Academic resilience and caring adults: The experiences of former foster youth

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ABSTRACT

As a result of being removed from their homes and moving between different placements and schools, foster youth can experience high levels of stress and challenges as they struggle to cope with such extreme emotional turbulence. The experience of trauma and instability in turn, can have consequences on foster students' academic progress. As it is seemingly uncommon for foster youth to matriculate to postsecondary education, this study examines how successful foster youth transitioned out of care and furthered their education at an academically rigorous institution. From high-achieving former foster students, this study uncovers their experiences while in out-of-home care that helped them enroll in a university, including how adult supporters provided guidance, emotional support, and stability, which allowed students to move out of their negative past experiences. Adults' willingness to assist youth and be a part of their lives provided students with a transformative academic and social emotional environment, furthering their ability to persist through high school and gain acceptance to a top-tier university.

1. Introduction

In any given year there are over 400,000 youth living in out-of-home placement across the nation due to issues such as child abuse, neglect, parental incarceration or death, and/or behavioral issues (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). As a result of being removed from family and unsuitable home conditions and moving between different foster homes and schools, foster youth can experience high levels of stress and developmental challenges as they struggle to cope with such extreme emotional turbulence (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, Hamby, & Kracke, 2009; Pecora et al., 2003). Each year approximately 6% of these foster youth will be released from the system as adults, yet for the majority of these youth, there is little support in the way of family or program assistance to help with housing, job placement, or options in higher education (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Wiegmann, Putnam-Hornstein, Barrat, Magruder, & Needell, 2014). Of the 6% of students who age out of the system each year, five to 13% enroll in higher education institutions and only two to 3% will graduate and obtain a bachelor's or other advanced degree (Casey Family Programs, 2010).

While in school, foster youth tend to have substantially high rates of poor academic and behavioral outcomes in the form of low test scores, low grades, high dropout rates, high rates of chronic absence and tardiness, and disproportionate placement in special education classes (Kirk and Day, 2011; Wiegmann et al., 2014). Schools also have a

difficult time retaining records on foster youth who are mostly highly mobile, causing these students to repeat courses and remain in certain grade levels far beyond the normal timeframe (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). With the compound disadvantages most foster youth face while in K-12 and before they leave the foster care system, the chances of being eligible for a university become slim.

Each year in California, approximately 4000 foster youth exit the foster care system as adults (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017) and most who are unable to return home to their biological families rely on social workers, foster homes, and other supportive adults to provide the same level of care. These negative outcomes for foster youth are prevalent in research but not nearly as much when it comes to solutions or identifying what the protective factors are that account for the successes that do exist, particularly in higher education. While research is limited, however, the development of efforts to reduce poor outcomes for foster youth is seen most extensively in the recent reform to California's educational funding system. In 2013, California passed the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) legislation, which recognizes the various educational needs of students who are traditionally disadvantaged, including foster youth. The supplemental funding requires school districts across the state to develop a Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) to ensure that the outcomes for these students are monitored and districts held accountable for creating goals and actions around improved student achievement. Though the reform was groundbreaking, foster youth continue to have low graduation from

high school compared to their peers, and low enrollment in post-secondary education.

As such, this study focuses on what it means to be a foster youth that has transitioned out of the system and enrolled in an academically rigorous institution. Through former foster youths' own accounts of their success during high school that led them to a university, as well as the perspectives of the adults who supported them in their educational journey, there are common threads identified in what contributed to their positive educational outcomes despite the harsh realities they faced. The adults in the lives of foster youth, from the teachers and counselors at their school(s) to extended family and community members, provided a different lens and perspective on the larger picture of what helps get these youth into top-ranking universities.

This study examined the following questions:

1. What do former foster youth currently enrolled in a research university identify as factors that supported or hindered their efforts to apply and enroll in a research university?

