From Foster Care to College: Barriers and Supports on the Road to Postsecondary Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explain and describe the perceptions of college-going, emerging adults who grew up in foster care (FC) regarding educational factors related to their journey to college. Thematic analysis of the narratives of 24 ethnically-diverse participants revealed academic barriers and academic supports unique to their status as young adults who lived in FC. The study introduces the Foster Youth Academic Achievement Model, a framework to help contextualize themes related to factors that serve as barriers and supports for this vulnerable yet resilient group.

Despite increased Federal, state, and local efforts to improve educational outcomes among emerging adults who emancipate from foster care (FC), low educational achievement and attainment continue to characterize this vulnerable subpopulation and their younger peers (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). Each year, between 20,000 and 30,000 emerging adults leave FC in the United States (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012, 2013). Approximately 50% of FC alumni (FCA) leave care without having obtained a high school diploma or a general equivalency diploma (GED). Although 70% of FCA desire to attend college—a percentage similar to their nonfostered peers (Casey Family Programs, 2007; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003), only about 20% enroll in college (compared to 60% of youth not in FC; Berliner & Lezin, 2010). Estimates of the percentage of foster youth who graduate from college range from 1% to 11%, depending on how and when educational attainment is measured, compared to about 25% of the general U.S. population (Dworsky & Perez, 2009).

Any emerging adult who doesn't obtain postsecondary credentials faces limited employment options (Arnett, 2004). Since 2001, Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, and Raap (2010) have compared outcomes for hundreds of emerging adults from FC with a nationally representative sample of individuals who participated in the National Longitudinal Student of Adolescent Health (the Add Health Study). Table 1 shows the sharp contrasts in academic achievement between these two groups of emerging adults at 25 and 26 years of age.

Children and youth in foster care grow up in families and communities that are often plagued by serious and ongoing adversity (Greeson, 2013). These issues often hamper their educational success and attainment. Educational inequity experienced by FCA, or any underserved subgroup, is a problem for economic and humanitarian reasons. In terms of economics, taxpayers should expect the billions (US$6.5 billion in Fiscal Year 2008) they pay to support FC to result in adequate education for these young people, who are wards of the state. The human cost of educational opportunities lost and unrealized potential is of even greater concern. If in fact there are more than 12 million adults in the United States who lived in FC as children (Foster Care Alumni of America, 2014) and less than 5% of those individuals have postsecondary credentials, much human potential has been lost. For these emerging adults, postsecondary educational success can in some way counteract the abuse, neglect, separation, and impermanence they experienced in their troubled lives (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2008).

The Knowledge Gap

Not much is known about the factors that influence the educational pathways of these vulnerable and often-marginalized emerging adults. Studies related to adult outcomes of youth in FC usually report high school completion rates, but little else

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Table 1. Highest Grade Completed at Ages 25 and 26 (Foster Care Alumni and National Comparison Group).

	Midwest Study on Foster Care Alumni (%) (n = 596)	Add Health Survey (%) (n = 890)
No high school diploma or GED[a]	20	6
High school diploma only	31	18
GED only	9	4
One or more years of college but no degree	32	26
2-year college degree	4	10
4-year college degree	3	24
One or more years of graduate school	1	13

Note: GED = general equivalency diploma. Adapted from "*Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 26*, by M. E. Courtney, A. Dworsky, A. Brown, C. Cary, K. Love, and V. Vorhies, 2011, p. 20. Copyright 2011 by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
[a]Includes 10 respondents (two males and eight females) who had received a certificate of completion.

about their educational lives (Elze, Auslander, Stiffman, & McMillen, 2005). Little research has focused on the perceptions of young adults who grew up in FC regarding their educational progress and attainment (Osterling & Hines, 2006). Therefore, little is known about the approaches that can ameliorate academic failure for these students (Yohalem & Pittman, 2001).

The lack of research on college attainment of youth in FC is a part of a large knowledge gap related to the developmental trajectories of former foster youth (Osterling & Hines, 2006). What is particularly needed is data that reveal, from the emerging adults' own perspective, the factors that support and hinder their educational journeys toward enrollment in postsecondary educational institutions and how these paths might differ from those of other disadvantaged young adults (Berliner & Lezin, 2012).

Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

No theory exists that specifically addresses academic achievement among youth and emerging adults in FC. Furthermore, theories that aim to describe educational achievement and attainment among the general population of U.S. students are insufficient to describe the phenomenon of academic achievement among foster children (Berliner & Lezin, 2012). Existing theories are based on concepts and propositions that do not include all aspects of the lived experiences of students living in out of home care.

One component of this study's conceptual foundation is the work of Marzano (2003), who followed the categorization scheme used by prior educational researchers to organize 35 years of research on schools and student achievement into the categories school-level factors, teacher-level factors, and student-level factors. Because Marzano's research focused

primarily on schools and instruction, the major contribution it provided to this study was the use of these broad categories as sensitizing concepts used during the data analysis phase. Marzano's work was also used during the interpretation phase of the study.

