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Undergraduate



Former foster youth in college

By: Haruka Motomatsu

Abstract:

The objective is to understand former foster youth's pathways to college, identify the factors that affect their educational achievements, and to help inform them about programs and extensive care to youth currently in the foster care system. There is little knowledge on the former foster youth who go on to lead healthy and productive lives and of the contributing factors that enabled them to succeed. This research paper outlines the modern programs and care available to foster youth and why those programs and care are helpful or not as helpful. From the studies, it is apparent that foster youth lack the necessary environments, reasons to keep up the motivation, adult who helps them keep up the motivation, and a place where they are able to concentrate on their goals and a place where they are able to obtain a goal. Each child needs special care, however there aren't enough resources and funds for such attentive care. The most important thing that needs to be improved for the services for this special population is the closeness of the relationship between the caretakers

and the children, and their treatment as normal individuals.

Foster youth exhibit difficulties in and after foster care. "Approximately 424,000 children are in foster care in the United States"(California & National Statistics - San Francisco CASA, 2013). It can be said that they are a minority and there are only a handful who continue on in their education. CASA proved this by saying that "Less than half of California's foster youth will graduate from high school and only 2% graduate from college or higher." (2013) We have only a little knowledge of the former foster youth who go on to lead healthy and productive lives and what the contributing factors were that enabled them to succeed. Understanding former foster youth's pathways to college and identifying the factors that affect their educational achievement can help inform programs and extensive care to youth currently in

the foster care system.

For my research, I conducted an online survey to ask what the foster youth in college felt were the obstacles or benefits that helped them pursue higher education. Guardian Scholars program's coordinator of University of California, Merced helped distribute my online survey via e-mail to those who declared themselves as former foster youth and are in a Guardian Scholar's e-mail list. Guardian Scholars is a program for the former foster youth students that provide benefits and support in housing, counseling, tutoring, and provide beneficial information for the former foster youth. The survey was voluntary, anonymous, short, and the answers were to be written in a blank box. The survey had to be voluntary and anonymous to ensure that they are not forced in anyway and to ensure their privacy. It needed to be short so that many are able to answer the survey without taking too much time. The answers were to be written in a blank box so that they are able to freely place their opinion. There were many limitations to this research since there are only a handful of foster youth and especially only a few who attend or attended college. The sample was also not random which affects the degree to which the results can be generalized. There were more respondents to the survey than what was originally expected. There were 12 respondents to the survey, which is approximately about a quarter of those who are identified to be former foster youth at UC Merced. From those who identify themselves as former foster youth, about or less than half take participation

in Guardian Scholars program. Thus 12 respondents are small in number and the responses cannot be considered the majority of opinions; however, 12 respondents may be considered a large amount of response from people who we are able to get access to. There is no specific number since the determination of the actual population who were foster youth is not measurable due to the fact that it is a self declaration and not every single person is verified. Another issue that prohibits determination of a specific number is that it is hard to determine how long they have been in foster care.

In the survey, eight questions were asked in total. In order to find out the paths to college for former foster youth, the questions asked were: 'What were the factors that influenced you to go to college?', 'What were the main obstacles to your attending to UC Merced?', 'Does your status as former foster youth make a difference in your social life?', 'Does your status as former foster youth make a difference in your performance in school?', 'Does your status as former foster youth make a difference in your work?', 'When you were in high school what were the obstacles?', 'Are there any services you would like to see for foster youth in high school?', and 'Are there any services you would like to see for foster youth in college?'

In the first question 'What were the factors that influenced you to go to college?', responses demonstrated that they wanted to better themselves and better their life for those who made sacrifices for their education, Some commented that

they wanted to get out of the life they are or were in and to pursue their dream of living a better life. This shows that many are influenced from their surroundings and the environment in which they are or were in. They all have a strong reason or supporters/mentors who support them emotionally to keep up their motivation in pursuing higher education. The article titled "On Their Own: The Experiences of Youth After Foster Care" (Barth, 1990) was based off of data from interviews and surveys of 55 young adults who left the foster care recently to when the experiment was conducted. In the article, statistics show that "More interviewees are female (53%) and the majority was White (72%), Black (13%), or Latino (9%)." and that "The group included 2 AA and one BA graduates" (1990). The article does not address this problem of why there are such difference between the foster youth and the general population. In the recent years, females have become the majority of students in college. "For all four degree levels and for all four race/ethnicity groups, women earned a majority of college degrees in 2012. Overall in 2012, women earned 59% of all college degrees, which also means that 142 women received a college degree at some level for every 100 men" (2014). It states that the majority of former youth are female; however, the female foster youth are not attending college. It shows that there are problems of not being able to or not wanting to proceed in their educational path. Exploring the reasons why they are in foster care and the environment in which they are forced to be in might help

us understand the issues of why they are not being able to express their potential in education. Foster youth are away from their parents and, therefore, they do not have any adults nearby who are able to provide them emotional and mental support. The foster care, by definition, is supposed to provide protection and care that they lack from their biological families. From the students' answers to the survey, it is revealed that there were a particular individual who provided a positive influence. The majority of time spent in underage years are in school, therefore teachers are whom they are supposed to spend the majority of time with. Since teachers are not available to every single student for their full reliance, there might not be enough emotional dependence provided to the youth. It could be said, that mentors in school are able to guide them through school and provide knowledge of how they are able to get the benefits that help them continue on their educational path.