2. What factors do adult supporters identify as contributing to former foster youth's academic success?

3. What do adult supporters perceive as their role in foster youth student achievement?

1.1. Literature

America's foster care system is intended to create a safe and healthy living environment for children and young adults who have faced various forms of abuse and neglect in their biological homes, being placed in the system anywhere from birth through their teenage years (Davis, 2006). Once placed, foster youth are the legal responsibility of their state until they are adopted, reunited with biological family members, or become legal adults (Davis, 2006; Wolanin, 2005). Typically, the transition from foster care to adulthood comes suddenly and without support, leaving foster youth vulnerable to negative outcomes, including low educational attainment (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). Most foster youth across the nation (70%) aspire to post-secondary education, yet less than 10% will actually meet their goals and enroll in college (Courtney et al., 2007; Rassen, Cooper, & Mery, 2010). The desire to continue on to a postsecondary institution and one's expectations for the future can impact a student's grades, academic participation, and motivational levels while they are still in K-12 (Boxer, Goldstein, DeLorenzo, Savoy, & Mercado, 2011). Similarly, students who believe they can do well in school are more likely to do so, making aspirations and expectations a critical influence on students' educational goals and life trajectory (Bandura, 1993; Bandura et al., 1996; Beal & Crockett, 2013; Boxer et al., 2011).

A comprehensive array of research has found that a student's aspirations are also shaped by personal and social factors; the experiences that influence development, such as school and community environments, and family involvement and expectations, all have an impact in a student's academic achievement (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Boxer et al., 2011; Davis-Kean, 2005; C. Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011a, 2011b; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). The environmental variable of parental support or family involvement, in particular, has been noted as one of the best predictors of academic outcomes and postsecondary educational attainment (Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Davis-Kean, 2005; C. Kirk et al., 2011a; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).

What makes some foster youth who experience stress and trauma academically unsuccessful and others succeed can be studied in the context of available supports that may enable some students to overcome the perceived barriers they face. Without a solid relationship with others or involvement in external activities, students may have difficulty engaging in healthy decision-making for their future (Taussig, 2002; Unrau, 2011).

Here, there is a gap in the research literature as it pertains to foster youth accessing top-tier universities. The common trend in this area of study is to either focus on foster youth at the community college or

State University levels, or to study their general success after leaving foster care and how that compares to the idea of quality of life gained. The data gathered for this study highlight the varying experiences of academically successful foster youth and their perceptions of their academic success, including the role of positive adult relationships and how to identify factors that may be reproduced for the majority of foster youth who do not access university level education. With the overwhelming obstacles that many foster youth face, it is important to understand how these students are influenced through their personal experiences and relationships and its impact on their decision and readiness to pursue postsecondary education.

1.1.1. Theory

This study examines frameworks around academic resilience and theory of care that serve as a lens to view educational aspirations for foster youth and the role of guidance and consistency from adults. Among this sample population of students, these two theories act as grounding context that contributed to the educational outcomes of foster youth.

Resilience alone is "the process by which individuals achieve adaptive functioning in the face of adversity" (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005, p. 381). Academic resilience, more specifically, is a construct tied to positive anomalies in educational outcomes for students labeled as *at-risk* (Morales, 2008). The theory is that aspirations and academic success represent highly meaningful accomplishments for youth who must transcend a multitude of barriers to attain them; these youth are considered academically resilient (Finn & Rock, 1997; Morales, 2008).

Theory of care is a significant protective factor against outcomes related to trauma and instability, involving at its most basic, the consideration of other's needs in order to protect or enhance their well-being. In addition, the basic elements of care lie in the relationship between the one caring and the one being cared for (Noddings, 2013). As students accept the care of adults, their likelihood of academic success rises. The notion of care in education points to the growth of high aspirations, academic resilience, and high self-concept. One of the most influential manifestations of care, the role of adult supporters, will be discussed as a main finding in this study.