This study was framed primarily, therefore, by Horn and Carroll's (1997) research on disadvantaged students' pathways to college. Horn and Carroll used the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS88) to examine the steps taken by minority and at-risk students through high school and into college. They found that the majority of academically successful underprivileged youths accomplished the following "five critical steps" (p. 2): (a) aspiring to college, (b) becoming qualified for postsecondary education, (c) taking appropriate college entrance tests, (d) applying for college, and (d) enrolling in college. Youth with one or more risk factors (barriers to academic success) are far less likely to take these steps. These barriers include (a) being in the lowest socioeconomic status quartile, (b) earning average or below average grades, (c) changing schools frequently, (d) having a single parent, and (e) having low-achieving siblings. Disadvantaged youths who attained college usually had (a) taken advanced classes in high school, (b) help applying to college, (c) involved parents, and (d) higher achieving peers. Because Horn and Carroll's work was nationally representative and longitudinal, and because so little other research existed related to college attainment related to youth in FC, Horn and Carroll's conceptual framework was a logical choice to provide a foundation for the study's research questions, which are as follows:

Research Question 1: What are the perceived impacts of internal and external influences on the high school graduation and college enrollment of college students who grew up in FC?

Research Question 2: What contributed to foster youths' overall academic success?

Research Question 3: What barriers and supports did they encounter during their K–12 education?

Research Question 4: What strategies have they developed to cope with their lives and excel in school?

A phenomenological research design was chosen as the most appropriate method to use when seeking to understand how people experience, perceive, describe, and make sense of some phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Phenomenology is the school of philosophical thought that undergirds all of qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). The phenomenological perspective is that experience affects perceptions that influence behavior and attitudes. Phenomenology promotes the description of participants' subjective experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Method

This section will discuss the study's participants, and data analysis and data collection procedures.

Participants

Participants for this study included 24 college students who grew up in FC and were under the auspices of foster care agencies in three South Florida counties—the counties that contain the majority of Florida's emerging adults from FC. FC independent living supervisors who worked with 18- to 23-year-old potential participants (the sample set) served as key informants (Patton, 2002). The key informants used a script approved by the internal review board to inform potential participants about the study. Inclusion criteria included (a) at least 12 months in FC before emancipation; (b) attending a public or private college or university, (c) being an adult, and (d) being enrolled in the Florida's Road to Independence program, which provided additional financial incentives for FCA who are enrolled in school.

All qualified potential participants who agreed to be interviewed were included in the sample. This total number, 24, represented 20% of the 123 Florida emerging adults who were eligible at the time of the study based on the criteria. The sample size proved adequate in that well before all narratives were analyzed, the researchers noted saturation, the point at which additional analysis did not reveal additional new information (Patton, 2002). Although additional data, past perhaps the 14th or 15th interview, added few new codes to the developing overall story (Strauss & Corbin, 1990/1998), all narratives were included in the thematic analysis. The sample proved diverse and deep enough to cull most important perceptions (Mason, 2010).

The average age at entrance into FC was 10.2. Years in care ranged from 1 to 18 years, with the mean being 8.8. This compares to a mean of 21.1 months of all children in FC in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Nearly all the participants were minorities. Eighteen were Black non-Hispanic, one Black Hispanic, one White Hispanic, and four Caucasians. All participants were from three southeast Florida counties, where most of Florida children in FC live. Eleven had taken high school honors or advanced placement classes, rare for foster children, 10 had general curriculum courses, and 3 were in special education. Eleven participants attended one high school, five attended two high schools, two attended three high schools, and three attended four or more high schools. Twenty-one participants were attending a public postsecondary educational institution and three were enrolled in a private postsecondary institution. Twelve were freshmen at the time of the interview, eight were sophomores, three were juniors, and one was a senior. Sixteen of the participants were female and eight were male.

Data Collection

Data were collected using the same open-ended interviews, presented in the same order, to all participants. Questions included basic demographic questions (e.g., name, age, years in FC, number of schools attended, college major, etc.). After the 12 demographic questions, an opening question about their lived experiences related to school and specific sets of

Table 2. Primary Questions Used During Interviews of College-Going Former Foster Youth.

1. Let's talk about your education story. I am most interested in hearing about experiences that occurred either in school or outside of school that affected your education from elementary school to high school.
2. Now starting with ninth grade in high school, tell me about your courses, your teachers, and how you were prepared to enroll in college.
3. How did you find out about the examinations you needed to take to graduate from high school and get into college? How did you prepare for them and how did you do on them?
4. Tell me about the process you went through to apply to college.
5. Once you were accepted into a school, how did you go about enrolling in classes?
6. Now that you are in college, what are some of the things you are dealing with and how are you dealing with them?

questions were asked related to the steps (i.e., aspiring to college, becoming academically prepared, taking necessary college entrance examinations, applying to college, and enrolling in college). Table 2 contains an abbreviated version of the semistructured interview guide, minus the probes, that was used during the interviews.

