: participants@research.ucla.edu or by mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS IF I TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

- *You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.*
- *Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.*
- *You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.*
- *You may review, edit, and erase recordings of your interview participation.*

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Identifying Resiliency Factors Among Foster Youth in Higher Education

My name is Cristina Camarena-Prieto and I am a doctoral student at UCLA conducting a study about resiliency factors that contribute to foster youth success in higher education. I am interested in your experiences as a current or former foster youth. Your participation involves a formal interview process that will last 45-90 minutes, including additional follow up if needed for clarification. This study is not intended to harm but we recognize that speaking about lived experiences can be difficult. For this reason, you will be provided with a list of mental health services at the beginning of the interview. Additionally, please be aware that you may withdraw your consent or stop the interview at any time and for any reason.

Please be advised that your name and the name of your school will be anonymous as will all of the information you share. All notes taken during the interview will be kept confidential and your identity protected at all times. The interview will also be recorded in its entirety and will later be transcribed for data analysis. You will also receive a $30 Target or Amazon gift card at the conclusion of the interview process.

Do you give consent for the interview to be recorded with audio equipment?

Questions:

Part I: Demographic Information

    SEE DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Part II: Child Welfare Involvement

    1. At what age were you first placed in foster care?

    2. How many years were you in foster care?

    3.. Please describe the number and type of placements (foster care, group home, kin/family placement, etc.)

    4. Are you an emancipated youth? If so, please tell me what that transition was like.

        a. If not, are you in Extended Foster Care? Please describe what that's like.

    5. In your time in foster care, who are the people who most supported you as a whole?

        a. Please describe the ways in which you were supported.

    6. Were you able to maintain contact with your family of origin during your time in foster care?

a. Please describe your level of contact and how it was beneficial to you.

Part III: K-12 Experiences

7. How many different schools did you attend before college? What were the transitions between schools like?

   a. If any transitions were better than others, what made them so?

8. Describe the barriers you faced in K-12 when pursuing your college dreams?

   a. What barriers did you face in school and home while pursuing your college dreams? How did you overcome them?

9. What were the experiences that inspired/empowered you to attend college?

   a. In what specific ways did they mobilize you to act in your pursuit of college?

   b. Describe any role models or mentors you may have had and the specific ways they helped you. (for example, family members who may have attended college before you)

10. Describe the college prep programs available to you in elementary, middle or high school.

   a. What specific programs were available to you and what types of support did they offer? (support programs such as Upward Bound, Promise Scholars, AVID, etc.)

11. Please tell me about any adults who helped you prepare for college in K-12 (counselors, teachers, coaches, etc.)

   a. Did these adults help you emotionally, spiritually or in any other significant ways? If so, please describe their support.

12. Are there any adults now, in your college experience that have helped you to stay on track and thrive?

   a. Please describe how they have helped you.

Part IV: The College Experience

13. In what ways has the campus support program at your current college helped you?

   a. How has the pandemic impacted the services you have access to presently?

   b. Are there services you would like to receive that are not currently offered, if so, what are they?

   c. Do you feel fully supported at your current college? If so, how?

   d. Do you feel supported by your professors? If so, how?

14. What strengths or characteristics do you now have because you have been successful in college?

15. What other kinds of support has been helpful to you in developing habits or beliefs leading to your academic success?

16. As you progress in your college journey, what do you most need to reach the finish line and graduate?

17. What concerns you the most about life after graduation?

    a. What supports would you still like to count on after you graduate? From your institution? From Extended Foster Care?

18. Resiliency is defined as the ability to overcome adversity and thrive in spite of tremendous difficulty. Do you consider yourself resilient, why or why not?

    a. Tell me about the qualities you possess that help you to keep working hard even when circumstances become difficult?

        i. What systemic barriers have you had to face and how have you overcome them?

        ii. Is there a particularly difficult situation where you have needed to be resilient?

        iii. What did being resilient look like for you in this situation?

    b. Describe the traits and capacities that you would still like to develop in yourself?

    c. Do you believe you have the ability to become more resilient? Why or why not?

19. Do you consider yourself successful in academia?

    a. If so, what does being successful look like for you? (good grades, stable mental health, positive outlook, etc)

    b. Do you think being successful is tied to you being resilient, why or why not?

20. When you think of your future, what's one word that comes to mind and why?

21. What advice might you give another foster youth as they consider pursuing a college career at a four-year institution and beyond?

22. Do you have any questions before we close or do you have anything you would like to add?

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