2. Methods

2.1. Site and population

This study focuses on a seldom-studied population of foster youth who have matriculated to a highly selective institution, as well as foster parents, teachers, and other supportive adults who have positively impacted this group. The sample is limited to undergraduate students identified through campus services and the Registrar's Office as current or former foster youth. Participants vary in levels of their undergraduate career, from freshman to senior, and had either a direct path to the university from high school or came in as a transfer student from a community college.

2.2. Data collection

First, surveys were administered to former foster youth enrolled at the research university who use campus services associated with foster care, as well as to foster youth students identified through the campus Registrar's Office. Due to confidentiality requirements, the Registrar's Office sent out the survey link via email to all undergraduate students identified as having been in foster care. Participants who completed the survey gave their consent to participate anonymously in the research study and were fully informed of the voluntary nature and purpose of the study. The survey was constructed, in part, from the California Healthy Kids Survey (2014–2015) modules measuring resilience, equity, and social-emotional health. The survey explored the types of

activities, including academics, in which the students were involved during K-12 and the support they received, if any, to understand further the types of behaviors, events, or supports that took place, where those supports took place, and how the supports were executed.

Next, a sample of 11 students who took part in the survey and were willing to participate in an interview were contacted, as well as the adults they identified as having been important supports to their academic success. The interviews with students were conducted in person at the University in the campus Student Center. The interviews further explored the lived experiences of foster youth and their perceptions about preparing to attend college. These perceptions included behaviors such as resilience, academic and extracurricular involvement, motivation, and whether the supports they received had an impact in their preparation and decision to apply and enroll at a research university. The interviews also examined whether the students identified a supportive adult, the students' ability to contact the supportive adults they identified, their frequency of interaction, the quality of how these students perceived those interactions in terms of their academic success and pursuit of higher education, and if the adults are still important in their lives today.

The sample for supportive adults and staff who participated in subsequent interviews came from the former foster youth interview participants who identified one or more key persons involved in their academic success. Nine adults were identified and interviewed via phone based on the information from the student interviews. These adults are different from traditional mentors and mentor-based programs in that the relationships between adults and youth were naturally developed through the experiences and environments that were already inherently available and not through a structured and explicit creation of a mentor relationship. The supportive adults included K-12 teachers, foster parents, athletic coaches, and other individuals who were acknowledged as being important to these foster youths' persistence to higher education.

2.3. Survey sample

Out of 247 surveys that were distributed, 57 students participated. Due to students' anonymity, increased participation could not be encouraged as all student email addresses were kept with the Registrar's Office. The sample was composed primarily of female students (81%) between the ages of 18–21 years old (72%). The percentage of females involved in the study varied significantly from the overall foster youth population at the university, where approximately 44% are males and 56% are female. Next, the class standing among the participants was almost evenly distributed, and the number of transfer students (32%) who participated in the survey is similar to the overall number of former foster youth on campus who transferred from a community college (28%). In addition, only 26% of the survey sample had ever been adopted, meaning the majority of participants were in out-of-home care throughout their high school experience. In addition, none of the student interview participants were adopted.

The survey data also showed that almost half of the students (49%) left their out-of-home placements between the ages of 17–18, similar to the overall numbers of youth exiting foster care after they turn 18 and leave high school. These data speak to the literature, which shows that young adults leaving care at age 18 are more likely to report being homeless and unemployed than others their age or children who attained permanence. Interestingly, though the statistics remain similar, the data in this study come from students who did find success after they left care. The interview data will examine what made the difference for these youth.

2.4. Interview sample

Table 1 presents the demographic makeup of the responding student interview sample. Although demographic data alone does not answer

the research questions, it does provide depth to the qualitative data collected. In first recruiting these interview participants, they noted how glad they were to help further this research around foster youth. Their immediate willingness could suggest that the participants are in a place emotionally and mentally where they were comfortable enough with their past experiences to be very open and candid about their life stories.