Pilot test. First, a draft copy of the semistructured interview guide was e-mailed to a group of 20 doctoral students and candidates for review and four child welfare professionals with extensive experience working with youth in FC. Feedback from these groups resulted in the addition of questions about extracurricular activities and nonacademic influences. The guide was then piloted with three FCA in college who suggested that participants be asked about standardized tests and that the interview should begin with a general, open-ended question about participant's educational experiences growing up.

Interview administration. Interviews were conducted in person or over the telephone. Participants read, or were read, a letter of consent and then interviewed one time. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min and were recorded with both a digital tape recorder and a back-up cassette tape recorder. Interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Discovering themes. To discover themes, the data were reviewed line by line, by the first author. Sensitizing concepts such as internal and external influences (Horn & Carroll, 1997) and home, school, and student-level factors (Marzano, 2003) were used to begin the coding process. Each data chunk or paragraph was carefully read for words and phrases related to the sensitizing concepts and for any other recurring words (Patton, 2002). In addition, chunks of data were coded in relation to the research questions. Short statements that summarized the data were developed as an intermediary data reduction step to link

the expressions (chunks of text) to more discrete categories (themes; Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Determining relevant themes. After following these steps with all 24 transcripts, the first researcher discovered dozens of potential themes and began the process of streamlining the list into a manageable set of themes clearly supported by the data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). To determine which themes best described the phenomena of college students who grew up in FC, the first author used the constant comparison method (Glaser, 1978) to compare themes and concepts across interviews, looking for ways in which texts within participants' narratives were either similar to or different from related texts.

To facilitate this activity, a new spreadsheet was opened and all the patterns and themes from each of the 24 interviews were pasted across the spreadsheet. To keep track of where the data chunks came from, one column for each participant was created that contained the name of the participant and the row from which the data chunk was taken. The end result was one worksheet that contained all data and related patterns and themes. To synthesize the data, all the themes were cut and pasted into a new worksheet with associated participant data (i.e., name and row number). This process enabled all the data related to themes to be sorted in one column, thereby revealing various patterns.

Organizing themes. To check for consistency, themes were organized based on the research questions and segments of data related to the same theme were compared among participants, inductively deriving a set of themes to characterize the phenomena. The first researcher began looking at all the patterns and descriptions to develop more abstract categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990/1998).

Trustworthiness

To increase the trustworthiness of the study (the credibility of the interpretation), multiple perspectives were gathered (Patton, 2002). The initial coding was submitted to peer review, which consisted of sharing spreadsheets with codes and data with five members of the researcher's dissertation writing group. The findings also were discussed with four college students who grew up in FC. The group of college students included one who participated in the pilot study and two study participants. The fourth college student is a national advocate for transitioning FC youth. All of the young adults agreed with the findings without reservation. One young adult said, "This is what I lived" and another said, "You have really captured what we go through."

The findings were also read by three child welfare professionals, including a veteran child welfare administrator and two professionals whose work keeps them in constant contact with FCA in college. These individuals affirmed that, based upon their extensive experience, the findings represented an accurate representation of the phenomenon in question.

Table 3. Themes and Types of Barriers and Supports Related to Foster Youths' Academic Achievement.

	Academic Barriers	Academic Supports

School related	Nonempathetic teachers/ administrators
	Lack of academic rigor
		Caring teachers
		    Helpful counselors
		    Challenging academic environment
		    Stable school placement

Foster care related	Uninformative caseworkers Uninvolved foster parents Homes nonconducive to study Low-performing and abusive peers	Education-promoting caseworkers Education-minded foster parents Stable residential placement
Community		Conscientious relatives Education-savvy mentors
Internal	Anger ~~Responsibility~~	Perseverance ~~Bad behavior~~ Resourcefulness Diligence Motivation Goal orientation Self-efficacy

Results

Through this iterative process, two major themes emerged: (a) academic barriers and (b) academic supports. Several types of barriers and supports, shown in Table 3, also emerged.

Academic Barriers

Academic barriers, obstacles that limit academic achievement or attainment of career goals, can come from close relationships such as family members and schoolmates or more distant influences, such as social, governmental, and cultural systems (Kenny et al., 2007). Four types of academic barriers were identified in this study: (a) school related, (b) FC related, (c) peer related, and (d) internal.

School related. Participants indicated that they faced two types of school-related barriers, nonempathetic teachers and administrators and lack of academic rigor, as primary obstacles to their academic progress. (1) Nonempathetic teachers and administrators were school officials who showed no interest in understanding foster youths' status and its impact on the academic progress. For example, Samantha remembered the general attitude of educators being "'Either you succeed or you don't' . . . I didn't develop any close relationships with any [teachers]." Farah said that administrators at her magnet school were not empathetic when she asked to reenroll after a short absence due to a sudden FC placement change. She said, "I was

[away] for a short period of time but I guess since I had moved, they wouldn't let me back in the school."

