

Lost and Found in Transition: Alumni of Foster Care Transitioning to College

Sarah E. Jones
University of West Georgia

Laura A. Dean
University of Georgia

This research emphasizes the educational transitions of students who experienced foster care (SEFC). Using student development theories from Tinto and Schlossberg this phenomenological research captured themes that described the lived experiences of college SEFC. Despite disconnections, feelings of inadequacy, and experiences of imposter syndrome, most participants were able to navigate their life and educational experiences with a strong sense of self-efficacy and self-love that they believe allowed them to be successful in college.

Keywords: fostercare, transition, experiences, qualitative, success, college, trauma, retention, progression, graduation, mattering, highereducation, postsecondary, phenomenology, resilience

INTRODUCTION

The trauma associated with transitioning into the FCS added to the trauma associated with the abuse or neglect that led to an out-of-home placement, create a space where barriers to academic success increase; as a result, very few alumni of foster care matriculate, then graduate from college (Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012). Myriad barriers to success in schools, such as multiple home and school transitions, add layers of marginalization to an already vulnerable population (Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012; Wolanin, 2005). Despite their disproportionately low representation in higher education, most students who have experienced foster care (SEFC) have postsecondary aspirations (McMillen, Asulander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2002). This sense of hope and optimism from a group of students that has been historically underserved and overburdened was the foundation for this phenomenological inquiry into the educational transitions of SEFC.

The educational inequity for students who experienced foster care (SEFC) is steep; therefore, many struggle to achieve academic milestones at rates similar to their peers not in the FCS (Okpych & Courtney, 2014). Though fewer than half of all PK-12 students in the FCS graduate from high school or earn their GED (Okpych & Courtney, 2014), more than 70% aspire to attend college. Further, of the students who graduate high school fewer than 10% matriculate to college and fewer than 2% earn an associate's or bachelor's degree (Abdul-Alim, 2019). Collectively, SEFC experience educational inequity; for example, SEFC are half as likely to enroll in college preparatory curriculum (i.e., AP, IB) (Unrau et al., 2012) and twice as likely to be placed in remedial courses (Abdul-Alim, 2019; Wolanin, 2005). Moreover, those who complete high school typically do so with lower GPAs and test scores

compared to peers (Unrau et al., 2012), thus generating an insecure foundation upon which to transition to college. The cascading exit of SEFC from educational environments across PK-16 is enough of an inequity to push this population's experiences to the forefront of conversations regarding educational attainment and opportunity. Further, their overwhelming desire to attend college signifies an opportunity to engage a group of students motivated to complete college.

Though myriad barriers to personal development and academic success (i.e., childhood history of neglect and abuse; subpar public schools) overwhelm the majority of school aged students in the FCS, every year a small percentage graduate from high school and transition to college. In fact, Sydor (2013) posited that SEFC are likely enrolled in every postsecondary institution, but their small percentages and unseen personal childhood experiences create an invisible population of students who typically disengage from the FCS upon college matriculation (Abdul-Alim, 2019; Sydor, 2013). While de-identifying as a "foster kid" can lead to feelings of personal liberation and control (Schelbe, Day, Geiger, & Piel, 2019), de-identifying also decreases access to personnel and resources that benefit students transitioning to college (Schelbe et al., 2019).

Since current literature regarding this population is mostly grounded in sociological theories and utilizes statistical analysis, this qualitative research brings voice to a population of college students who were also in foster care. Their first-person narratives provide insight and descriptive accounts into the resources that helped each student achieve academic success.

PERSISTENCE, MATTERING, AND TRANSITIONS

This research was undergirded by theories of persistence and departure, marginality and mattering, and transitions. Tinto's (1988; 1994; 2014) research regarding student persistence and departure, combined with Nancy Schlossberg's (1988; 1989) two unique theories of transition and marginality and mattering, framed this study. Tinto's (1988) stages of departure posited that students were more likely to persist in college when they experienced increased engagement, integration, and commitment to their academic and co-curricular activities. These experiences, in addition to outlying factors such as students' prior academic qualifications, family and individual attributes, and support in teaching, learning, and money management, impact student retention and departure (Tinto, 2012).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012) is integral because individuals in transition are more vulnerable than those who are not; further, SEFC spend considerably more time in transition compared to their peers not in the FCS. Schlossberg's (2012) theory, which emphasized the role of transition in daily life, framed students' experiences. SEFC experience multiple school and home transitions throughout their lives, and this theory provided context for the factors that influenced their transitions, i.e. situation, self, support, and strategies (Anderson et al., 2012).