Finally, interviews were conducted with the adults who former foster youth participants identified as having been important influences on their academic success. The interviews were designed to explore what the professionals who work with this population feel are the qualities, circumstances, or decisions that need to be in place to lead to successful academic outcomes and higher education as well as their role in supporting those outcomes.

3. Results

3.1. Survey findings

This study uses the survey data to draw comparisons between the larger population of former foster youth on the university campus and those students who were interviewed in order to gain an understanding of how widespread various traits and experiences are among the population. Through analysis of the survey data, the sampled population of former foster youth believe they were well supported by their schools overall, held a notion of responsibility for achieving academically, and participated in positive activities throughout high school. There is also evidence in the survey data that there were certain protective factors in place for academically successful foster youth, including relying on a network of caring adults to create positive environments in which students could excel.

Fifty-one students (89%) reported that they were connected to an adult supporter while in high school providing the data for a starting point in understanding the supportive relationships in the lives of foster youth within the university. The number of survey respondents who experienced adult support is rare compared to the larger national and state populations of foster youth who exit care without receiving adequate support (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). Though a small set of data, the information begins to show the important influence that care has in the lives of foster youth who are and have been academically successful.

Former foster youth at the university also had positive feelings about their high school environment and were held to high expectations by their peers and teachers. In further exploring the creation and influence of positive environments during high school brought up through the survey data, there was a main through line connecting the social-emotional and academic environments at play in the lives of former foster youth and their resulting academic achievement and persistence. The remainder of this study will focus on the development of these environments through an analysis of interview data.

3.2. Interview findings

In an overview of the major interview findings, four significant themes emerged. First, the interview data reveal that adults perceive intrinsic characteristics as being the reason for student's academic success and enrollment at a university. As the students themselves noted, they have always had a love of learning and most (nine) were competitively successful in their high school careers. Intrinsic characteristics related to educational resilience and academic success include intelligence, being goal-oriented and disciplined, and having high academic aspirations. All 11 student participants exhibited these traits in the stories they tell of their experiences in high school. Resilience, fortitude, and tenacity were all common traits identified by adults. The academic performance and determination to succeed described by students and their supporters point to the fact that this sample of former

Table 1
Student interview participant demographics.

Participant (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Race/ethnicity	Years in out of home placement	Total # of placements	Number of high schools attended	Transfer student	Weighted high school GPA
Mayra	Female	23	Latino	14	1	1	Yes	3.0–3.4
Dana	Female	19	African-American/White	11	3	1	No	4.0 +
Monica	Female	20	White	9	3	1	No	3.5–3.9
Amy	Female	20	African-American/White	7	2	1	No	4.0 +
Justin	Male	18	African-American	7	1	1	No	4.0 +
Brooke	Female	21	African-American	4	1	1	No	3.5–3.9
Rachel	Female	18	Latino	4	3	2	No	4.0 +
Jean	Female	18	Asian/Pacific Islander	3	1	1	No	4.0 +
Andrea	Female	21	Latino/White	2	2	1	No	4.0 +
Anthony	Male	18	Latino	1	1	2	No	3.5–3.9
Tracy	Female	22	Latino/White	1	1	3	Yes	3.0–3.4

foster youth are exhibiting a combination of being educationally resilient and inherently gifted students who achieve naturally in school.

Second, the interview data reveal that students' motivation for academic success sometimes comes from seemingly negative spaces. Resistance was an important aspect of students' lives that advanced their academic achievement and college aspirations as they found ways to resist their environments, prove people wrong, and avoid ending up like their biological parents. The theory of resistance was not a domain covered by the survey or interviews conducted for this research. However, students repeatedly spoke of resistance as a way to achieve academically and overcome life challenges.