Lack of academic rigor means classes that were too easy and curriculum that did not result in consistent knowledge gain (Marzano, 2003). Janet said she struggled academically during her freshmen year in college because in high school she didn't have to do her homework or work hard to get good grades. She explained that "The transition from high school to college was like a reality check because you have to study. Erica, a high school honors student, also said a lack of rigor in high school had left her ill prepared for the university explaining, "The schools were not tough enough for me ... I feel like a misfit; [like] they are more prepared. I think I could be doing a lot better with a better education. What I had was just a regular education."

FC related. FC-related barriers are challenges that are unique to wards of the state (Casey Family Programs, 2004). The clear pattern was participants' perceptions that uninformative caseworkers and low-quality FC placements were the primary FC-related barriers on their road to college. Nearly 50% of the participants said their social workers were not actively involved in their education and that they wished they would have provided more information about the educational benefits available to them at age 18. Eleven participants said caseworkers told them about their postsecondary educational benefits when they were close to their 18th birthday (at the time, Florida law required a staffing about postemancipation plans during youths' 17th year). At this time, many young people were worried about where they would be living once they turned 18. Betty had paid for college for 3 years before her caseworker told her she was entitled to tuition waivers. Kenneth explained that he heard about the educational benefits "When I was about to turn 18 ... I didn't know anything. I didn't know you get a scholarship." A number of participants, like Melanie, indicated they did not live in a supportive environment stating her foster parents " ... didn't really care." Naomi's foster mother, even though she was a teacher "didn't really focus on my and my sister's educational goals and extra-curricular activities."

Peer related. Participants consistently mentioned the negative impact of peers in foster or group homes; peers who were not motivated to achieve academically, were hostile, and sometimes even abusive. Danny said the other boys in his group home did not value education as a way to a "brighter future" and would "skip school to smoke weed and stay out late fighting ... They're working towards the moment and at the moment, school isn't fun." Participants were often abused physically or mentally by peers who were jealous of their academic success. Kenneth fought with other boys in his group home. He said "They would get mad, calling me 'snitch' and saying that I was trying to be somebody I am not."

Internal. Anger and bad behavior were the two internal academic barriers that emerged during the analysis. Anger sometimes led to bad behavior that resulted in suspensions or expulsions from school. Anger was specifically mentioned 19 times by 11 different interviewees. Mike, for example, was angry and frustrated about having to move to Florida, and away from his adoptive parents, to quality for the state's living stipend and tuition voucher. He said:

I was just totally angry ... that I moved and [spent] my last year of high school at some place that was completely foreign. For the first few months, I remember I made terrible grades, I had a low B, a couple of C's and I believe one D.

Participants admitted their behavior, mostly fighting, sometimes led to negative educational outcomes. Nekiva said:

When I was in middle school I got expelled a few times because I was not an angel I got into a few fights. I was arrested. I got a few felony charges involved with fighting. I went to alternative school in middle school.

Participants spoke of personal barriers experienced at school, in their FC placements, with peers and from within themselves.

Academic Supports

The following four types of academic support were identified: (a) school related, (b) FC related, (c) community related, and (d) internal.

School related. Participants indicated that their primary support at school came from caring teachers, helpful counselors, and a challenging academic environment. Eleven participants spoke about special attention they received from teachers. Martin, a freshman at a community college, commended his magnet middle school's challenging curriculum and the teacher who worked with his case manager to make sure he completed an important homework assignment.

When [my case manager] and I got to class [my teacher] was like "You didn't do it?" and she was really upset with me ... they waited for me to do all the homework. They made me sit there and do it and I was really upset. It was a lot of work but they made me do it ... They didn't give up on me.

Seven participants, all female, spoke positively about their school guidance counselors who helped with fee waivers and college applications. Comments about teachers and counselors indicated that the adults remembered by participants went above and beyond what was expected of them as educators.

Nine of the participants (seven of whom are former honors students) said academic rigor and stability helped them reach the college campus. All but one of the participants said they attended either one or two high schools—reflecting a level of high school stability rare among teenagers in FC. Honors classes exposed participants to increased academic rigor, conversations about college, information about college entrance tests, and frequent visits by guidance counselors and college

advisors. Four participants said their school provided a stable, comfortable, safe haven. For instance, Tami said "[School] was my sanity. My life would change all around me but school always stayed the same. I could always do good in school."

FC related. Eleven participants had authoritative foster parents who were warm yet expressed clear limits and high educational expectations. Sylvana's foster mother convinced school officials to take Sylvana out of special education classes so that she could obtain a regular diploma and enroll in college. Samantha's foster mother emphasized academics with statements like, "No TV. No phone until you do your homework." Five participants mentioned caseworkers whose actions specifically encouraged them to excel educationally. Tami, for instance, spoke of a social worker who introduced her to his college-enrolled client, a young woman who encouraged Tami to consider college. Tina spoke of a caseworker who "treated us like her own children" and enrolled her in community college as soon as she passed her GED, at age 16.