Literature regarding marginality and mattering links the concepts of departure, retention, and transition (Tovar, Simon, & Lee, 2009). From a retention and departure perspective, engagement leads to feelings of mattering. Schlossberg's (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering emphasizes the likelihood of student engagement based on students' positions inside and outside a group. Schlossberg (1989) theorized that students experience episodes of marginality each time they are in transition; however, their ability to rely on others and belong to a group increases their feelings of mattering, thus increasing the likelihood of persistence in education. Through this theoretical frame, students' experiences in transition, foster care, and educational environments were related to their feelings of inclusion and exclusion.

METHODS

This research was grounded in phenomenological methods which include inductive and descriptive processes where true meaning stems from participant voices (Husserl, 1970). This phenomenological inquiry explored the following questions:

1. How do students who have been in foster care experience transitions as they matriculate to college?
2. How do students who have been in foster care experience transitions as they progress through college?

Participant Selection and Recruitment

I used purposive sampling since this population is labeled hard to reach. Via agencies, nonprofits, and campus organizations that work with students in foster care, I recruited students in their second year of college or beyond who were also in the FCS. Because more than half of SEFC do not matriculate to college (Unrau et al., 2012), and students often de-identify as being in foster care at 18 (Wolanin, 2005), this population of students is hard to reach (Sydor, 2013). Further, the negative stigma associated with foster care creates a system where students may find it difficult to self-disclose their previous or current status (Sydor, 2013). However, because this population is often overlooked, it is not only necessary to capture their experiences, but to do so in spaces where participants realize their power in the research process (Sydor, 2013). Therefore, I recruited participants via a trusted third-party. After potential participants learned about the research study, those interested completed a Qualtrics survey which captured demographic information and notified me of a student's desire to participate. I contacted interested participants via text or email (their preference). From the 23 individuals who completed the online survey, nine students met the proposed criteria for the study. Each was contacted, and interviews with eight of the nine students were scheduled. Though seven of the eight participants were female, other demographic characteristics are more diverse.

Data Collection and Analysis

The semi-structured interview gave participants time and space to recall their educational transitions. The interview questions emphasized students' transitions into and through college, and their resources connected to situation, self, support, and strategies. Students also had an opportunity to share narratives regarding their educational and personal experiences in transition. Though phenomenological inquiry suggests multiple points of contact between the researcher and participant (Moustakas, 1994), I interviewed participants once. The transient and hidden nature of participants combined with the length of the research project made it unrealistic to schedule multiple interviews.

After transcription but before horizontalization, the act of categorizing endless relevant expressions (van Kaam, 1959), I read each transcript at least twice. After generating hundreds of horizons, I organized them by theme (van Kaam, 1959). As I clustered statements regarding transitional and educational experiences, central groups related to the students' experiences began to emerge, thus leading to the final identification of invariant constituents and themes (van Kaam, 1959). If invariant constituents were neither explicitly related to educational transitions or not compatible with students' experiences, I deemed them irrelevant to the phenomenon and eliminated the theme from further consideration and analysis. Once identified, I used the invariant constituents and themes to write individual textural and structural descriptions of each participant's experience, including verbatim statements from their transcripts. (Moustakas, 1994; van Kamm, 1959).

RESULTS

Four main themes emerged from the phenomenological reduction process. The first theme, "*Ahead of Most*": *Consequences of Trauma*, reflected the significant role trauma played in many of the participants' childhood experiences. "*Outsider*": *Peer Relationships* is the second theme. Students' unique experiences made it easier to contrast their lives with their peers, therefore keeping the concepts of normalcy and difference forefront. The third theme, "*I'm Not Here to Party*": *Integrating Social and Academic Experiences in School*, reflects students' experiences across the PK-16 (prekindergarten through college) continuum. Finally, "*Heavy Amount of Love*" is the fourth theme. Despite their early experiences with abuse and neglect, participants described the ways hope and love influenced their lives.

“Ahead of Most”: Consequences of Trauma

Though no interview question asked about childhood trauma, many participants described their feelings and memories regarding the neglect or abuse they experienced before or during their time in the FCS. Their experiences of trauma not only created a lens from which participants made meaning, it also shaped their personal and collective identities. Participants discussed ways trauma impacted their development, especially their maturity, social personality, and resilience.