Though not much research has been conducted with respect to this theory, resistance places a student's motive for academic success within the context of how he/she views his/her life and those in it. Tara Yosso's work builds on the theory of resistance by including one's need to prove certain people wrong, arguing that students are motivated by the idea that individual change is possible and are driven to navigate the educational system both for themselves and for or because of others (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Resistance theory in this study is strongly related to resilience as a response to challenging one's own personal circumstances. The stories of the students in this study reveal how the negative experiences of abuse and homelessness, loss of biological parents, and tumultuous home environments, prior to and throughout their time in out-of-home placement, affected their academic success. Students felt they had little control over the circumstances that led to their placement in foster care or the aftermath of those events and, as a result, used school and the pursuit of college as a way to get out of whatever situations in which they were placed. Consequently, 10 of the 11 students discussed using their past experiences in foster care as motivation and aspiration to attend college.

In a similar regard, students wanted to feel they could change their future prospects and the future of the families they had yet to create. The foster youth interviewed remembered instances where they were unsure of what was going to happen to them, creating a desire to change their outcomes so their children would not worry about the things they worried about, such as where they would live, whether they would have food to eat, or if they would continue to live in an abusive home environment. Although each student envisioned different dreams and ideas of success, they all spoke of creating an opportunity to live a life different from the one they experienced growing up. Their drive for being successful in high school was based on their commitment to breaking the cycle of hopelessness they and their families had endured.

For some students, the determination to be different was directed towards a particular parent. As biological parents were continuously absent and unaware of their children's endeavors, students expressed a sense of anger and spite, further fueling their motivation to accomplish their dreams. The determination to be different and change the course

of their future is crucial to resilient behavior among foster youth, even for those who took an alternate route to higher education. Mayra described how her motivation came while she was struggling in community college:

> I really hit rock bottom, where my grades were really bad, I needed a job, I had no money, I wasn't getting financial aid, I got kicked out. It was just bad until I realized, like what am I doing with my life. I'm becoming my mom, I'm becoming my dad…the parents I didn't want to become. They're supposed to be the example and I was becoming that person and that was when I hit a rock bottom and I was just like, alright I gotta change, I gotta do something about this and so I did…I wouldn't wish [to be in foster care] but I'm grateful that I went through it because I don't think I'd be here if I didn't go through the foster care system. It changed the way I look at life.

The influence of Mayra's biological parents was strong enough that even though she was not at the top of her class in high school and unsuccessful during her first 2 years of community college, she was determined to counter the series of negative life circumstances she and her family had experienced.

The third finding in the interview data reveal that organizations and extracurricular programs provided protective structures to support growth and academic success and helped to boost self-esteem. Andrea in particular attributed her success to both sports and church, not because they provided direct academic support, but because they became an outlet and a means to expel negative energy. When she would run, she explained, "It helped me physically to not be a violent mess." The survey data support the assertion that extracurricular involvement provides positive outlets and methods for coping with stress. Survey participants (47%) also reported the use of outside activities as a means to persist through the stressful times they faced during high school. The healthy behaviors in which this sample participated highlight students' positive responses to their circumstances and their ability to seek resources that may have a constructive impact on their overall well-being.

Ten of 11 students interviewed saw school and the clubs and organizations it offered, as well as outside leadership and church-based programs, as positive distractions from their home lives. The participants were involved in multiple activities during high school and community college including sports, theater, business leadership, internships, church, college prep programs, community service, and even literature and writing. As these students struggled to receive adequate support both financially and emotionally while maintaining balance in their academic lives, they sought activities that filled a need for a safe place to express themselves, which ultimately enhanced their high school experiences. Students revealed that the activities in which they participated in during high school were not just hobbies or to appear better on college applications; rather, they needed them to connect to a

support system and pursue something that was productive and took them away from the sadness and grief they experienced at home.

Lastly, the student and adult interview data reveal that adult supporters fill the need for guidance, emotional support, and stability. All 11 student participants identified relatives, teachers, parents of friends, and adults from outside organizations as people who expected them to do well academically and ultimately provided a safe place to tackle their individual emotional traumas and help them prepare further for college. The adults in this study presented a humbled perspective of their contribution to the students' academic success and persistence. Though many (seven) did not see their role as unique, their willingness to act in times of need was life-changing for this group of former foster youth. As such, developing a relationship with a caring adult was an effective method for this group of students in supporting their efforts to attend a top-tier university. Though the students interviewed exhibited educational resilience, were it not for these adult supports, every student believed his/her path to college, at least in part, would have been different.

