The grip of trauma: How trauma disrupts the academic aspirations of foster youth

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ABSTRACT

The academic challenges foster youth encounter during their P-12 education have been widely reported. Yet, despite these challenges, the majority of foster youth desire postsecondary education. What is less known is the reason why so few foster youth alumni who desire a four-year college degree, achieve this goal. For the participants in this four-year longitudinal study, maltreatment, resulting in foster care placement, and the ensuing exposure to the foster care system, resulted in trauma histories and mental health diagnoses. Anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), were the most common diagnosis. The participants shared the ways in which these mental health challenges manifested throughout their college education. Of those in the study, almost half successfully graduated from college, a third dropped out, and only two remain enrolled. This study provides a unique and critical insight into the experiences of foster youth, enrolled in a four-year university, by sharing their stories.

Children placed in foster care are at greater risk for mental and emotional challenges. They have been found to experience more depression, anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and behavioral issues than their non-foster peers (Turney & Wildeman, 2016). Due to their history of abuse and neglect, children and youth in the foster care system may be at heightened risk for posttraumatic stress or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Kolko et al., 2010). Unfortunately, data is not available on foster youth with mental health diagnosis pursuing postsecondary education. Therefore, it is difficult at best to determine the challenges they face as they pursue their degree. For these reasons, this study is an important voice in this conversation. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of foster youth and foster youth alumni who are enrolled in a four-year university, to identify the challenges/barriers they experienced as they pursued a bachelor degree. Utilizing qualitative, phenomenological methodology, their voices can be heard.

1. Literature review

Earning a bachelor’s degree is a significant accomplishment, and one that is particularly valued in the United States (Day, Dworsky, & Feng, 2013; Salazar, 2013). In 2015, approximately 33% of adults in the United States were found to have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (2016) found that 60% of students who enrolled in a four-year university successfully graduated six years after enrolling. Women were found to graduate in slightly higher percentage rates than males, 62% versus 57%. The ability to enroll in a four-year university, however, does not guarantee a bachelor degree.

Unfortunately, not all who wish to earn a degree will have the opportunity to do so. Foster alumni are at a distinct academic disadvantage. With only 50% graduating from high school (Bruskas, 2008), post secondary education is often out of reach (Salazar,
Only 3% to 11% of foster alumni who are able to enroll in college will successfully persist and earn their bachelor’s degree (Casey Family Programs, 2011). In fact, Day et al. (2013) found college students who had been in foster care were less likely to graduate than those from “low-income, first generation students” who attended the same university (p. 7). Additionally, they found that even when foster youth have been academically successful, that did not guarantee or predict graduation. There are many factors contributing to the low percentage of foster alumni earning a four-year degree. They include significant academic deficiencies and barriers that occur during their P-12 education; cognitive and behavioral challenges due to maltreatment, challenges throughout their foster care experience, and mental health diagnosis due to complex trauma.

2. P-12 educational challenges

Researchers have reported the educational challenges foster children and youth face. Studies have pointed to consistent movement from one foster care placement to another (which typically also means a school change), over and underrepresentation in special education programs, and high suspension and expulsion rates compared to non-foster peers (Morton, 2015). Of these, frequent disruptions in school enrollment have been noted as the most prominent barrier to post-secondary success (Pecora et al., 2005; Wolanin, 2005). With safety as the first priority for the Department of Human Services, children and youth are moved from their home or to a new placement when threats to safety appear, rather than at the end of a grading period or semester. This can be particularly devastating for high school students as this often means a loss of credits, which puts them farther behind on the path to graduation.

3. Barriers to a bachelor degree

For foster alumni interested in pursuing a bachelor’s degree, their access to higher education is limited, and their chances of actually earning a bachelors degree are much lower than their non-foster peers (Day et al., 2013; Kirk & Day, 2011; Salazar, Roe, Ullrich, & Haggerty, 2016). While students enter college with the expectation of successful completion, many will face insurmountable obstacles that cause them to leave before earning their degree (Boyraz, Granda, Baker, Tidwell, & Waits, 2015; Salazar, Haggerty, & Roe, 2016).

Youth with a foster care history, have not been adequately prepared for independence, including the degree of independence necessary to succeed in college (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Nevertheless, foster youth are often anxious to leave the child welfare system. While they may feel they are prepared to live independently, the structured foster care system they have lived in does not in fact prepare them for decision-making. This kind of preparation is left up to the adults assigned to their case and to foster parents. If by the time they leave care they have not attended an Independent Living program, and/or if foster parents or caseworkers did not teach financial responsibility and money management skills adequately, they will find themselves unprepared to manage their own living expenses (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). It is not surprising, then, that after achieving independence from the foster care system, only 40.5% felt they had been somewhat prepared to navigate their future on their own (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). Additionally, only 33.3% reported having a valid driver’s license, and 38.4% reported they had $250 in cash (Pecora et al., 2005).

While in foster care, children and youth are often placed with adults without post-secondary experience. This can mean that foster youth who successfully graduate from high school and who could pursue a bachelor’s degree are not encouraged to do so, as they are often with adults who underestimate their potential (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Vacca, 2008). This leaves foster alumni without guidance on how to successfully prepare and navigate the challenges and complexities of a college or university (Merdinger et al., 2005). Finally, the majority of high school alumni who desire a college degree do not have the financial support that others do, which results in a significant barrier to completion (David, 2016; Wolanin, 2005).

While there are many researchers who have identified barriers to bachelor’s degree completion, the barriers they identify, appear to be symptomatic of a larger cause. Unrau et al. (2012), Watt et al. (2013), and Banyard and Cantor (2004) identified trauma and the role trauma plays in the academic achievement of students as a barrier to degree completion and perhaps the central cause of the majority of barriers previously discussed.

4. Trauma leading to mental health challenges

While there is literature identifying the causes of poor academic outcomes for youth who were in foster care, few studies have considered the role of trauma, leading to a compromised mental and emotional state relationship, to these outcomes. Banyard and Cantor (2004) was one of the few studies that looked at the role of trauma. They found that college students who had survived complex trauma were at risk for leaving college. Foster youth alumni have experienced complex trauma stemming from maltreatment, multiple placement moves, loss of family and friends, and multiple school moves, to name a few causes. Many of these experiences have been quantified as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE).

Given the histories of maltreatment and complex trauma, it is not surprising, then, that children and youth who are in the foster care system have been found to have high ACE scores, leaving them at risk for mental health challenges (Hambrick, Oppenheim-Weller, N’zi, & Taussig, 2016) and behavioral challenges in the P-12 setting. In their study of women who had experience with the foster care system, Bruskas and Tessin (2013) participants reported an average of 5.68 ACEs. The participants’ experiences ranged from 97% reporting at least one ACE to 23% reporting nine. In addition, over half reported psychological distress.

Simply stated, trauma changes the brain (Perry, 2006). The toxicity of trauma can affect development and learning in a number of
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