Ariel, a graduating senior, spoke about maturity, “I had to take on an adult role earlier in my life... I was robbed of my childhood and robbed of the opportunity to explore, to be immature, to make mistakes.” Tara described the juxtaposition of positive and negative consequences when she considered the totality of her educational experiences. She expressed the need to find her own balance in order to be successful, “I [have] faced adversity. It took a lot get in this position, but I am driven. So, it works against me, but it also works for me because it makes me seek my wants, [then] achieve them.” Like Tara, Cheyenne articulated the inverse effects of trauma and the reasons she was grateful for the perseverance and resilience gained. For each barrier she successfully navigated, she learned a new skill to help her in the future. She said, “Every single part about foster care is difficult, but I’m grateful. It’s put me further ahead than behind... Because we have been through so much, we know how to handle things and advocate for ourselves. We are ahead of most.”

Several participants spoke about the lingering effects of the abuse and neglect they experienced. Participants described feelings of anxiety, depression, and ambiguity. Awnan discussed the anxiety he felt regarding academic performance. Since he did not have a home to return to if unsuccessful, he knew he had to make college work. He said, “I have one shot. If I miss it, there will not be another opportunity for me.” Awnan’s feelings were common to study participants. Not only did each know how difficult it was for students like themselves (SEFC) to matriculate to college, but participants understood that progressing and graduating from college was challenging, too. If they did poorly, they had fewer options than their peers. Like Awnan, this dire situation motivated Ta’Leah to pursue her education. She said, “College was my life, my token, my ticket to success. If I didn’t make it here, I didn’t know what was in store for me. So, this was do or die.” The pressure participants placed on themselves created more space for anxiety to manifest. Kaylee, also felt the pressure to be successful in school. Explaining why she plagiarized a paper she said, “I needed to pass these classes. I developed anxiety and depression and worried about transferring from my community college within two years. I needed to finish these courses and still maintain my social life. And be happy.”

Like her peers, Cheyenne struggled to remain poised; the more chaotic her life became, the harder it was for her to maintain a façade of success. In high school she struggled to keep up with her peers academically. She said, “I felt like I was behind. Like everyone was ahead of me like I wasn’t as good as everyone else. I didn’t have the same chances. It was less likely for me to succeed.” She continued to describe the ways trauma disempowered her and how ambiguity increased her level of vulnerability. “I hit this barrier. I was disempowered and sad. I always thought I’d go to high school, college, [and] graduate school. But I didn’t know how I was going to make college work. And it was very scary.” Participants also talked about the struggle to keep up with their peers. Tara described the exhausting process of catching up with those who have not been part of the FCS. “[School has] been difficult but I maneuvered my way around. That takes energy. I exert a lot of energy trying to get the job or internship. Once I get there, I still perform well but it takes more effort.”

Participants developed various coping mechanisms that allowed them to be successful in school and life. For example, they displayed high amounts of self and system awareness and described themselves as prepared, adaptable, and persistent. Furthermore, some participants described feelings of empowerment because of their ability to advocate for themselves. This group of students identified personal needs, then found resources to help meet those needs. In our interview, Tara explicitly stated her ability to navigate systems. She believed it was an advantage unique to SEFC. She said, “Things are difficult so I learned to self-advocate and am learning how to maneuver within various systems. I know how to navigate my way through foster care, so I know how to navigate my way through higher education.” Cori expressed her thoughts regarding her positions in college and as an alumna of foster care. She emphasized personal

resilience, “Going to college means resilience...or proving that there is hope...There is a high rate of dropout through middle school and high school [but I model] resilience in that aspect.”

“Outsider”: Peer Relationships

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed their interactions and relationships with peers. Overall, participants described disconnection; they recognized that the differences in their childhood experiences were often viewed as deficits and acted as barriers to authentic relationships with peers. Further, because foster care is not typically discussed by people outside the system, students did not know how to speak about this part of their lives with others, thus further stigmatizing their identity. At times, participants described the impact of the stigma they internalized. Ariel described the ways she compared herself to others and the disconnect that ensued. She said, “Some people just can’t grasp the concept that events or things that happen in your childhood can affect your behavior now.” Cori, who described herself as “antisocial,” believed her experiences in foster care made her “less extroverted” because many friends were untrustworthy. Like Cori, other participants described the ways their personality developed as a result of the FCS. This development impacted the ways they interacted with people, particularly their peers.