Community related. Nonresident blood relatives, as well as non-kin mentors, emerged as the primary sources of community-related academic support for a majority (14) of the participants. Several participants mentioned that college-enrolled older siblings (biological, foster, adopted, and step) served as living reminders that college was a potential path even for youths with chaotic backgrounds. Naomi's college-educated aunt, who had a stable marriage and owned a stately home with land in New England, motivated Naomi from afar to pursue her education.

> I liked [her] world. I liked the big house. I liked the nature. I liked the attention. Knowing that I always had that in a sense was kind of like a cushion to fall back on … that kind of fostered a belief that maybe I deserve only the best.

Ten participants remembered effective and consistent mentors, including relatives, who helped them apply to and enroll in college. John's mentor of 7 years helped him apply to college and "was always on my back about school and homework." Erica's mentor of 11 years helped her apply for school, gave her summer work, and called her often and "really came through. Like sometimes she would pick me up and say 'OK, we are going to do what needs to be done.' She actually did it!"

That effective mentoring can lead to positive outcomes for youth in FC has been affirmed by Munson and McMillen (2009) who found that the presence of "non-kin natural mentoring relationships" among older youth in FC was related to "fewer depression symptoms, less perceived stress and greater satisfaction with life" (p. 109). Moreover, Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, and Lozano (2008), who studied a nationally representative sample of youth in FC, found that mentored youth demonstrated "a significantly greater number of positive outcomes than non-mentored youth," including "a borderline significant trend toward more participation in higher education" (p. 3).

The term "education-savvy mentors" was used as a qualifier because it seemed to be of particular import that the mentors involved in the lives of these emerging adults were well informed about the world of postsecondary education and were perceptive about the characteristics their mentees demonstrated that might lead them to have higher or lower levels of academic success after high school. Participants' comments regarding the importance of mentors and community support affirm research that emphasizes "the importance of mentors and the social and instrumental support from families, peers, teachers, and programs for students' academic success" (Syed, Azmitia, & Cooper, 2011, p. 450).

Internal. Internal supports are individual strengths, assets, or personal competencies associated with resilience, healthy development, and life success (Bernard, 2004). The following seven internal resiliency traits, called "success strengths" (to coin a phrase) emerged from participants' narratives: (a) perseverance, (b) responsibility, (c) resourcefulness (d) diligence, (e) motivation, (f) goal orientation, and (g) self-efficacy.

Perseverance is the ability to endure in an undertaking in spite of discouragement, counterinfluences, and opposition—"the capacity to keep persisting" (Howe, 1999). When asked what advice they would give younger peers in FC, participants' responses were nearly identical.

"Don't give up!" Erica said, "You can do anything you set your mind to … no matter what people say." William said, "Stick with it ….If you want to do it, you can do it." Nekiva, who persevered through the death of her mother, a move from rural Georgia to urban Miami, and cruel taunts from her peers, believes that no matter how bad it gets, "Eventually it's over."

Responsibility, being accountable for one's own actions and academic progress, is an important part of being resilient (Bernard, 2004). Sixteen participants said they took personal responsibility for their own educational progress. Danny said no one has the right to blame the system or his or her background for not doing well. Latasha said "If I failed anything, it's because I didn't put in the effort." After years of debilitating anger, Thomas finally decided to "stop playing and I just got serious with everything." Virginia said, "Even if you are in [special education] classes you can do it as long as you apply yourself."

Resourcefulness is the ability to identify and use "external resources and surrogate sources of support" and is also known as "help-seeking, resource utilization, and just plain 'street smarts'" (Bernard, 2004, p. 18). Participants' academic strategies included constantly seeking advice about schoolwork, obtaining tutors, buying extra study resources, and becoming friends with high-performing youth. Kenneth explained that "I just wanted to get involved more with the smart kids … before I would go to football practice, I would talk to them."

Diligence, or hard work, was another success strength evident in the narratives. Researchers who study disadvantaged yet academically successful young people have often noted this important trait (Bempechat, 2000; Steinberg, 1996). Thomas said he would study until the work was "in my system,"

Melanie would "go above and beyond on my projects," and Mike, who had a learning disability, said:

> I've always worked harder than any other students because I basically needed and wanted to understand most of the subjects that were being taught ….if I want a good life or to lead a good life after high school I need to go to college [and] that would take a lot of work … so I always worked hard.

Motivation, the "urge or push to carry out a specific action or behavior" (Brouse, Basch, LeBlanc, McKnight, & Lei, 2010) is an internal character trait that influences performance and behavior. Thirty-two of the 38 participants' statements concerning motivation related to their own volition to succeed academically. The desire for independence motivated Naomi. Thomas was motivated to disprove his naysayers and earn positive attention as a role model. Latasha was internally compelled by the desire to provide for her child and by negative memories of a father who abused her for less than perfect grades. Kenneth was motivated by a desire to change that began when "something just hit me!"