For the second question, 'What were the main obstacles to your attending to UC Merced?', they responded that the obstacles were financial support, housing, and transportation. It became apparent from the survey that financial support was one of the major difficulties they encounter. Many commented that they were helped in tuition by scholarships and financial aid; however, majority commented that they struggled with everyday living expenses. There are benefits and programs, such as AB12 which gives youth extension of care until the age of 20 and rights to receive Medi-Cal health

insurance until they turn 21; however, many expressed that such benefits and programs are not being taken advantage of or did not know of such benefits existed. People might say that there is information available on the internet if they search for it, however, foster youth do not have many possessions due to their constant changing of homes, and, especially, they are not in an environment in which they are able to access the computer. Since they also do not know of the existence of such benefits, the thought of searching for such benefits do not come to mind for children who are underage. But, even if they do know, most of them are in an environment where they are not able to access a computer. Changes must be made in order to give foster youth a better chance of becoming successful adults. Benefits such as California Fostering Connections to Success Act, which is often called as AB12, requires the youth to be either in school or employed or unable to do any of these due to a medical condition. The youth must also “meet with your social worker or probation officer each month, attend a court hearing or administrative review every 6 month, sign an agreement and agree to work with your social worker or probation officer to meet the goals of Transitional Independent Living Case Plan and receive case management services”(AB12 Benefits-Aging Out of Foster Care, 2014). Looking at this, it is clear that they are not treated as children who need these benefits; instead they are treated as fugitives who need to be monitored. With such treatment, many foster youth become hesitant to seek help

and are hesitant to trust people who do not trust them.

For the question, ‘Does your status as former foster youth make a difference in your social life?’, majority answered that they don’t experience any difference. However, to those who answered that there is a difference, they commented that they are more cautious of those around them or are a bit hesitant in trusting or fully expressing themselves. This shows that their social life was not affected by their difference in situation from others, and some did experience emotional barrier towards others. For the question, ‘Does your status as former foster youth make a difference in your academic performance?’, half of the respondents answered that it did not make a difference. They commented that it is their responsibility to strive harder and that same work is expected out of all of the students. Those who answered that there is a difference commented that it made them strive harder or that their emotional stress has affected their academic performance. Thus it shows that it could fall in either direction. For the question, ‘Does your status as former foster youth make a difference in your employment?’, majority answered no, not at all, and some answered that they were not sure if it made any difference. Those who answered that there was a difference commented that they work too much or it actually helps them work harder than other employees. From the past three questions, it became apparent that the former foster youth believed that their status as a former or current foster youth did not affect their social, academic,

and work environment. Those who have commented that there are differences have said that what does affect them are the emotional disturbances that they had from such situation; however, this shows that the difference in why they were in foster care may have an effect in their performance in their social, academic, and work environment. Youth are placed in foster care to gain protection since they are not receiving appropriate care at home and do not have distant relatives who are able to take care of them. They gain protection from child neglect, abuse, parents unable to provide sufficient care due to health reasons, and sexual abuse. They need attentive care, which they could not receive in their homes and/or during the time in foster care. “Seventy five percent (75%) of foster youth suffer from severe emotional disturbances. This is often due to impermanency, neglect, prenatal drug abuse, and exposure to violence” (California & National Statistics - San Francisco CASA, 2013). This shows that the foster youth are a very vulnerable population, especially since they are under age and have been exposed to many stressful and traumatic situations. “Fifty percent (50%) of preschool-aged foster children have high developmental and behavioral needs, but only 23% of these young children are receiving services for these issues” (2013). Even though they are such a vulnerable population, the services they are receiving are not helping or are not being used by foster youth. In the article “Former Foster Youth Attending College: Resilience and the Transition to Young Adulthood” (Hines et al, 2005), the

authors reviewed the risk and resilience of academic success among former foster youth. In the article it is stated that “All respondents reported having some degree of difficulty in the area of psychological functioning and emotional health” (2005). They do not specify what the exact psychological and emotional health in which they have a difficulty in. They say “some degree of difficulty”, however, it is not only the foster youth who have “some degree of difficulty” in psychological functioning and emotional health. What needs to be understood are the specific causes and relationship between the specific difficulties in which they are experiencing due to the fact that they are a former foster youth. “Of the 30,000 teenagers who age out of the foster care system each year: 25% become homeless, 56% are unemployed, and 27% of male children end up in jail” (California & National Statistics - San Francisco CASA, 2013). Even though they are placed in foster care to take them out of such harsh environments, they again fall back in. This shows that the emotional and mental disturbances may be huge factors that affect their lives after foster care.