Relationships with peers were complicated for myriad reasons. Participants experienced tension between their desire to connect and their reasons to stay separated from peers. Ta’Leah shared, “I ended up joining a few clubs on campus and that was really cool for a time being but in the same breath I still felt like I don’t connect with these people.” Cheyenne, a second-year student said, “I’m still waiting around for the long-term friends.” Participants described feelings of insecurity, empowerment, and loneliness.

Participants also discussed feelings of normalcy. Ta’Leah remembered the first time she realized that most people grew up differently. She said, “It hit me that the things that I experienced were not normal for others not in foster care—you know like people who will eventually be your roommates or your friends. Their lifestyle wasn’t like mine.” Because she only talked about her anxiety and depression with students in and professionals working in FCS, Cori thought the severity of her anxiety was “normal.”

Not all participants felt impacted by FCS. Awnan, a second-year student said, “I feel there is no difference between me and others just that I was in foster care. And other than that, I’m just the same as everyone else,” but the majority of participants discussed perceived and actual differences between themselves and peers. For example, Cheyenne, who entered foster care in high school, said, “I realized that people have a different life than me. They don’t prioritize the same things. They don’t have the same values and that’s perfectly fine, but it’s sometimes hard when you are studying alone in my room again.” Like Cheyenne, who studied alone in her room, Ariel experienced feelings of isolation that created barriers between herself and others. She said:

[Abuse] puts you in an isolating state where the kids don’t know how to relate to you. How are [students] in a public school who have been raised by two loving family [members] who never harm you going to be able to relate to and honestly talk to a person who has experienced sexual assault at the hands of their father?

Cheyenne and Ariel, both white women, experienced significant disconnection from their peers in high school and college. Cori and Kaylee, both women of color, discussed the ways their race impacted their relationships with peers. Cori said, “I feel secluded to my Black community. It’s hard to like make connections between my Black community and not even just white, but non-Black [peers] in general.” While Cori felt most connected to her Black peers, Kaylee experienced feelings of disconnect between herself and her Asian friends. She said, “I consider myself an outsider because I went through so much and I can’t really connect with Asian parents or Asian friends because they all come off so well rounded.”

All of the participants in the study except Awnan said they had a difficult time meeting peers and staying connected to them. Much of the disconnection stemmed from trauma they endured. Women of

color who participated in the study said they experienced instances of racism and cultural appropriation which added to the distance they felt to their peers.

“I’m Not Here to Party”: Integrating Social and Academic Experiences in Schools

Study participants solidified their decision to attend college while in middle school. Most were encouraged by multiple adults to pursue education, and participants believed that educational achievement was necessary for success. Specifically, study participants heard guardians, mentors, case workers, and educators say that education would create opportunities for a “better life.” In addition to adults who promoted education, participants said they were inundated with messages regarding the promise of education. Tara exemplified the pervasiveness of this message:

I decided I was going to attend college when I was 10. It came about from playing . . . the game Life. You had the option to go straight to your careers or go to college. At the end... people who went to college made it further in life. They were [happier]. They made more money. By playing that game I instilled in myself a desire to go to college. Since I had it in my head at such a young age it never really left me.

Ta’Leah decided to attend college when she was a freshman in high school. During that time, she built a good relationship with her social worker and realized she would like to be a social worker, too. Then, Ta’Leah started to seriously consider attending college, “I always wanted better for myself... I was going to do anything necessary to make that happen. In 9th grade I decided I would go to college.

While transitions in the FCS made it difficult to navigate high school for many, Kaylee thrived in the structure the FCS provided her. It created an opportunity for her to start over in high school and find a way to graduate on time. She said, “Before foster care I was ditching school and [becoming] a rebellious kid. I wouldn’t have graduated high school if I stayed with my biological parents.”

Most participants believed college was the antidote to the structure and social politics of high school and viewed higher education as a way to increase their capital and catalyze their passion. In her interview, Ariel said, “I knew I needed to get a college degree to be any kind of legitimate help for kids who have gone through what I have gone through.” Although some participants believed college was an opportunity to build community, others struggled with campus dynamics. Each participant had a unique experience regarding matriculation and persistence. Tara discussed her thoughts regarding privilege and education:

Going to college is a privilege in itself. I’ve noticed that it’s a lot less footwork that I have to do just by saying that I go to [a private liberal arts college]. I get more access and am privileged to more information.