Goal orientation, having long-term goals beyond just obtaining a degree, was the most consistent trait that emerged. Eighteen of the 24 participants had a clear vision regarding what they wanted to become—and most spoke of entering one of the helping professions (i.e., teaching, psychology, and social work). Other professions of interest included business, law, and firefighting. Six of the participants aspired to graduate degrees. Participants seemed to have an understanding that it will take time and effort to reach those goals, and seemed willing to do the necessary work. Nekiva, a paralegal, was determined to become a lawyer. Her educational goals and persistence are illustrated by this comment:

> Barry [University School of Law] is walking distance from my house and I never thought I would go to a place like that, to me it is like the Harvard of my world, to be this close to being a lawyer – it's the best feeling in the world.

Not only did Nakiva aim to become a lawyer, she was convinced that she could guide her course toward her goal. This perceived self-efficacy "refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). This trait influences the other success strengths that emerged during the analysis because self-efficacy beliefs influence people's choices, perseverance, and effort.

Self-efficacy can be inferred even in quotes related to other success strengths. Kenneth, the football player, became friends with smart students because he believed he could succeed like they did. Naomi chose to work, attend college, and raise her child because she believed she could do all three effectively. Virginia said that she started doing well academically when she realized that "Even if you are in [special education] classes you can do it as long as you apply yourself. And I know that." Sally asked to remain in a placement with an authoritative foster mother she called "Granny," even though her sister refused to obey Granny's rules, asked to be moved. Sally stayed because she was convinced she had the ability succeed—as long as she was in a challenging academic setting.

The overall sense one obtains from participating in conversations with these resilient emerging adults is that they had an internal locus of control (Bernard, 2004). Werner and Smith (1992), who conducted a longitudinal study on resilience with hundreds of children through their adult years, found that having a sense of being in charge of one's own actions was "a key determinant of resilience" (p. 22).

This sense of being in control relates to the importance of "first party intervention" noted by Adelman (2006). Following a nationally representative cohort of students from high school into postsecondary education to explore factors that lead to postsecondary educational success, Adelman and his associates concluded "there is a limit to what we can realistically do unless students respond to highly-targeted advice and prodding" (p. 80). The participants in this study were successful because they demonstrated the commitment likely to result in their earning a degree.

Discussion

This section will answer each research question and then introduce a new model that contextualizes themes related to the barriers and supports.

What Contributed to Foster Youths' Overall Academic Success?

Participants experienced support at school, at home, and within their communities. In addition to empathetic educators and helpful school guidance counselors, 11 participants were clearly challenged academically in their honors or advanced placement classes, an important factor related to academic success (Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Nearly all of the participants attended only one high school, leading to the stability emphasized by child welfare researchers and advocates for youth in FC (Burrell, 2003; Casey Family Programs, 2004, 2005; Choice et al., 2001; Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy, 1999).

Authoritative guardians who emphasized the importance of homework, and education, were another positive force—a supportive home environment vital to the success of emerging adults from FC (Festinger, 1983; McMillen et al., 2003) and disadvantaged youth in general (Bempechat, 1998; Pecora et al., 2005; Search Institute, 2003). Community-related support came from immediate family members, mostly nonresident siblings, and extended family members serving as distant yet powerful role models that strengthened participants' self-efficacy.

What Barriers and Supports Did Former Foster Youth Encounter During Their K–12 Education?