To the question, ‘When you were in high school what were the obstacles?’, many responded that their obstacles were family issues and moving around and transition of change in school and environment affected them greatly. The reasons may be that when many were in foster care or in transition from foster care they were going through puberty, thus they were in the midst of an emotional

rollercoaster. One of the most important factors that affects the foster youth is that foster youth are forced to adjust to the rapidly changing environments, which may cause a greater mental stress to be inflicted upon them. Mobility especially greatly affects their educational needs. In the article "School Mobility and Issues of Educational Access for Children in Foster Care" (Alpert, 2005), the school motility of California's foster children is examined. It states that "California foster children attend to average of nine schools before turning 18" (2005). Most foster youth leave foster care at the age of 18; however, in the recent years AB12 has helped them by extending the care until the age of 20. If they were to move about an average of nine schools, foster youth must get accustomed to each neighborhood, school, foster parent/foster care, friends, and the environment. With the constantly changing environment, they experience mental stress that hinder their ability to focus on their own education. This adjustment must not be dealt by the foster youth alone, but with social/welfare workers and teachers that understand their situations and consider their rapidly changing environment. This may be said for not only those in foster care, but for all children who experience constant changes in their lives. The article only talks about the issues that might occur for educational access, the article does not, however, talk about why the children might experience great mental stress due to the mobility.

For the last two questions, 'Are there any services you would like to see for foster youth in high school?' and 'Are

there any services you would like to see for foster youth in college?' in their respective order, the responses were quite similar and some answered same as above for the last question. Many commented that counseling, mentoring, and services that help them gain information on the beneficial programs and benefits that they may be able to take advantage of is needed. The difference between the responses in the two questions were that, for the question of what services in college they would like to see, many commented that they would like to see services that give them information and help with post-graduation issues. What was apparent of those who succeeded their continuation of the education who participated in my survey was that they all looked forward to their future. It seemed that many did not dwell on the past and their current states, instead they were and are able to keep up their motivation by concentrating towards making a better future for themselves. This is seen when some commented that they would like assistance with information that would prepare them for after graduation and help in building resumes and cover letters for future employment. This part may be true for not only the former foster youth in continuation of their education but for any youth who succeed in continuation of their education. It became apparent that high school is where they experienced the most obstacles in transition of school, changing environments, new family issues, and getting everything together in order to pursue higher education. Many have expressed the need for mentors as

being the most critical in pursuing higher education. In the article “College Access, Financial Aid, and College Success for Undergraduates from Foster Care”, it states “60% of case/social workers surveyed were not aware of the existing laws when referring children to special education” (Davis, 2006). ‘Special education’ refers to help that gives information and resources which serves the unique needs of persons with disabilities so that each person will meet or exceed high standards of achievement in academic and nonacademic skills. The social workers, teachers, and those who tend to the foster youth do not know of the existing laws and beneficial programs. In this article, it explains that the case/social workers withhold pertinent information due to privacy, hindering the educators from maximizing the student’s education; also, that the social workers do not believe the educators and schools hold high academic standards for children in foster care. However, it seems that they are only blaming the other party for the problems they are not able to solve and are not looking for a solution in order to solve it. The teachers and social/case workers must work together and share the knowledge in order for the children to receive proper education that fits the individuals. All the articles talk about the problems that arise for the foster youth; however, they do not talk about why the foster youth need the attentive care, why many are in foster care, and why they are different from the general population. The important things that need to be considered are the reasons why they are in foster care and the fact that they are of

underage makes them a very vulnerable population.

The necessary environment for proper education enables the students to focus on the study and provide motivation to keep up the work. From the studies, it is apparent that foster youth lack the necessary environments, reasons to keep up the motivation, adults who help them keep up the motivation, and a place where they are able to concentrate on their goals and a place where they are able to obtain those goals. Instead, they are placed in many different homes which may cause distractions and are without any support financially, emotionally, and mentally. They need a safety net where they can fall back on. They need a place where they are able to feel safe and not be treated as a fugitive who is in need of keeping an eye on. Many youth are in disabling positions where they are not able to receive resources which they are entitled to. The reasons why the youth are removed from their homes affect their mental state and cognitive process very differently. Each of these reasons for why they were removed from their homes need to be considered separately to understand the resulting mental states. Therefore, they all need mentors who help them mentally and emotionally--a person who believes in them. Each child needs special care, however there aren’t enough resources and funds for such attentive care. The most important thing that needs to be improved for the services for this special population, is to help them have close relationships with adults and to be treated like normal, not special people.

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Haruka Motomatsu is a senior year undergraduate student at the University of California, Merced pursuing double Bachelor's degrees in Cognitive Science and Psychology. Originally from the city of Tokyo, Japan, she has finally gotten used to the rural areas of Merced. Haruka has taken interest in these fields of study since she wanted to know more about the human brain and how it could be applied to society and technology. After attending the University of California, Merced, she gained motivation for attending medical school where her knowledge may help save more lives. After she graduates in 2015, Haruka plans to continue her interest and proceed to medical school. Outside of academics, she devotes her time in tutoring children and enjoys snowboarding, ice skating, basketball, and swimming.