Amy expressed those same feelings as she describes how important her Sunday school teacher became:

> [David] was someone that I felt close to as a father figure or who felt close to a father figure. He helped me get closure, make sense of things that were going on at home and dealing with that and school and taking care of my little cousin. The ways that I experienced a love that I haven't experienced before, that helped me get through. And the principle of having peace in the midst of storms really helped me as well academically. If I didn't have peace, I wouldn't be able to focus on assignments.

Through their consistent presence and guidance, the adults offered these youth a sense that someone cared and would always be there as they needed them. Tania, a college counselor, who works with the foster care population and with Mayra specifically, spoke of the importance of providing stability. She explained that foster youth need someone to be consistent with them, just by the nature of their circumstances of being removed from their homes. Tania stated, "In the beginning [foster youth] are testing you. They are testing to see if you are going to fail them, if you are going to disappear." Knowing she was a big support for many foster youth at the community college level, Tania made a conscious effort to not push students out even as they made mistakes. The importance of consistency was brought up several times by students as well. When asked about the characteristics that foster youth need in high school to fulfill their academic goals, Dana turned to the role of adults and spoke of her insecurities and fear of abandonment:

> I don't mind moving but I need people to be consistent. Whether I live in California, Alabama, Mississippi, when I call I need you to answer the phone. A large part of it, especially after my first move, I need for you to keep me. I need for you to not get tired of me so I'm going to do really well, I promise. And you're not gonna get rid of me. Even now logically my mind knows [my aunt and uncle are] not gonna get rid of me. The illogical part of me is like, I still need to do well because I need [my aunt and uncle] to be proud of me.

It is apparent that meaningful and consistent involvement was important for developing educational resilience among these students. Meaningful involvement was also expressed through holding high expectations of students. Most students in the study (six) spoke of having a positive high school experience, where there was a strong college-going culture and teachers and counselors believed in their students, which aided in their academic achievement and college aspirations. As Brooke noted, "I honestly feel like my teachers and counselors, they had higher expectations for me than I did of myself." The expectations set forth by school personnel created an environment for Brooke and other students like her to strive for excellence in their education.

A positive academic environment encouraged high achievement among the students interviewed, though not all described school or family environment as being the reason. Tracy's motivation for performing well in school came from a need to change the way she felt about herself. Tracy expressed, "It makes me feel good to get A's. I guess it's like esteem-able acts…when I do this I feel good about myself. And that's one of my main ways for knowing how to feel good about myself." The small, manageable academic behaviors over which Tracy had control changed her academic environment and thus changed the way she looked at herself and her life trajectory. As Tracy struggled with drugs and homelessness after dropping out of high school, the one consistent factor in her life, she remembers, were her books. Tracy's academic focus and need to repair her self-esteem kept her from staying in a damaging environment and helped her pursue more positive goals.

Yvette was another adult supporter who recognized the importance of having a strong academic environment. Yvette pointed out that her niece Dana, who she calls her daughter, grew up in a stable two-parent household, had positive role models all around her who were well educated and affluent, and was told at a young age that college was the only option for her. Yvette made sure that even before high school Dana was thinking about a career path and researching universities so she knew the eligibility requirements and could go into high school with the knowledge she needed to succeed. When asked what influenced her academic success, Dana remembered, "Just the solid expectation. Like you're going to do this and you're going to do well. And if you're not going to do well we're disappointed because we know you can do well."

Furthering the idea that these students made it to college because of their hard work and inherent intellect, the adult supporters exhibited a sense of selflessness and humility as they described the various ways they provided support for these foster youth. As some adult supporters did what they believe anyone in their position would do, their presence, whether intentionally tailored to the unique experiences of being in foster care or not, became life-changing for these students.

4. Discussion

The findings from this study confirm an important connection between academic resilience and care; that when students who are considered vulnerable, especially those with involvement in the foster care system, are facing challenges, those challenges have to be met by a collective solution. Without the expected guidance and support of a parent, these students expressed having low self-esteem and bouts of depression. Though protective factors can develop from various influences, involvement in activities coupled with emotionally responsive care from adults was critical to students' academic persistence. Even though most (seven) adults did not believe they did anything exceptional for these students, they were able to offer "normal" everyday experiences that were free of the typical sadness, instability, and loneliness the students expressed feeling. It makes sense then that the adults could not see the importance of their care; what may be common actions to the adults in this study, things that anyone would do for another person, were transformative to the students who had come from a place of grief and anger due to the trauma they experienced.

Laursen and Birmingham's (2003) study of how unprotected youth perceive the care of adults, found that when challenging experiences outweigh a student's protective environment, even academically successful students need support. The researchers further discovered several characteristics of caring adults that are important in the relationships of adult supporters and students in need. Some of these characteristics include: trust, attention, empathy, availability, and affirmation. Engaging in these acts can cause youth who are experiencing trauma and instability to feel important and worthy of others' time. These characteristics stress the behaviors that adult supporters exhibit for students who need support to remain resilient.

As the literature further explains, resilience is not permanently rooted in foster youth; life circumstances and the environments to which students are exposed greatly affect resilient behavior and

persistence (Hass & Graydon, 2008; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). If students cannot independently maintain educational resilience long enough to achieve their academic goals, it is likely that the effort and care put forth by others are essential to sustain resilience (Hines et al., 2005; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Joan Tronto (1993) defined caring as follows:

> On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining, web (p. 103).

By examining the concept of care in terms of the basic need it fills to sustain and support the environments in which we live, we can begin to understand how and why individuals engage in these productive activities as protection from harm. Similar to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, people must first have their physiological needs met in order to then move on to more complex needs such as self-esteem, love, and sense of belonging, which for these students are manifested in their pursuit of higher education (Engster, 2005; Onyehalu, 1983; Tronto, 1993).

As seen in this study, when physiological and social needs are not met, even the most intelligent, motivated, and resilient student can suffer emotional pain that may act as a barrier to educational resilience and persistence. The impact can be dramatic when these students are exposed to support and others' belief in their abilities and self-worth. A significant finding in this study is that every student participant reported feeling confident about their intellectual abilities and their love of learning, but still expressed the heavy emotional challenges they faced were barriers to persistence in high school.

With the understanding of the impact of resilience and care on vulnerable students, policymakers and practitioners need to be more aware of adopting a holistic approach to servicing the needs of foster youth. For youth who do not feel they are more academically inclined, or who do not have a person to turn to, the results can look vastly different. The following recommendations can prove valuable in increasing academic achievement and positive outcomes for foster youth:

First is to ensure that foster youth are connected to a caring adult supporter at school. As a result of experiencing emotional and physical instability, foster youth may become disconnected from healthy and supportive relationships that may aid in their academic success and emotional protection. Positive relationships with an adult can stimulate students' belief in themselves and the desire to change their academic outcomes, resulting in a stronger academically resilient student. Counselors can engage foster youth to identify a supportive adult at their school site, such as an academic or foster youth counselor, peer mentor, or teacher if one is not already present.

Second is to establish a college-going culture within schools. Through extensive support services and making a commitment to increase retention and graduation, schools will be creating access to more opportunities. Foster youth should be provided with dedicated academic advising with an emphasis on college and career paths, and social development opportunities that may be offered through school's extracurricular activities. Engaging students, even at an early age, in a mutual educational plan and supporting the transition to higher academic achievement, is important for guiding their decision-making process.

Third, is to ensure that school leadership, teachers, and counselors are supported and trained in maintaining high academic expectations of their students. Many students in foster care are not always shown encouragement or an explicit belief in their academic abilities. As students' aspirations are significantly shaped by the involvement and expectations of adults in their lives, academic self-perception and ultimately educational attainment are directly impacted. Professional development opportunities should be made available for school administration, staff, and faculty on how explicit perception of high expectations among other social and academic environments are linked to positive academic outcomes despite the perceived ability of a student.

4.1. Conclusion and implications for future research

Despite its limitations, a great deal can be learned from the experiences of the students in this study and how educational outcomes for vulnerable students may be impacted. Especially important to consider are how the implications of this study can reach any student considered vulnerable, whether in foster care or not. An explicit leaning towards the development of resilience was key in this study as it explained how students grasped on to the ideas of persistence and overcoming barriers. Researchers and practitioners however, should be careful not to over rely on theories such as grit and resilience for solutions that are unfair burdens to place on any student, particularly for populations of students who are experiencing structural and social inequities.

Yet as this study identified the protective factors in place that allowed foster youth to aspire to postsecondary education, the next step is to consider more fully how success is impacted by social and systemic conditions. As described throughout, gaining social capital became an asset that was key to navigating life challenges and was an important indicator for academic achievement. The social-emotional and academic needs of students in care are not currently being met in ways that would encourage greater achievement among this larger population. As such, service delivery is highly implicated in how foster youth move through and experience the foster care and school systems.

Additionally, not discussed in this study are the ethnic and racial implications of the population. The majority of the survey respondents in this study were either Latino or African-American/Black (80%), including those who identify with more than one of those races. The students interviewed reflected those numbers, with 10 out of 11 students identifying as non-White. As African-American/Black youth and other students of color are disproportionately represented in the foster care system, they also experience fewer opportunities for permanent placements, have a higher chance of becoming vulnerable to violence and drugs based on their placement options, are more likely to be enrolled in the lowest-performing schools, and have fewer educational services provided (Armstrong, Gunderson, & Mecca, 2005; Bass, 2012; Foster et al., 2011; Wiegmann et al., 2014). Individual protective factors may also shift with the changes in students' social environments or the cultural context in which they exist. Research then should move beyond studying anomalies through isolation of the risk and protective factors among highly successful foster youth. Future research can be expanded to understand how social structures, including race and ethnicity, influence a students' relationship to their environment and consequently impact their academic behavior and decision-making. In a broader sense, structuralism and theories about race and racial constructs can be used as a lens to examine elements of foster care and educational achievement in terms of their connection to higher, overarching structures. Using these frameworks, efforts to understand social phenomena can be viewed in terms of factors external to the student and their impact on educational resilience.

There is also limited research on adult supporters in the lives of vulnerable students. Key areas of focus could include the examination of adults' care and support in the context of particular external circumstances and opportunities, personal attributes such as altruism that may point to a predisposition to act selflessly on behalf of others, and their backgrounds and upbringing that may suggest their behaviors and feelings towards caring for others were learned (Oliner & Oliner, 1988).

The recommendations and implications for future research advocate for a change in strategy and call for proper understanding of the issues foster youth and other vulnerable populations of students face.

Research ethics

All research on participants in this study has been approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). As such, all participants involved gave their informed consent that acknowledged the participants' rights during data collection and protected participants' privacy. Each participant and the individuals named in their interviews have been given a pseudonym to provide anonymity.

Though confidentiality was ensured during the survey and interviews, and participation in both was voluntary, I addressed the possible difficulties students may have had in the process. To further protect students from any harm that may have resulted from participation in the survey and/or interview, the informed consent form fully explained the purpose of the study, the methods, and the context of the questions. The protocols were also submitted to campus services who work directly with foster youth for approval before administering. Furthermore, I made available a list of resources that students can access if they would like ongoing support following participation in the study.

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