When it was time to transition to college, some students, like Ta’Leah, felt prepared to handle the worst, while other students wanted a slower matriculation process. Ta’Leah explained her thoughts regarding college by comparing them to her life before and during foster care. She said, “I just felt like I already experienced hell and whatever college throws at me, I will be ok.” Ta’Leah transitioned from high school to a four-year college, while Kaylee decided to move slower. She said, “At my community college, I transitioned slowly into the [university] system. I decided that going to community college was helping me look for a better future.”

As students persisted through college, they began to engage in curricular and co-curricular activities. Regarding the difficulty of her academic work, Tara said, “First year of college was a breeze, it was fine it was great. Second year of college was one of the most academically, emotionally challenging years of my life... Each year it gets a little harder.” Though Tara experienced difficulties in her academic work, she was excited about the opportunity to create a community. She said, “I was excited to go to college. I was looking forward to going to a place to craft my own communities.” Campuses were not always safe spaces for students, however. Cori, who like Tara is an African American female, discussed the tension she felt on campus regarding racial difference of students. She said, “There’s a lot of tension. I experience

a lot of cultural appropriation on this campus which is very uncomfortable and frustrating so I feel a lot of disconnection.”

Six of the eight participants matriculated to four-year colleges/universities that had a campus program specifically for youth in foster care. Ariel spoke of the comfort she felt after meeting students with similar experiences. She said, “It’s been interesting to be in college and talk to kids who have had similar experience. I know I am not alone in my desire to make myself better.” Kaylee also appreciated the connection; she said the program, “helped me so much. I had no prior knowledge about living on my own and I felt super scared. The people helped me stay in college and get good grades.”

College offered the participants freedom and autonomy they desired. It also gave students an opportunity to meet people with similar backgrounds, which had a cathartic effect. Unlike high school, while in college, participants found peers with whom they could connect.

“Heavy Amount of Love”

Despite their childhood experiences with abuse and neglect, participants described many feelings of love, hope, and optimism that they experienced while in the foster care system. Participants juxtaposed their earlier life experiences with abuse and neglect from their biological parents to the love, grace, and sense of purpose they felt from the people connected to the foster care system. Case workers, counselors, PK-16 teachers and administrators, personal mentors, foster parents, and peers gave away their love, support, and resources to this study’s participants who were then able to develop self-love. As a result of the love participants received, the majority described opportunities to give back more than they received by enrolling in college and majoring in helping fields so that they could later be employed as caseworkers, guardian-ad-litem, and counselors.

In her interview, Madeline described love as an encompassing and connecting force surrounding stakeholders in the foster care system. She referenced bell hooks’s (2000) when she described the ways her campus organization helped her see the value in her identity as a youth in foster care. Madeline said she was encouraged to participate in counseling where she learned to see herself clearly and accept herself for who she truly was. As a result, Madeline was able to build the necessary foundation for self-love.

Kaylee described feelings of love and gratitude regarding her foster family, supported her goals. She said, “I am so eternally grateful for them. I’m probably going to get their names tattooed with a heart.” Ariel also describes the love she felt on campus, when she finally felt part of a community. She said:

There’s definitely a heavy amount of love. I wouldn’t give up any of these people...It’s hard to make connections and it’s one of the best bits of being at [college] and finding that I can have a family away from home and a support system away from home. . . . If more foster youth had that ability or opportunity to have a group of people who really cared about them, that they can go to no matter what. I think they’d do a lot better. And I think they’d be a lot more successful.

Cori, who described feelings of love from her adoptive mother early in her life, also found love via her campus’s Black Student Union (BSU). She said, “[I am] connected in my BSU. We have discussions, and we put on events that promote self-love and black love and we have events. We listen to speakers or sometimes or alumni come through and speak to us about their experiences.”

Despite the trauma students experienced in their youth, they found ways to embrace the love that surrounded them. This love provided hope for students and supported them through the most difficult times. Though participants did not always expect to receive love from others, they worked their way through problems to find ways to accept and embrace love.