Participants encountered school-related, FC-related, and personal barriers and supports during their K–12 education. These barriers are interrelated and represent forces that both help
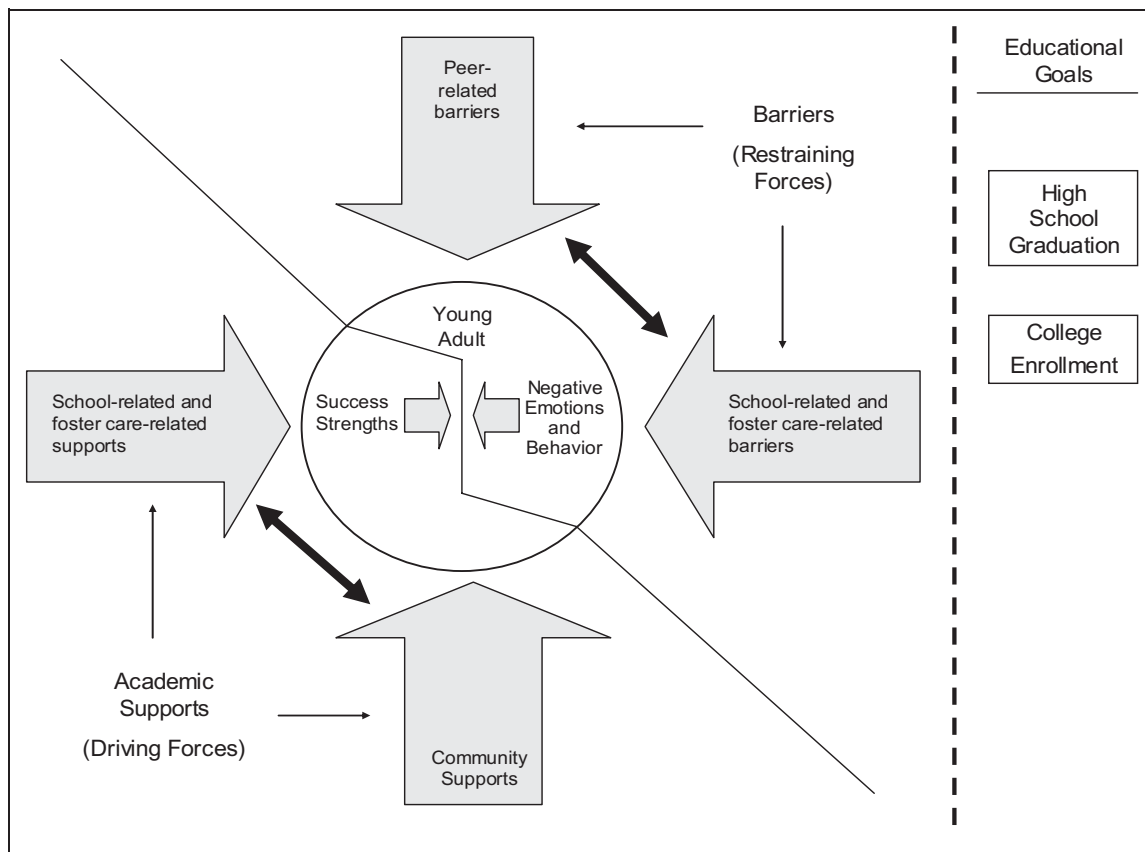
Figure 1. Foster youth academic achievement model.

advance and delay foster youth's attainment of their education goals, such as applying to or enrolling in college. Kenny et al. (2007) noted a similar duality among the disadvantaged youth they studied.

What Strategies Have Adults Emerging From FC Developed to Cope With Their Lives and Excel in School?

Participants used strategies such as accepting help, working hard, and limiting distractions on their journeys through K–12 education. Several participants said they limited their diversions, like partying and relationships, so they could do well in school. Two had abortions and indicated they made their decision to forego having a child so that they would not be diverted from their educational goals. Three stayed in stable foster homes, instead of following siblings who chose to leave, so as to not disrupt their education. Other strategies were more traditional, such as paying close attention in class, applying school lessons to everyday life, and making friends with high-performing students.

The Foster Youth Academic Achievement Model

A major outcome of this study was the realization that a new model was needed to adequately represent the interplay of external supports (i.e., school, FC, and community related),

external barriers (i.e., school, foster care, and peer related), internal supports (i.e., success strengths), and internal barriers (i.e., negative emotions and behaviors). Figure 1, the Foster Youth Academic Achievement Model, which is based on Lewin's Force Field Analysis Model (Marrow, 1969), is introduced here to represent this model.

Lewin theorized that issues are held in balance by the interaction of two opposing sets of forces, those seeking to promote change, known as driving forces, and those attempting to maintain the status quo, restraining forces (Marrow, 1969). The Foster Youth Academic Achievement Model proposes that opposing external and internal forces impact the academic achievement of young people in FC progressing through high school toward college enrollment. The circle in the middle represents the young person, who are sometimes still teenagers but more often are emerging adults, having reached their 18th birthday while still in high school because of numerous academic delays during their K–12 school years. The circle is bisected, with arrows representing both internal supports and barriers.

External supports are shown as arrows in the left and lower quadrants supporting the young person up and driving him forward. External barriers (restraining forces) are found in the upper and right quadrants, indicating their potential to keep the young adult from achieving the goals of high school graduation and college enrollment, shown to the right of the dotted line.

The double-headed arrows between school-related and FC-related supports and community supports, as well as between peer-related barriers and school-related and FC-related barriers, indicate that these influences are related to, and interact with, each other.

Implications for Theory

The theoretical implications of this study can be understood in relation to the extensive research on student achievement synthesized by Marzano (2003) and work on student attainment by Horn and Carroll (1997), the conceptual frameworks that guided the study's design and development. The results of this study both extend and contradict aspects of both frameworks.

Marzano Vis-à-Vis Foster Youth Academic Achievement Model

Marzano (2003) categorized factors related to student achievement within the general student population into three levels: school-level, teacher-level, and student-level factors. School-level factors included a guaranteed and viable curriculum and challenging goals and effective feedback. Study participants benefited from positive school-level factors in that nearly 50% of the study's participants were enrolled in demanding honors classes and most (67%) experienced a level of educational stability (one or two high schools) rare among high school youth in foster youth.

This study extends Marzano's model by showing the importance of family and significant others not mentioned specifically in Marzano's work, thus adding family-level and internal success strengths. Participants seemed to consistently use their strengths to overcome academic barriers.

The findings also challenge Marzano's work. Barriers such as negative peer pressure from FC siblings, highly unstable FC and school placements, as well as low-quality foster homes, are understandably not considered by Marzano. His meta-analysis is based on research among general population students and focuses mainly on school-oriented supports, not on barriers. Barriers and supports specific to FCA, however, should be included in models about academic achievement among this population of students.

Horn and Carroll's Pipeline to College Model

The results of this study cast new light on the five critical steps that Horn and Carroll found to be true of the disadvantaged students they studied: (a) aspiring to college, (b) becoming qualified for postsecondary education, (c) taking appropriate college entrance tests, (d) applying for college, and (e) enrolling in college. Barriers participants faced in school and out of school prevented them from traveling through the pipeline linearly—confidently and systematically taking the necessary steps to arrive at college ready for success. Instead, participants traversed a minefield littered with potential bombs, such as abuse in foster homes and group homes, time in juvenile detention facilities due to violent outbursts provoked by unresolved anger, periods of poor grades, confusion, and fear. The step labeled "becoming qualified" was sometimes not accomplished, with participants getting into college via open door policies. While a number of participants did very well on standardized tests, others failed to meet all graduation requirements (i.e., passing the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test), and even those who did well in high school sometimes failed classes early in college, demonstrating a lack of college readiness experienced by many college freshmen, regardless of their status. The Foster Care Achievement Model illustrates that for adults emerging from FC, at least in this sample, there is no pipeline to college.

Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

State and local educational policy makers may consider the knowledge generated by this sample of students from FC (20% of all of Florida's 18- to 23-year-old former foster youth attending college at the time) useful to inform the development of new preservice and in-service educational and training programs for teachers, counselors, and educational administrators. Furthermore, policies already in place that require the identification of academically gifted children, and the placement of these youth in appropriate advanced placement and honors courses, should be enforced relative to youth and emerging adults in FC, especially because youth in FC are often overlooked for those classes.

Findings related to the importance of external influences, particularly the importance of caring and helpful adults at school, imply the need for state and local educational policies requiring the designation of a FC liaison at public schools and institutions of higher education, especially those with high numbers of youth in FC. One of the most recent examples of this requirement can be found in the State of Florida, which passed a law last year to help address the need for a comprehensive support structure, at postsecondary institutions, for college-bound former foster youth. The Nancy C. Detert Common Sense and Compassion Independent Living Act, Chapter 2013—178, Laws of Florida, this law requires that the Florida Department of Children and Families collaborate with the Board of Governors, the Florida College System, and the Department of Education and that Florida public colleges and universities to:

> provide postsecondary educational campus coaching positions that will be integrated into Florida College System institutions' and university institutions' general support services structure to provide current and former foster care children and young adults with dedicated, on-campus support to help address the need for a comprehensive support structure in the academic arena to assist children and young adults who have been or continue to remain in the foster care system in making the transition from a structured care system into an independent living setting.

Although Florida's new law is one of the few of its kind in the United States, secondary and postsecondary institutions in other parts of the nation are developing programs to address the postsecondary educational needs of former and current foster youth. As they work to meet the needs of this disadvantaged yet resilient population, the Foster Youth Academic Achievement Model may provide a framework to guide program administrators as they develop training objectives, content, outcomes, and policies. It also can help researchers identify potential areas of inquiry.

Findings related to internal barriers and supports may indicate that the campus coaches, teachers, administrators, school guidance counselors, and other school staff should receive training on internal barriers that hinder and the success strengths that promote educational achievement among youth in care. Regarding internal barriers and supports, the findings imply that child welfare leaders, especially at the state and local levels, may do well to focus on the connection between unresolved negative emotions, youths' own positive attributes, and their future academic and life success. Life skills training should cover affective domains, especially anger-related issues that may negatively impact academic achievement.

The finding that participants experienced a lack of empathy among teachers and other school personnel, as well as that they benefited from caring teachers and helpful counselors, implies that principals in K–12 and adult education settings should seek out materials and staff training regarding the influences that impact educational achievement among youth in FC and make sure that as many members of their staff as possible are exposed to this training. Although most of these young people do not self-identify as being in FC, educational administrators and teachers can nevertheless alert all students about counseling and referral services that their institutions might offer, realizing that vulnerable youth and emerging adults seek out these services if they know they are available.

Hopefully, these findings can inform the work of lay people, paraprofessionals, and professionals working to impact the education and lives of young people in and from FC, as they travel complicated and often treacherous paths to college. The findings represent the often unheard voices of emerging adults who lived in FC.

Author's Note

All participants' names have been changed to protect their identities.

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