DEFYING THE ODDS: VOICES OF FOSTER YOUTH COLLEGE GRADUATES

Poppy Fitch, EdD, Ashford University

Panelists
Marilee Bresciani-Ludvik, PhD, San Diego State University
Sylvia Garcia-Navarrete, EdD, Southwestern College
Steven Salter, MEd, Palomar College

NASPA Educational Session | March 11, 2019
AGENDA

Welcome & Introductions
Overview of the Research
Findings & Implications for Practice
Panel Discussion
Closing remarks and Q&A
OVERVIEW

Patchworking Our Futures: A Model of Foster Youth College Success
Foster Youth Research in Context

- The number of children in foster care is on the rise. (USDHHS, 2017)
- Experience disproportionate challenges tied to their foster care history. (AECF, 2013, 2014).
- California is home to the largest population of foster youth in the nation: 55,000. (USDHHS, 2017)
- Seen concentrated efforts around policy and practice to support foster youth adult transition. (California College Pathways, 2017, 2015)
- Poor adult outcomes:
  - Unemployment
  - Homelessness
  - Engagement in High Risk Behaviors
  - Physical and Mental Health Concerns
- Lower educational attainment at secondary and post-secondary levels. (Barnow et al., 2013; Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2003; Wolanin, 2005)
Degree Completion Problem

3 – 11%

(Barnow et al., 2013; Pecora et al., 2003; Wolanin, 2005)
It is crucial to hear directly from foster youth regarding their educational experience ... Student voices are not only necessary to validate the importance of practices ... but also to identify new variables that researchers are unaware of or have not yet had an opportunity to include in data collection efforts.

(California College Pathways, 2017, p. 22)
Research Purpose

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to engage the voice of foster youth in research on their postsecondary educational success to illuminate the experiences of foster youth college graduates. A theory of college success for foster youth may inform practice and policy formation that aims to support foster youth college completion. Research that enhances an understanding of the experiences of foster youth college graduates may help practitioners better support college students who are former foster youth, and subsequently improve their educational outcomes.
Research Questions & Methodology

RQs
• How do foster youth conceptualize and describe their experience of college degree attainment?
• What went well for foster youth in their college experiences?
• How can the experiences of foster youth inform policy and practice to support increasing positive outcomes for others?

Methodology
Constructivist, grounded theory methodology+ appreciative inquiry
Theoretical and snowball sampling

Participant Selection Criteria
• Foster youth college graduates (bachelor’s degree or higher);
• spent one or more year(s) in foster care; and
• aged out of the foster care system in California.
FINDINGS
Patchworking Our Futures: A Model of Foster Youth College Success
Degree Completion Conundrum

3 – 11%

(Barnow et al., 2013; Pecora et al., 2003; Wolanin, 2005)
Education for Survival

I tell people I didn't stay in college because I understood how good it was. I stayed in college because I realized the people around me who had degrees, they weren't on drugs, they weren't impoverished and ...so I assumed if I went to college I wouldn't have roaches and rats and I wouldn't be abusive to my future kids.

~ Renee
Authentic Care
I didn’t feel like she felt bad for me, I felt like she was invested in my success, she wanted me to have fun and be happy, and I was able to lower my guard ... I always tell people, I had an emotional break through at a Walmart, of all places, even though social workers couldn’t get it out of me...
It ended up being a wonderful experience. I was asking her, what do you think of these towels? Should I get these towels or these towels? Do you think this matches? So, she had a really positive impact on me.

~Ciote
Holistic Support
Holistic Support

So, my first year at the dorm, I remember the dorms closed over the break, and so you had to move out... Well, I didn't really have anywhere to move out to, and I wasn't even aware that was a thing – that you had to move out... I felt a lot of shame about being in foster care, and so I don't think I reached out the way I could have.
Guardian Scholars was a place where they just checked in with us like, ‘okay the break is coming, where are you living? Do you have a place to stay?’ I was like ‘no, I don't.’ And so, they placed me in some family housing for the break.

~ Michelle
Foster Youth Identity
Foster Youth Identity

So there was a lot of realization I think in that transition that I was different from other students.

~ Michelle
I feel like I lived a thousand different lives growing up through foster care.

~ Abraham
Foster Youth Identity

I really was like learning how I felt, and what I thought, like a brand new person.

~ Julie

I think it demonstrates the power of your chosen family - they are important to feeling a sense of hope and optimism.

~ Cherie
Findings Overview

• Experienced degree attainment dichotomously (criticality vs. impossibility).
• Relationships with adults who demonstrated authentic care;
• Programs and holistic support services designed to meet their unique needs; and
• Foster youth identity formation and acceptance...

...emerged as crucial to achievement of educational goals, and essential to finding community and belonging.
A Model of Foster Youth College Success

- Education for Survival (perspective)
- Authentic Care (people)
- Holistic Support (policies and programs)
- Foster Youth Identity (essence and self)
Implications for Policy and Practice

- Increase college access and capacity to serve foster youth.
- Bring visibility to, and advance awareness of, foster youth capacities and vulnerabilities.
- Help foster youth navigate unfamiliar and complex institutional processes and policies.
- Integrate service to foster youth into campus equity and strategic plans.
Panel Discussion: Implications for Policy and Practice

Marilee Bresciani-Ludvik, PhD
San Diego State University

Sylvia Garcia-Navarrete, EdD
Southwestern College

Steven Salter, MEd
Palomar College
Thank you for listening, for caring, and for your service to foster youth.

Stay In Touch!

poppyfitch@gmail.com
www.poppyfitch.com
@poppy-fitch
REFERENCES


REFERENCES, CONT.


## Appendix A: Participant Demographics

### Foster Youth College Success Study Participants Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Major Field of Study</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Currently Employed</th>
<th>During School: Enrolled in Community Support Program?</th>
<th>During School: Enrolled in EOPS/TRIO?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abraham</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>Social or Behavioral Sciences Education</td>
<td>Bachelors’</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allie</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>Behavioral Sciences Education</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherie</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciote</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarissa</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>Social or Behavioral Sciences Education</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>Social or Behavioral Sciences Education</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>55+</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>Social or Behavioral Sciences Education</td>
<td>Bachelor’s (Master’s in progress)</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>Social or Behavioral Sciences Education</td>
<td>Master’s (Doctorate in progress)</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>Social or Behavioral Sciences Education</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>Social or Behavioral Sciences Education</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Validation Theory

Rendón (1994) asserted that it is the responsibility of the college community to engage nontraditional students by validating their experience and their place within it.

“How students who come to the academy *consumed with self-doubt or expecting to fail are being transformed into students excited about higher learning*” (p. 36).