Summary

Students who participated in this study discussed a range of experiences and emotions. Though each were unique, common themes regarding their personal and student development emerged. The themes *Ahead of Most: Consequence of Trauma, Outsider: Peer Relationships, I’m Not Here to Party:*

Integrating Social and Academic Experiences in Schools, and *Heavy Amount of Love* describe the relationships students have with themselves, their peers, and the individuals in their lives who support their transitions.

Overall, participants described feelings of instability and inconsistency as a result of placement in the foster care system. Though the time in foster care and subsequent number of PK-12 school transitions varied greatly within the participant pool, each participant described feelings of devastation, discouragement, and vulnerability throughout the college application and decision-making process. Further, the majority of participants described feelings of disempowerment when it felt as if they had less control of their future than their peers who had always lived in stable, nurturing environments.

The results included multiple horizons describing the barriers associated with trauma, but they also include positive consequences like persistence and resiliency. For example, all participants felt more mature than their peers not in the FCS and most believed they were better equipped for life's inevitable disappointments. The majority described feelings of independence and self-advocacy associated with living on their own. Participants were proud that they accomplished their goals and humbled because they realized that most students in the FCS did not have the same opportunity.

Though participants' experiences in foster care created a space for them to gain independence and self-advocacy skills, multiple transitions and previous trauma also led to feelings of disconnection and distance between participants and their peers. Interpersonal relationships generated the most themes in the data. Within the theme, horizons such as isolation, disconnection, and normalcy arose several times. Despite disconnections, feelings of inadequacy, and experiences of imposter syndrome, which made students feel as if they did not belong in higher education, most participants were able to navigate their life and educational experiences with a strong sense of self and a self-love they believe their peers did not learn to possess. Students' ability to feel empowered and confident on their college campuses created opportunities for involvement and engagement.

DISCUSSION

The findings emphasized the consequences of trauma, the complex relationships participants have with peers, ideas regarding school, and love. Though each theme is described separately and in detail throughout the previous section, they work together to describe the meaning and essence of participants' educational transitions. SEFC are a diverse group who are impacted by their childhood experiences with neglect and abuse. Though participants described anxiety, depression, and hopelessness that arose from their previous experiences, they generated their own educational equity by transferring the skills they needed to survive in the FCS into their educational environments. They entered classrooms with perseverance, resilience, and stamina and worked diligently to graduate despite myriad barriers.

Impacts of Trauma

Though SEFC have a background of trauma and an increased likelihood of developing anxiety or depression, they are mature and have developed reliable coping mechanisms to support their development. In fact, participants collectively exhibited and described adaptive behaviors (i.e., forming relationships with college faculty, avoiding alcohol and drugs) that not only supported academic success and student development but also increased their resourcefulness, awareness, and self-assurance. Participants described themselves as independent, aware, resilient, persistent, strategic, resourceful, mature, motivated, and optimistic.

Participants in the study described additional personal characteristics that add to the essence of their experience. Not only did students believe they were academically inferior to their peers (a myth to which many undergraduate students subscribe) (Day et al., 2013), they also realized the inherent differences between themselves and their peers. The trauma associated with abuse and neglect not only increases their risk of mental illness, but it also creates a distance between SEFC and everyone else. For students of color, the chasm between self and peers was exponentially greater. Consistent with literature, the majority of participants in this study recounted personal struggles with anxiety or depression (Day et al., 2011).

Participants also perceive themselves as having more coping skills, perseverance, and self-awareness than their peers.

Institutional Type and Specific Support

Institutional type, campus climate, and authentic engagement impacted students' experiences. Participants enrolled in a variety of colleges including community colleges, comprehensive or research universities, and private liberal arts colleges. The following factors contributed to the participants' choice in school: scholarship/affordability, expected rigor, size of institution, location, and program of study. One participant discussed the way her identity as a queer woman of color influenced the type of school she would attend, while another female participant of color discussed how race, racism, and expectations for the model minority influenced the type of institutions to which she applied. The degrees to which an already marginalized group (SEFC) is further oppressed based on identity characteristics is another element that related to the essence of participants' experiences.

While programs to support SEFC may not be a significant factor in institution choice, they do have a positive impact on students' experience once they are enrolled. SEFC are likely enrolled in every college however, they are not easily identified (Sydor, 2013), which not only makes it difficult for administrators to locate and offer services but also decreases the likelihood that such students will find each other and gain support from common experiences. Students who were involved in campus programs designed for SEFC were also involved in other areas of campus life by being active members in other campus organizations (e.g., Black student union, Asian American service fraternity, university ambassadors) or via campus jobs. Though cautious about attaching to brief connections, students used intuition to guide them to safe spaces where belonging led to more belonging, thus impacting their emotional and academic needs.

SEFC are a diverse group who are impacted by their childhood experiences with neglect and abuse. Though participants described anxiety, depression, and hopelessness that arose from their previous experiences, they also believed it was through perseverance that they developed the resilience and stamina to reach their educational goals. Though wary of their peers, whom they label as immature, entitled, and naïve, participants developed loving relationships with mentors, faculty, and advocates who gave them the advocacy skills, support, and love necessary for self-empowerment.

Self-Awareness

Throughout their experiences in foster care, participants had ample opportunities to participate in personal and group counseling in both communities and schools. These experiences led to a variety of coping mechanisms necessary to be successful in school and life. Participants exhibited and expressed high amounts of self and system awareness. In fact, participants described their self-awareness as a trait that generated equity because compared to their peers, they were better able to identify their needs and advocate for themselves.

Some of their self-awareness was exhibited by their knowledge of position and power within the educational and social services systems. Each participant understood that they were the exception to the rule; that most students in their situation do not have the support necessary to matriculate to college. Their experiences as children in a (seemingly) unjust and impersonal social service system helped participants realize that they needed to develop their own strength of character to move through foster care and PK-12 education. While the circumstances that created this resilient group of students are unthinkable, the participants' ability to think through their processes created multiple meaning-making experiences that eventually developed them into resilient and self-aware young adults.

Implications

Participants described the ways they engaged with faculty, student affairs professionals, and peers in campus organizations on micro, meso, and macro levels. Micro-level strategies, including one-on-one services for students, helped to stabilize students during the initial transition to college, while meso-level supports created opportunities for students and student affairs professionals to work together to make

lasting change in the educational, and social service systems. Finally, macro-level support, such as federally funded tuition programs for SEFC, helped to generate equity for a group of students that typically arrives to college with less than \$100 for the semester (Wolanin, 2005).

Based on participant experiences, higher education was the exemplar in micro-level strategies. Since college campuses are microcosms of society (Kaldis, 2009), much can be learned from the way services are offered. Colleges also have a unique opportunity to engage youth in foster care. The majority of participants in this study decided while in middle school to attend college. By creating avenues to disseminate information regarding college admission, SEFC can learn (in middle school) the steps necessary to matriculate to college. As these conversations continue, SEFC can consider other options, such as dual-enrollment.

Dual-enrollment is a program where students are simultaneously enrolled in high school and college (Amy & Bryan, 2008). Traditional high school students participating in dual-enrollment enroll in on-campus or online college courses and upon successful completion receive high school and college credit. Students participating in dual-enrollment not only have an opportunity to transition slowly to college, they can earn credit, often without a fee. Furthermore, since campus-based dual-enrollment classes are accessible to multiple high schools, SEFC who must transition from their school have a greater opportunity to remain stable in their academics. Enrolling and transitioning SEFC is a systemic/meso-level change that has the potential to increase access and encourage SEFC to pursue their education, while easing their transition into postsecondary schools.

For sociopolitical or macro-level changes to occur, significant structural changes that allow for communication and interconnectedness between the PK-12, higher education, and social services systems are necessary. There are multiple ways to integrate the best practices and theories that undergird each of the separate systems with which SEFC interact. Professionals in various settings must collaborate to integrate systems. Addressing students' needs on micro, meso, and macro levels creates opportunities for SEFC to have their immediate needs met, while engaging in advocacy work to bring about system and sociopolitical change.

CONCLUSION

SEFC are a vulnerable yet resilient group. Currently half of the population do not graduate high school, and less than 2% of the 10% who transition to college persist until graduation. However, for those who do persist and succeed, the major themes of this research reflect both their vulnerability and their resilience. Alumni of foster care deserve the best, and professionals in higher education can help to generate equity by working to understand students' unique perspectives and advocating for changes in the educational system(s). In doing so, more SEFC may have the opportunity to actualize their dreams of attending and succeeding in college.

REFERENCES

- Abdul-Alim, J. (2019). 8 tips for foster care students and their counselors. *Journal of College Admission*, 244, 50-52. Retrieved from <https://www.nacacnet.org/news--publications/journal-of-college-admission/>
- Amy, R., & Bryan L. (2008). Prior college credit of first semester freshmen: Does it make a difference? *NACTA Journal*, 3, 29. Retrieved from <https://www.nactateachers.org/index.php/journal-sp-1148215168>
- Anderson, M. L., Goodman, J., & Schlossberg, N. K. (2012). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking Schlossberg's theory with practice in a diverse world* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Springer.
- Batsche, C., Hart, S., Ort, R., Armstrong, M., Strozier, A., & Hummer, V. (2014). Postsecondary transitions of youth emancipated from foster care. *Child & Family Social Work*, 19(2), 174-184. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2206.2012.00891.x

- Davis, R. J. (2006). *College access, financial aid, and college success for undergraduates from foster care*. National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED543361.pdf>
- Day, A., Dworsky, A., & Feng, W. (2013). An analysis of foster care placement history and post-secondary graduation rates. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 19, 1-17. Retrieved from <http://link.springer.com/journal/11162>
- Day, A., Dworsky, A., Fogarty, K., & Damashek, A. (2011). An examination of post-secondary retention and graduation among foster care youth enrolled in a four-year university. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 2335-2341. doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2011.08.004
- Dworsky, A., & Pérez, A. (2010). Helping former foster youth graduate from college through campus support programs. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32, 255-263. doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2009.09.004
- Hooks, B. (2000). *All about love: New visions*. New York, NY: William Morrow.
- Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology: An introduction to phenomenological philosophy*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Kaldis, B. (2009). The university as microcosm. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 41(5), 553- 574. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2008.00431.x
- McMillen, C., Auslander, W., Elze, D., White, T., & Thompson, R. (2002). Educational experiences and aspirations of older youth in foster care. *Child Welfare*, 82(4), 475-495. Retrieved from <http://www.cwla.org/child-welfare-journal/>
- McMillen, J.C., Zima, B., Scott, L., Auslander, W., Munson, M., & Spitznagel, E. (2005). The prevalence of psychiatric disorders among older youths in the foster care system. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 44, 88-95. <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.chi.0000145806.24274.d2>
- Moustakas, C. E. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Noonan, K., Matone, M., Zlotnik, S., Hernandez-Mekonnen, R., Watts, C., Rubin, D., & Mollen, C. (2012). Cross-system barriers to educational success for children in foster care: The front line perspective. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 403-408. doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2011.11.006
- Okpych, N. J., & Courtney, M. E. (2014). Does education pay for youth formerly in foster care? Comparison of employment outcomes with a national sample. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 43, 18-28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2014.04.013>
- Rios, S. J., & Rocco, T. S. (2014). From foster care to college: Barriers and supports on the road to postsecondary education. *Emerging Adulthood*, 2(3), 227-237. doi:10.1177/2167696814526715
- Schelbe, L., Day, A., Geiger, J. M., & Piel, M. H. (2019). The state of evaluations of campus-based support programs serving foster care alumni in higher education. *Child Welfare*, 97(2), 23-40. Retrieved from <https://www.cwla.org/child-welfare-journal/>
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1989). Marginality and mattering: Key issues in building community. *New directions for student services*, 48, 5-15.
- Sydor, A. (2013). Conducting research into hidden or hard-to-reach populations. *Nurse Researcher*, 20(3), 33-37. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr2013.01.20.3.33.c9495>
- Tinto, V. (1988). Stages of student departure: Reflections on the longitudinal character of student leaving. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 4, 438. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1981920>
- Tinto, V. (1994). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (2012). Enhancing student success: Taking the classroom success seriously. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 3(1), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v3i1.119>
- Tinto, V. (2015). Through the eyes of students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 0, 1-16. doi: 1521025115621917

- Tovar, E., Simon, M. A., & Lee, H. B. (2009). Development and validation of the college mattering inventory with diverse urban college students. *Measurement & Evaluation in Counseling & Development*, 42(3), 154-178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0748175609344091>
- Unrau, Y. A., Font, S. A., & Rawls, G. (2012). Readiness for college engagement among students who have aged out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 76-83. doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2011.09.002
- van Kaam, A. (1959). Phenomenal analysis: Exemplified by a study of the experience of “really feeling understood.” *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 15(1), 66-72. <https://utpress.utexas.edu/journals/journal-of-individual-psychology>
- Wolanin, T. R. (2005). *Higher education opportunities for foster youth: A primer for policymakers*. Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy.