Defining Success: Reconsidering a Successful Transition into Adulthood for Ethnic Minority Former Foster Youth

Benjamin T. Bencomo
benjaminbencomo@yahoo.com

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Defining Success: Reconsidering a Successful Transition into Adulthood for Ethnic Minority Former Foster Youth.

by

Benjamin Thomas Bencomo

A Banded Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Social Work

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Abstract

The following banded dissertation is comprised of three separate products that together provide a complete exploration of the dominant markers of success for former foster youth as they transition into adulthood. This banded dissertation reveals how those markers may not be adequate when applied to ethnically diverse members of this vulnerable population. The first product is a conceptual manuscript that provides an overall theoretical and contextual orientation from which to examine these concerns, namely a sociocultural and situational framework. The second product details findings from a thematic analysis of eight semi-structured individual interviews with youth who had recently emancipated from foster care. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was employed to analyze major themes presented by interviewees. Major themes identified through the analysis included: education, family and other informal supports and obligations, community, and financial struggles/employment. The third product contained within this banded dissertation is a summary of an oral presentation given at the Council on Social Work Education’s 64th Annual Program Meeting, entitled *Expanding Interprofessional Education to Achieve Social Justice*, a national peer-reviewed conference for social work educators and practitioners. At this presentation both appraisals of success for former foster youth as they transition into adulthood, as well as social work education’s place in more appropriately serving this subpopulation were discussed.

**Keywords:** youth, foster care, aging out, emancipation, ethnicity, culture, ethnic minority, diversity, identity development, transition, adulthood, higher education, sociocultural, situative
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¡Primeramente Dios! Thank you God, for allowing me the blessing of realizing this dream. Thank you for the gifts and talents necessary for completion of this work, but especially thank you for surrounding me with the people that have supported and encouraged me and without whom I would have been unable to complete this journey.

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Dedication

I dedicate this banded dissertation first to my babies. Amiyah, Benjamin, and Mireya, you three are my reason for living and my greatest joy. You inspire me and make me so proud to be your dad daily. Please know that you are each amazing and gifted and talented in so many ways! I know that there is nothing that you cannot accomplish in this life. I cannot wait to see what life has in store for each of you and I am excited to see how much better you will make this world. Secondly, I dedicate this banded dissertation to the amazing foster youth I have known and to all of those that I haven’t. Your resiliency and strength astounds me and I hope that we can continue to do better for you all.
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Defining Success: Reconsidering a Successful Transition into Adulthood for Ethnic Minority Former Foster Youth.

Much of social work research and practice, in regard to working with adolescents and young adults, has involved a fostering of a “successful transition” from adolescence into adulthood. Collectively, we have invested immeasurable time, energy, and heart into supporting and sustaining youth as they make this transition into becoming successful adults. However, what have we traditionally referred to as the measure of success for these young people? Have we used our own experiences during this stage of life to gauge their level of independence, or perhaps have we used societal understanding and standards to quantify success? The following banded dissertation explores these questions with ethnic minority former foster youth, a marginalized population who has obtained little success using traditional measures of successful transition due to the struggles they experience related to their social positionality and multiple experiences of oppression.

As a society, we have an internalized view of what constitutes a successful transition into adulthood, much of which is rooted in a Euro-western tradition (Pao, 2017). For many educators and social work practitioners, these measures include a youth’s ability to differentiate themselves from their family of origin, live independently, maintain stable housing, obtain employment (Naccarato, DeLorenzo, & Park, 2008), and achieve success in secondary and postsecondary education settings (Zuberi, 2011). These measures have widely become the aspirational goals for which transitional services for former foster youth have been designed.

When utilizing these traditional measures for successful transition, youth aging out of foster care succeed at dismal rates. Recent estimates paint an alarming picture of former foster
youth rates in regard to homelessness. Nearly twenty percent of foster youth become immediately homeless upon emancipation (National Foster Youth Initiative, 2017) and approximately one half will become homeless within eighteen months of aging out (O’Neal, 2015). Furthermore, former foster youth who experience homelessness within three years of aging out are much more likely to struggle with maintaining employment and continuing their education (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018).

A second widely accepted traditional measure of successful transition into adulthood centers around educational attainment. Former foster youth remain among the lowest subgroups to obtain a high school diploma or GED, few pursue education afterwards, and even fewer reach completion of a higher education degree (Snow, 2009). Although several federal and state initiatives and programs have been developed to assist former foster youth to continue their education, their graduation rates continue to lag far behind their peers who did not age out of foster care (Dworskly, 2018).

Another marginalized subgrouping of youth who struggle with successfully transitioning into adulthood using these normative markers of success, are ethnic minority youth. Ethnic minority children and youth enter and exit the child welfare system at disproportionately high rates (Shaw, Putman-Hornstein, Magruder, & Needell, 2008). Hispanic youth, an overly represented minority group among foster youth, are less likely to continue their education past the secondary level and have lower English proficiency rates (Vaquera, 2008). Hispanic youth also report struggling with navigating the dual realities of family dynamics, including the culturally prescribed roles and responsibilities within their family of origin, and successfully achieving autonomy during this transition (Basáñez, Dennis, Crano, Stacy, & Unger, 2014).
Indigenous youth also continue to remain disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. This is despite the enactment of the Indian Child Welfare Act nearly forty years ago (Scannapieco, & Iannone, 2012). Indigenous youth continue to struggle with higher behavioral health needs and lower educational attainment (Luna-Firebaugh & Tippeconnic Fox, 2014). Many Indigenous belief systems also counter traditional thought processes related to individuation as a marker of success as many traditional communities value interdependence and mutual support above the Western concept of independence (Long, Downs, Gillette, Kills in Sight, & Iron-Cloud Konen, 2006).

A third minority group largely overrepresented in child welfare systems across the country is African American youth. Many African American youth struggle as they must face institutionalized racism present within the primary, secondary, and higher education systems (Bracey, 2017). Many must also overcome barriers presented to successful adult transition in the form of lower socioeconomic status, internalized racism and hopelessness, and other mental health concerns (Goldston, Molock, Whitbeck, Murakami, Zayas, & Hall, 2008). Family closeness and mutual support into adulthood is also common among many African American families (Lei and South, 2016).

Ethnic minority youth who age out of foster care experience conflicting influences and expectations, which compound the barriers to success from a traditional viewpoint. For these young people, transition into adulthood can become a grueling endeavor. Most begin at a severely disadvantaged state and many become overwhelmed with the dual realities they must contend with. This banded dissertation explores these matters and furthers the conversation regarding how we describe, define, and quantify success among this vulnerable population.
Conceptual Framework

Social work educators and practitioners often speak of the importance of supporting clients throughout their lifespan as they navigate the complexities inherent in life stage transitions. Within the profession, it is generally agreed upon that the life stage transition of adolescence to adulthood involves successful identity development and individuation from the adolescent’s family of origin. As a profession, many in social work also speak to the value of diversity in professional practice with individuals, groups, families, and communities (NASW, 2017). However, missing from the discussion is where these two norms of professional social work practice and education converge. In this dissertation, I contend that the profession has not fully honored diversity of client experience nor culture and ethnicity in defining a successful transition into adulthood.

Therefore, this dissertation is grounded in a decidedly sociocultural pedagogical orientation and informed by situational learning theory. Sociocultural theory was first proposed and developed by Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist who began to see how the influences of people in the environment effected the internalized representations of reality that his clients created. He became increasingly interested in the influences of social interactions in shaping the learning of young children and developed sociocultural theory as an alternative to behavior theory which was gaining prominence at the time (Marginson & Dang, 2017). Sociocultural theory maintains that learning and growth cannot take place devoid of environmental influence (Murphy & Ivanson, 2003). As applied to this banded dissertation, a one size fits all orientation to examining success across the board for all youth in the transition stage lacks accuracy in examining the totality of experience for these young people.
Further, sociocultural theory provides a context for which cultural divergence to traditional developmental models can be explored (Tabak & Weinstock, 2008). Therefore, before beginning to quantify success in this life stage for minority youth aging out of foster care, we should begin by looking not only at their struggles relative to their experiences as foster youth, but also honor and explore what successful transition into adulthood looks like for someone from their ethnic, racial, cultural, and community context.

In order to fully account for diversity among each youth, we must also honor and support the inherent difficulties of their experiences that led to their becoming involved in the child welfare system, as well as those that resulted from this involvement. Consequently, a situational learning theory lens also informs this banded dissertation. Situational learning theory maintains that any learning, in this case learning to navigate the transition from foster care into adulthood, cannot take place devoid of the environmental realities present when the learning takes place (Järvenoja, Järvelä, & Malmber, 2015). Situational learning theory further explains the interpretation of new experiences as highly influenced by the ontological perspective of the learner (Turner & Nolen, 2015). For former foster youth, any expectation of successfully transitioning into adulthood must account for limited supports (Hegar & Scannapieco, 2017), elevated behavioral health needs (Gabrielli, Jackson, & Brown, 2015), and other difficulties they undergo related to their traumatic experiences (Steenbakkers, Ellingsen, Van der Steen, & Grietens, 2018).

Through this grounding in sociocultural theory and through the examination of learning informed by situational learning theory, we begin to see a more accurate picture of the needs of ethnic minority former foster youth. This conceptual framework encourages an examination the
individual needs of each youth from a cultural context, allowing for services that have proven effective for supporting former foster youth in general. We are provided with an expansion of understanding with which to more accurately assess the privations of this vulnerable population and enhance our measures of successful transition. This, in turn, will encourage an investment in their own success with which former foster youth can feel more accurately understood and supported, thus enhancing their ability to define their own success as adults.

**Summary of Banded Dissertation Products**

The three products of this banded dissertation represent a comprehensive exploration of the needs of ethnic minority foster youth as they transition from foster care into independence, through three distinct scholarship endeavors. Although all three products involve distinct processes, all share the ultimate goal of understanding the unique realities of this subset of vulnerable youth.

Product one is a conceptual manuscript exploring the literature relative to the needs of both former foster youth and ethnic minority youth that provides an overarching framework for honoring the totality of needs for these young people. A sociocultural and situational lens is applied to interpret and examine existing literature related to the needs of both former foster youth and ethnic minority youth as they navigate the transition into adulthood. Through this in-depth theoretical exploration, the totality of identity for this marginalized population becomes more pronounced. Also offered are recommendations for honoring the complex needs of youth as both former foster youth and as ethnic minority youth as they navigate emancipation.

Product two is a qualitative research article that is informed through in depth semi-structured interviews with eight youth who have aged out of foster care in the state of New
Mexico, seven of whom self-identified as ethnic minority youth. Youth interviewed were asked to discuss what their experiences in foster care were like, what their current struggles are, and what they are focused on at this point in their life. A qualitative analysis, specifically a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, is then utilized to gain a clearer picture of the lived experiences and everyday realities of these young people. Through the data analysis process, four main themes emerged as central concerns of these former foster youth. These themes included; education, family and other informal supports, community, and financial struggles/employment.

Product three is a summary of an oral presentation that was presented on November 10, 2018 at the Council of Social Work Education’s 64th Annual Program Meeting in Orlando, FL, a national peer reviewed conference for social work educators. This oral presentation was delivered to social work educators and at least one current social work practitioner working with foster youth. In the presentation itself, the findings and recommendations of the first two products were delivered, and ideas for how social work educators can partner with practitioners to better serve ethnic minority current and former foster youth were discussed. Informal feedback from attendees of the oral presentation was all positive and spoke to the need for continued efforts to serve this vulnerable subpopulation.

**Discussion**

Through this banded dissertation I provide a rationale for further examination of the needs of former foster youth, particularly the overrepresented population of ethnic minority former foster youth, as they transition from foster care into adulthood. While services provided to foster care alumni have proven efficacious at increasing success rates, this subpopulation
continues to fare much worse than their peers on traditional measures of a successful transition. Several of the youth involved in the research component of this banded dissertation spoke of the gratitude that they felt for services provided to them by state child welfare youth services social workers and the various financial supports that they received from federal and state initiatives. However, some also spoke of the complexities involved in achieving and maintaining success via mainstream avenues to realization of adulthood presented to them given their unique situational and cultural realities. Others spoke of how their traditional cultural belief systems were incongruent with the dominant ideals of successful transition into adulthood.

The conceptual paper helps to ground this banded dissertation providing readers with a theoretical framework from which to explore the unique needs of this subpopulation, specifically a sociocultural and situational orientation. Product one provides a comprehensive review and assessment of the literature surrounding the multiple needs of current and former foster youth, as well as the complexity of reality for ethnic minority youth as they transition into adulthood. The manuscript then provides a theoretical model for honoring the complexity of experience for the many youth who are members of both populations and recommendations for serving the complex identities of these young people. This component of the banded dissertation also, however, speaks to the need for continued exploration of these and similar topics.

The second product, a qualitative research article, provides the research component of this banded dissertation. The results of this research endeavor offer a unique snapshot of the lived reality of ethnic minority youth who have recently aged out of state foster care. The analysis of main themes discussed by interviewees supports current federal, state, and private initiatives to assist this vulnerable group (Ungar, Liebenberg, & Ikeda, 2014), while also giving
credence to the need to expand our perspective of quantifying a successful transition into adulthood, particularly among ethnically and culturally diverse former foster youth.

The work from the conceptual manuscript and the qualitative research endeavor formed the basis for one oral presentation that was delivered at a national peer reviewed conference attended by social work educators and practitioners in the fall of 2018. The feedback received from attendees of the presentation further supported the need to expand our considerations of measuring success among ethnic minority former foster youth and the need to continue to explore the unique needs of this vulnerable subpopulation.

**Implications for Social Work Education and Practice**

As social work educators and practitioners we are bound to an ethical code that provides a framework for our profession. This code encourages us to provide social work services from a person-centered, strengths based, holistic practice model, while honoring diversity and the influence of the environment at all levels (NASW, 2017). These guiding principles ensure that social work education and practice remain true to the ideals of the profession. Thus, any efforts to understand and serve ethnic minority foster care alum must include an individualized plan of care that serves the particularized needs of each young person and must take into account the multiple facets that make each youth unique. This will be crucial for helping to close the achievement gap between ethnic minority former foster youth and their peers.

The conceptual model proposed in this banded dissertation can provide an overall framework from which social work practitioners and educators can begin to more accurately determine the needs of this vulnerable subpopulation. For members of the social work academe, the education provided to students on the needs of children and youth before, during, and after
foster care must begin to include a focused discussion on child welfare practice that incorporates a healthy degree of cultural humility. Students must begin the discussion of how to honor the diverse experience of each child and youth in foster care that they will serve, including how their ethnic, racial, and cultural background will support or hinder their realization of success using traditional standards. Social work educators must also encourage open minded social work practice that allows for an expansion of more culturally appropriate markers of success as these young people transition into adulthood.

Another implication for social work educators relates to scholarly pursuits and program development to better serve those ethnic minority former foster youth who chose to pursue education at our home institutions. Numerous former foster youth are already present on college campuses and online learning communities, many of whom may presently be sitting in our social work classrooms (Okpych, 2012). Social work colleges, schools, and departments on college campuses can and should become a hub of support for former foster youth and assist them as they attempt to navigate their own higher education pursuits. These structured supports on college campuses can be instrumental in fostering success for those foster care alumni who chose this path (Unrau, Dawson, Hamilton, & Bennett, 2017).

Implications for Future Research

While this banded dissertation provides a clearer picture of the complexities inherent in the transition from foster care to adulthood for ethnic minority former foster youth, additional research is warranted to fully investigate the efficacy of the concepts proposed. Although a focused effort to explore the intersecting needs of ethnic minority and former foster youth was undertaken, services that honor these dual realities remain undeveloped and untested. Other
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limitations of this banded dissertation involve the small sample size of respondents interviewed as well as the localized sampling of ethnic minority former foster youth from just one state, which is a largely rural and minority majority state where Hispanic and Indigenous youth represent the majority of young people. Consequently, any generalization of findings from this qualitative research cannot be made given these limitations.

Continued scholarship is indicated to determine if the results of this qualitative research endeavor are replicated with a larger sample, as well as with youth from other minority communities. Mixed methods research in particular, may be useful to more clearly quantify the overarching needs and concerns of ethnic minority youth in foster care and those that have already emancipated from care. Such research outcomes would help to guide not only current child welfare practitioners who work with these young people, but could also inform program development in the years to come. Only through a concerted effort to address the needs of these vulnerable young people can social work educators and practitioners truly help them to realize success as they transition into adulthood.
Comprehensive Reference List


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Sociocultural and Situational Factors Affecting Foster Youth’s Transition into Higher Education

Benjamin T. Bencomo

Author Note

The author currently serves as a Visiting Professor in the Facundo Valdez School of Social Work at New Mexico Highlands University. Correspondence should be addressed to the author at the Facundo Valdez School of Social Work, New Mexico Highlands University, Box 9000, Las Vegas, NM, 87701. Phone: (505)454-3346. Email: bbencomo@nmhu.edu.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that the author has no conflict of interest.
Abstract
Youth who have aged out of state foster care have long exhibited poor success rates in higher education across the country. These alarming statistics have seen increased attention in social work. Several programs have developed to address this concern and support former foster youth as they make this transition. However, to date, cultural, ethnic, and geographical variances effecting this population have not been fully investigated. Although, in findings from previous studies, ethnic identity has been endorsed as a variable impacting success in higher education, in this conceptual paper, the author more closely examines cultural, ethnic, and situational factors using a sociocultural and situative lens. Through application of this perspective, social workers and other helping professionals are provided with concrete interventions and strategies that address cultural variance in a meaningful way and better support former foster youth in making this transition.

Keywords: youth, foster care, aging out, higher education, sociocultural, situative
Many young people experience difficulty in navigating the transition from adolescence into adulthood. Especially problematic can be the transition into postsecondary education settings if they chose to continue their education past high school or completion of their GED. This can involve not only a change in living situation, but also a shift in focus to a more independently driven orientation toward daily tasks. For youth who age out of foster care, although they may be accustomed to changing living situations, this new found level of freedom often comes with an array of conflicting emotions and uncertainty (Clemens, Helms, Myers, & Thomas, 2017). Although youth in foster care share similar desires to those of other adolescents related to stability and personal fulfillment (Harwick, Lindstron, & Unrah, 2017), many struggle with successfully navigating the passage into adulthood and particularly into postsecondary education.

Recent appraisals illustrate that only about 7 to 13% of youth aging out of foster care continue their education past high school (Casey Family Programs, 2010). When assessing the success rates of emancipated foster youth, researchers have estimated that anywhere from 3 to 11% of youth that do choose to attend college, will continue to completion of a bachelor’s degree by the age of 25 (Batsche, Hart, Oert, Armstrong, Strozier, & Hummer, 2014). For youth of color transitioning from foster care into higher education, those numbers are likely to be even lower (Lane, 2017). Cultural variances regarding higher education, as well as situational factors effecting minority youth, have not yet been fully examined in the research to date.

Poor success rates of youth aging out of foster care, in regard to higher education attainment, have been widely documented (Batsche, Hart, Ort, Armstrong, Strozier, & Hummer,
2014 and Harwick, Lindstron, & Unruh, 2017). However, lacking in the body of social work knowledge, are studies that employ a thorough examination of environmental factors contributing to barriers and supports for emancipated foster youth as they attempt this transition. Although comparisons have been made concerning success rates among ethnically diverse populations, the full measure of ethnic identity, as well as variances among different cultures pertaining to the value placed on higher education to begin with, have yet to be addressed.

The Euro-American higher education structure, and the history of oppressive practices and exclusion of people of color, has long plagued our higher education system in general (Tijerina & Deepak, 2014). These facts, coupled with postsecondary education’s storied history of serving as a means toward cultural extinguishment (Thompson, Johnson-Jennings, & Nitzarim, 2013), has led to an underrepresentation of ethnic minorities among college students nationwide. For youth aging out of foster care, whose higher education attainment has already been described as dismal at best, cultural variance and influence must be addressed by those in the helping professions.

In this conceptual paper a sociocultural and situative perspective will be applied to current research related to youth aging out of foster care. In doing so, social workers will be provided with a clearer picture of the day to day realities of youth aging out of state foster care systems. Sociocultural theory maintains that social interactions and environmental influences effect how a person interprets the challenges that they face in life and how they learn to navigate those challenges (Donato & McCormick, 1994). The situative perspective proposes that learning and growth cannot be separated from the context in which the learning is happening. This framework further explains learning as a function of a person’s interaction with outside stimuli and proposes that any skill development must understand reality as perceived by the learner.
The author will begin with an exploration of the complexities and variances among ethnic minority youth, in regard to higher education attainment, utilizing this conceptual framework. Any efforts to support youth aging out of foster care as they continue their education past high school and GED completion, require a thorough examination of the youth’s specific cultural and ethnic identity, and the situational factors affecting their daily lives. Through application of a sociocultural and situative perspective, social workers and other helping professionals will be better equipped to ensure a successful transition into higher education for former foster youth.

**Sociocultural Theory**

As social work educators and scholars we must remain true to the guiding principles of our profession. As described in our professional code of ethics, an environmental focus must guide our professional interventions, research, and publications (NASW, 2017). Through the application of a sociocultural and situative lens, a more detailed picture of the strengths, challenges, and needs of transition aged foster youth will develop. Of particular importance is how cultural and situational factors have been explored in regard to the influence they have had on youth aging out of foster care as they endeavor to further their education after completion of high school or a GED.

Sociocultural theory maintains that societal and environmental pressures directly affect the interpretation of meaning associated with life stressors (Donato & McCormick, 1994). Further, this approach views the learning process itself as a sequential activity that builds upon the interaction of the person in their historical context, as well as the cultural, institutional, and communicative influences surrounding them in the present (Lim & Renshaw, 2001). At the core of sociocultural theory is the notion that learning is not purely an internal development, but
rather is a result of responses to a series of social interactions over time (Fernandez, Mercer, Wegerif, & Rojas-Drummond, 2015).

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist and theorist, argued that central to learning and development are environmental influences on an individual. He suggested that learning does not occur simply as a result of cognitive development, but rather that true learning occurs as a result of cognitive processes that are reinforced through social interactions with others around them. (McLeod, 2014). He termed this circle of influence the Zone of Proximal Development, (ZPD) (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2008).

The ZPD refers to the space between what a person knows and what they have not yet learned. Vygotsky concluded that the influence of formal and informal educators and the social influences on a person are central to the learning process (Donato & Mccormick, 1994). Of paramount importance is the relationships that are built that either support or hinder the learning process of individuals. Former foster youth who are contemplating the decision to continue their education, do so while navigating the extreme complexities of such a transition. During this time, their relationships with their foster family, biological family, peers, their cultural community and larger societal influence serve as the catalyst for the construction of their ZPD (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2008).

Building upon this concept, sociocultural theory conceptualizes a process where the learner would be supported through a process of “scaffolding” (Lim & Renshaw, 2001). Scaffolding in this regard would mean that the learner would be supported to build a foundation of learning and then build layer upon layer of additional understanding to reach a higher level of comprehension. In order to best accomplish this, the learner must first identify the tasks to be completed and problem solve through the steps associated with learning. They must then be
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provided with support to allow them to set realistic and attainable goals for learning, and be provided with cognitive and emotional support as they progress through the stages of understanding (Fernandez, Mercer, Wegerif, & Rojas-Drummond, 2015). Programs designed to support former foster youth in higher education, would prove more efficacious if they recognize and incorporate a scaffolding approach in the framing of their overall design. This will allow the young person to build both their knowledge base and confidence in navigating the complexities involved in being successful in this endeavor.

Situative Perspective

A situational lens will allow for an examination of the literature looking at environmental influences faced by youth as they age out of foster care, and how their unique realities interplay with their ability to succeed in postsecondary education settings (Järvenoja, Järvelä, & Malmber, 2015). The situative perspective, as applied to learning, states that a person’s base beliefs and assumptions are dependent upon the influence of those in their immediate social surroundings (Turner & Nolan, 2015). Former foster youth are in a unique situation, in that they have experienced extreme changes in their primary support systems, and in many instances, their home environments have been disrupted several times.

Situational learning theory further states that the individual and their metacognitive abilities are a direct reflection of the context in which the individual is presently positioned (Moore, n.d); therefore, the design of programs serving youth aging out of foster care will be examined utilizing this lens. This combined perspective will form the framework from which the literature will be reviewed. Particular attention will be focused on the extent to which programmatic designs incorporate the environmental and cultural realities of youth as they

**Foster Youth Barriers to Success in Higher Education**

Children and youth in state foster care systems begin their educational careers in a disadvantaged state. Most have experienced trauma related to chaotic home environments (Mitchell, 2018). This, coupled with the trauma experienced as result of removal from home, can have long-term consequences on a youth’s cognitive processes and emotional regulation. Difficulty in appropriate processing of emotions and disruption in thinking patterns can negatively impact youth’s academic success for many years, if not for the rest of their lives (Bruce, Naccarato, Hopson, & Morelli, 2010). Furthermore, former foster youth are beset with limited formal and informal supports. Consequently, many exhibit difficulty reaching out for assistance (Curry & Abrams, 2015).

Although many youth have an arduous time competing in institutions of higher learning, several of their academic problems began while still in a secondary education setting (Pecora, Kessler, Hiripi, O’Brian, Emerson, Herrick & Torres, 2006). Throughout their school aged years, many youth experience multiple foster home placements, which frequently includes changing school settings. Findings from one study examining the academic achievements of children and youth in state foster care systems suggest an inverse relationship between the number of school placements and academic success; as the number of out of home placements increases, the likelihood of successfully completing secondary education decreases (Clemens, Lalonde, & Phillips Sheesley, 2016).

Youth exiting foster care often struggle with appropriate emotion regulation as a direct result of the trauma that they have experienced (Clemens, Helm, Myers, & Thomas, 2017).
Consequently, disproportionately higher numbers of youth leaving foster care have advanced behavioral health needs. Some estimates affirm that as high as 60% of children and youth in foster care struggle with behavioral health needs requiring intervention (Minnis, Everett, Pelosi, Dunn, & Knapp, 2006). Diagnoses of anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder occur most often with youth who have aged out of foster care (Morton, 2018). Youth with advanced behavioral health needs are also more likely to require special education accommodations (Ungar, Liebenberg, & Ikeda, 2014), both factors contributing to lower completion rates in higher education settings (Courtney & Hook, 2017). Consequently, any approach to supporting foster youth as they attempt the transition into higher education must include wraparound behavioral health services as a major component of programmatic development and implementation (Ungar, et al., 2014).

**Situational, Cultural, and Ethnic Realities of Minority Youth**

For youth today, a college education can seem like an unrealistic undertaking, one that they may not even be sure they desire. Seemingly insurmountable obstacles, coupled with the complex needs that go along with a transition from foster care into adulthood, strip away any motivation to explore this option for many ethnic minority youth exiting care (Lane, 2017). Life circumstances may prevent them from attempting to further their education and systemic and institutionalized racism may hinder their efforts to succeed. For minority youth in particular, finding a sense of belonging can be difficult in higher education settings, which are based in a western academic tradition (Castellanos, Gloria, Besson, & Harvey, 2016).

One major challenge for adolescents during the transition years is identity development, and for many youth that includes ethnic identity development. Ethnic identity development can serve as a protective factor for youth while in and after foster care (Roller White, O’Brien,
Jackson, Havalchak, Phillips, Thomas, & Cabrera, 2008). A recent study was conducted, attempting to determine the degree of ethnic identity development among a sample of Hispanic adolescents. The researchers utilized an ethnic socialization scale measuring the degree of conformity to ethnic expectations relative to gender roles, specifically “machismo” and “marianismo” among self-identified Hispanic youth. Results of this research project indicated that self-identification within the larger social and cultural context was seen by study participants as central to successful adjustment to adulthood (Sanchez, Whittaker, Hamlyton, & Arrango, 2017).

Hispanic youth face further challenges that are unique to this demographic. For example, Hispanic youth are more likely to have a lower English proficiency rate than any other minority group in the U.S. (Vaquera, 2009). For many Hispanic immigrant youth, the amount of time they and their families have been in the country, the use of Spanish only at home, and acculturation levels have a direct effect on academic achievement (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2008). Recent political posturing regarding the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, has significantly impacted Hispanic youth presently in the U.S., further contributing to the anxious feelings among Hispanic college age adolescents as they contemplate furthering their education (Cox, 2017). Many Hispanic students already in college have expressed fears related to not being able to continue their education, as well as fear of deportation for themselves, and for other family members (Zamudio-Suaréz, 2017).

A noteworthy increase in African American students enrolling into institutions of higher education has been seen in recent decades. This may be due in part to the Brown vs. Board of Education decision of 1954, which made primary education, and as a result postsecondary education, a reality for many (Harvey, Harvey, & King, 2014). However, African American
youth continue to be disadvantaged in higher education. African American youth are, at times, the victims of overt hate and racism (Reynolds & Maryweather, 2017), and other times suffer at the hands of institutionalized racism within the higher education system itself (Bracey, 2017). African American youth also begin their college careers disadvantaged in many ways due to low quality elementary and high school education systems that are overburdened with low income families, internalized racism, hopelessness, and depression (Goldston, Molock, Whitbeck, Murakami, Zayas, & Hall, 2008). With so many barriers to success experienced by African American youth, many chose not to begin college, and for those that do, many struggle with successful completion.

Dominant societal expectations related to higher education are not always congruent with traditional belief systems and practices among youth from Indigenous communities. For many Indigenous youth, their ability to successfully exhibit interdependence among their community is valued at a higher rate than independence (Long, Downs, Gillette, Kills in Sight, & Iron-Cloud Konen, 2006). For others, the pressures of having to navigate between the traditional values of their culture and those of the dominant society can alienate them from informal support systems (Lawler, LaPlante, Giger, & Norris, 2012). This duality in social roles, coupled with limited supports, can further contribute to the stress and anxiety many Indigenous youth are already experiencing as they transition into adulthood and contemplate continuing their education.

Indigenous youth in foster care do not fare much better in terms of educational attainment than African American and Hispanic youth. A long history of overrepresentation of Native youth in foster care has led to several state and federal pieces of legislation, most notably the Indian Child Welfare Act (Lawler, et al. 2012). However, although ICWA was passed nearly four decades ago, Indigenous children and youth in foster care continue to struggle especially in the
areas of substance use, crime, and education (Luna-Firebaugh & Tippeconnic Fox, 2014). One qualitative study combined case record analysis and individual interviews with former foster youth. The researchers in this study discovered that youth from Indigenous communities were more likely to experience poverty and receive public assistance, and were less likely to be employed and own their own home. The study further determined that Indigenous youth in foster care complete high school at lower rates than other foster youth and are also less likely to attend and complete college than those youth from other ethnic communities (O’Brien, Pecora, Echohawk, Evans-Campbell, Palmanteer-Holder, & Roller, 2010).

The transition into higher education can seem foreign and riddled with insurmountable obstacles for ethnic minority youth. For many, geographic location, cultural factors, traditions, and the needs of the community are paramount to individual educational needs. Any attempts to adequately serve minority youth aging out of foster care in higher education settings, must include focused attention to the unique needs of each youth. Particular attention should be paid to the situational factors affecting their everyday lives and to the sociocultural realities influencing the value that they place on continuing their education. Of special importance in program development is enhancing the informal supports available to youth, identification of the cultural and ethnic strengths that can be called upon, and any barriers that the youth must overcome to be successful.

**Existing Programs Serving Former Foster Youth**

With the passing of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, state agencies were mandated to provide support services for youth who had aged out of foster care and were provided with financial support with which to do so (Myers, 2011). These funding increases have assisted with program development and infrastructure for state child welfare agencies. They have
also provided financial supports in the form of Medicaid coverage, Start-Up Funds to support youth living on their own, and Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) to assist youth in paying for higher education (Hill & Peyton, 2017). Recent initiatives have increased the age limits for Medicaid coverage, thus allowing for medical and behavioral health access throughout most of their young adulthood. Formal support programs housed within state child welfare agencies and community organizations have developed to bolster supports for foster youth. Such programs have included independent living education and support, financial literacy, behavioral health services, case management, and provisions for continuing education (Kerman, Barth, & Wildfire, 2002).

Private foundation sponsored organizations such as Casey Family Services, a branch of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, have further enhanced funding for research and program development to assist former foster youth (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). However, recommendations have been made to increase access to funding options for foster care alumni to more accurately counter the rising cost of a college education, as well as expand sponsorship for campus-based support programs to assist foster youth (Okpych, 2012). Other potential funding opportunities for foster youth remain woefully underutilized (The Aspen Institute, 2017).

Recently, programs designed specifically to assist former foster youth as they enter institutions of higher education have been initiated. Fostering Success Michigan, the CAL Independent Scholar program at Berkeley, Guardian Scholars at Smith University, Transition for Youth at Rutgers, and others, have all developed campus-wide support programs for foster care alumni (The Field Center for Children’s Policy, Practice, and Research, 2018). One shared trait of many of these programs is increasing awareness of campus services available, as well as the mentoring of former foster youth enrolled at their universities. Programs such as these have
exhibited great success in improving graduation rates among foster youth already enrolled in higher education. However, sociocultural and situational factors preventing youth from enrolling in college in the first place have yet to be addressed.

One distinctive program designed to serve former foster youth already enrolled in higher education is the Seita Scholars Program at Western Michigan University. The Seita Scholars Program employs a coaching approach, providing individualized support to former foster youth. The coaching and support is designed to help students transitioning out of foster care navigate the various systems involved in a university setting (Unrau, 2011). This program initiated in 2008, has shown success in improving the graduation rates of former foster youth enrolled at their university and participating in the program. Participants in the Seita Scholars program have an approximate graduation rate of 30%, which is significantly higher than the national average for this subpopulation (Unrau, Dawson, Hamilton, & Bennet, 2017). While ethnic identity has been identified as a variable in assessing success rates for Seita Scholars participants, the full measure of ethnic and cultural influences have not been fully reported. Embedded within the design of any program serving former foster youth must be a focus on the individual needs of the youth, as well as attention to what makes each youth unique.

The Fostering Higher Education (FHE) program provides an evidenced based approach to working with youth who are nearing the age of emancipation from foster care as they prepare for postsecondary education. The FHE program is structured on the ideals of serving the needs of youth aging out of foster care utilizing a holistic approach to service delivery. The main components of the FHE approach are providing professional education advocacy, mentoring, and substance abuse prevention (Salazar, Roe, Ullrich, & Haggerty, 2016). This programmatic approach is designed to be implemented collaboratively with state child welfare agencies and
colleges and universities, thus ensuring wraparound services for transitioning foster youth (Salazar, Haggerty, & Roe, 2016). One major strength of the FHE approach, is that youth are engaged in services prior to beginning college. Although environmental and situational factors effecting foster youth in general are addressed by the FHE program, ethnic and cultural variances are not addressed through the design of this approach. In order to more truly serve the holistic needs of youth aging out of foster care, the entirety of their sociocultural experience must be understood and applied to interventions designed to assist them.

**Discussion**

In this conceptual paper, the author has examined both the needs of ethnic minority foster youth, and programs designed to serve them, utilizing a sociocultural and situational lens. Youth aging out of foster care constitute a unique subset of the general population of those attempting to navigate entry into higher education settings. These youth present a distinctive challenge and opportunity for social workers, educators, and other helping professionals. Any efforts to assist foster care alumni as they attempt this transition must include wraparound services to support the needs stemming from the trauma that they have experienced that led them to become involved in the foster care system.

Former foster youth must face the trials inherit in continuing their education, while overcoming the challenges they face due to their unique past experiences. Many were subjected to severe maltreatment and trauma at the hands of those they trusted most. Numerous others were further traumatized through having to adjust to changes in living situations. As a result, a large portion of youth who have aged out of foster care struggle with matters related to trust and the forming of healthy relationships.
Many youth experience inconsistencies related to a combination of identifying with, and individuation from, a family they may not have been around in some time. They may also experience some difficulty forming their own identity coupled with difficulty in appropriate emotion regulation, both factors linked to higher rates of depression in adolescents (Norton, 2010). Youth who have aged out of foster care also often struggle with anxiety, PTSD, and other advanced behavioral health needs. Consequently, transition aged foster youth often labor with successfully navigating entry into adulthood and as a whole, complete higher education at rates well below their peers.

Several new initiatives and programs have developed to help serve the unique needs of former foster youth transitioning into higher education, with varying levels of success. Programs employing a mentoring approach, coupled with behavioral health services and financial assistance, appear particularly effective at supporting youth in higher education settings. However, although programs such as these have shown success at supporting foster care alumni already enrolled in postsecondary education settings, the unique needs of each youth, particularly in regard to their ethnic, cultural, and situational realities have not been adequately explored. Factors that might have prevented former foster youth from even considering furthering their education have also not been fully addressed.

In general, ethnic minority youth struggle in higher education settings. Situational factors including poorer primary and secondary education settings, higher rates of poverty, higher behavioral health needs, and less access to resources contribute to ethnic minority youth beginning the process in an already disadvantaged state (Castellanos, et al., 2016). Some must also navigate the complexities involved with immigration laws and differing levels of acculturation (Altschul, et al., 2008). Others struggle with ethnic identity development and with
navigating the complexities between their traditional ethnic and cultural realities and those of the dominant culture. These concerns, compounded by their experiences in foster care, create a complex challenge for ethnic minority transition aged foster youth as they attempt to further their education after acquiring their high school diploma or GED.

**Implications for Social Work Practitioners and Educators**

Efforts to serve former foster youth from ethnically diverse communities must include a holistic approach that seeks to address the reality of their experiences in foster care, as well as honoring the individual youth and their personal, cultural, and ethnic identity. Efforts must also be made to reach out to youth while still in care to determine how they can be supported as they transition into adulthood. Social workers and other helping professionals should work with the youth to identify what supports they have and what challenges they may encounter if higher education is something that they would like to pursue. These supports and limitations may be located within the foster care agency and other formal supports or may be located within their foster families, biological families, or their spiritual, ethnic, and cultural communities.

Therefore, a new manner of engagement of ethnic minority foster care alumni is warranted. Adequate services for this population will require social workers and other helping professionals, as well as educators in secondary and postsecondary education settings, to work together to honor the unique experiences of each foster youth. These efforts must include the youth’s buy in and participation in the process in order to accurately construct an individualized plan of action to help support them in this transition.

**Sociocultural/Situational Model for Serving Transitioning Ethnic Minority Foster Youth**

As previously explored, foster care alumni from ethnic minority communities face challenges far above other youth in similar situations. Consequently, a new approach to serving
their unique needs is warranted. Such an approach requires the honoring and accepting of both their identity as former foster youth and their identity as ethnic minority youth. The following Sociocultural/Situational Model for Serving Ethnic Minority Foster Youth as they transition into higher education settings is proposed.

Figure 1. This conceptual model presents three branches of needs that must be considered for program design and service provision. These three branches represent a complete environmental snapshot of the needs of each youth consistent with a person-in-environment approach. To date, many policies and procedures and program design endeavors have honored the collective needs of former foster youth. To a lesser extent, they have honored the individual needs of each youth, as well. However, missing from much systematic design, remains the third branch that is
proposed in this model; this includes an examination of the needs of the youth as a member of their own ethnic, racial, cultural, and geographic community.

The first branch of the proposed model involves serving the needs of youth who have aged out of foster care. As has already been discussed, these needs primarily revolve around their physical and legal separation from primary support systems, albeit for their own safety and protection. These needs include but are not limited to; safe and stable housing, educational assistance, financial support, transportation needs, and life skill development.

The second branch of needs involves honoring the ethnic and cultural minority status of youth as they transition into adulthood. As presented in this paper, the specific markers of successful transition into adulthood are not always congruent with cultural value systems present within their communities of origin. This second recommendation of services involves fostering and supporting a connection between each youth and their family and cultural community. It also involves an expansion of consideration of identity formation to one that is more culturally inclusive. This includes expanding our definition of markers of success during the transition period to more accurately encapsulate the needs of youth of varying backgrounds and experiences.

The third and final branch recommended by this model involves honoring the individual needs of each young person that we serve. Each former foster youth will have an internalized set of needs and externalized behaviors that result from their experiences before, during, and after their time in foster care. These may manifest as advanced behavioral health needs, individualized learning needs, individual formal and informal supports needed to name a few.

The preceding conceptual model is recommended to be implemented through a structured team approach led by social work educators, practitioners, and other helping professionals already working with youth as they navigate the transition into adulthood, employing supportive
services from university educators and staff. Further recommendations include a centralized point of contact within the university that can provide assistance in navigating services on campus for those former foster youth already attending college.

Conclusion

Former foster youth presently experience tremendous levels of adversity as they navigate the transition from foster care into adulthood. The trauma they have experienced continues to affect their ability to respond to changing environments and new challenges presented. Their advanced behavioral health needs, coupled with limited informal supports, further exacerbate the difficulties they experience in successfully navigating this transition. Consequently, any efforts to support former foster youth in higher education must include a realization that these youth will experience challenges unlike those of most other college students.

However, simply designing programs to support these youth and their specialized needs serves to group them all into one high need subpopulation. This may have the unintended effect of minimizing their unique experience as individuals. Situational factors and sociocultural realities must also be recognized and incorporated into any efforts to serve them if we are to truly honor them as individuals, thus increasing their likelihood of success as they enter the world of higher education. As social workers, educators, and other helping professionals, we have an ethical responsibility to help to level the playing field and afford these youth with the same opportunities of every young adult transitioning into adulthood.
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https://fieldcenteratpenn.org/fostercaretocollege/


Am I a Successful Adult? Exploring the Influence of Ethnic Diversity in
Defining Success among Former Foster Youth.

Benjamin T. Bencomo

Author Note

The author currently serves as a Visiting Professor in the Facundo Valdez School of Social Work at New Mexico Highlands University. Correspondence should be addressed to the author at the Facundo Valdez School of Social Work, New Mexico Highlands University, Box 9000, Las Vegas, NM, 87701. Phone: (505)454-3346. Email: bbcomo@nmhu.edu.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that the author has no conflict of interest.
Abstract

Barriers to success experienced by former foster youth are well documented; however, missing is the full exploration of the experiences of ethnic minority foster youth. This qualitative exploratory study presents a hermeneutic thematic analysis of interviews conducted with eight youth, of varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds, who recently aged out of foster care in a largely rural southwestern state. Special attention was given to the extent to which their ethnic and cultural identity impacts their lived realities. For many participants, their definition of success differed markedly from mainstream measures of successful transition into adulthood. Major themes of participant interviews included; education, family and other informal supports, community, and financial struggles/work. Although both education and financial difficulties have been widely documented among former foster youth, the attention to family and other informal supports as well as community factors have not been fully explored.

Keywords: youth, foster care, aging out, ethnicity, culture, identity development, transition, adulthood
Am I a Successful Adult? Exploring the Influence of Ethnic Diversity in Defining Success among Former Foster Youth.

The transition from adolescence into adulthood can be both exciting and terrifying. For some, it can be a time of liberation and relief as they enjoy new levels of independence. For others, the psychosocial stressors, complications, and uncertainties inherit in this transformation, can make a successful entry into adulthood difficult and in some cases nearly impossible. However, as educators and practitioners, we must first begin with determining what a successful transition looks like. When we think back to our own transition from adolescence into adulthood, how did we measure success? Was success measured in terms of physical or financial independence? Or perhaps is success measured by individual identity formation? Was successful entry into and completion of higher education our measure of success? The following manuscript will explore the process and these questions through the lens of ethnic minority youth who have aged out of foster care.

Youth from varying cultural, religious, socioeconomic, and situational backgrounds have different notions of how they will measure success in navigation of this identity conversion into adulthood. Traditionally, society has measured successful transition from adolescence into independence through economic solvency, successful individuation from primary caregivers, and educational attainment. Yet, for young people who begin this transition in an already disadvantaged state due to their membership in a marginalized minority population or due to difficult life circumstances, the barriers to success and the complexities involved in what constitutes success, can seem insurmountable, given this traditional view of a successful move into adulthood.
Former foster youth, young adults who have aged out of the state foster care system, struggle immensely in regard to traditional measures of successful transition into adulthood. Former foster youth, as a group, lag well behind their peers in the areas of employment and education attainment and are overrepresented in the population of incarcerated and homeless adults (National Youth in Transition Database, 2016). As noted by Osterling and Hines, (2006), many report few informal supports due to separation from friends, family, and community while in foster care. In addition, ethnic minority youth also fair much worse than their white counterparts in the areas of education, access to healthcare, and economic wellbeing (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). For youth of color exiting foster care, these intersecting risk factors warrant an exploration into their unique realities as they transition into adulthood.

The following qualitative study provides an exploration into the various experiences, viewpoints, and priorities of former foster youth who have recently transitioned out of foster care in the state of New Mexico. Of these youth, the majority self-identified as ethnic minorities, a sample that is reflective of the demographics of youth in custody in New Mexico (Child Welfare League of America, 2017). Throughout the course of eight exploratory interviews, a unique picture was formed of the everyday lived realities, strengths and supports, and challenges and barriers to success, as experienced by this subset of young adults as they complete the transition from foster care into independence. Those interviewed also gave voice to what a successful transition into adulthood may look like among ethnically diverse foster care alumni.

Background

**Ethnic/cultural disparities in traditional markers of successful transition to adulthood.**
Traditional markers of successful transition into adulthood have been highly rooted in a Euro-western value system (Pao, 2017). Such measures have generally included an ability to obtain gainful employment, a stable living situation separate from primary caregivers, (Naccarato, DeLorenzo, & Park, 2008) and entrance into and successful completion of postsecondary education programs (Zuberi, 2011). For most, benchmarks such as these have helped to determine successful individuation for youth across the board regardless of a youth’s cultural or situational background (Arnett, 2000).

A longitudinal study of nearly sixteen thousand adolescents identified significant barriers to successful transition into adulthood for minority youth related to the increased levels of stress, due in part to marginalization of minority communities and experiences of racism and other forms of discrimination (Wickrama, Noh, & Bryant, 2005). Minority youth are also at greater risk for the development of psychological concerns and at a much higher risk for suicidal ideation (Goldston, Molock, Witbeck, Murakami, Zayas, & Hall, 2008). In another study measuring successful outcomes among college aged youth, Asian American youth in particular were found to be at a much higher risk for psychological distress and reported higher levels of depressive symptomology when compared to Caucasian students (Lorenzo, Frost, & Reinherz, 2000). Experiences with racism and especially residential segregation due to race and ethnicity, further hinder young minorities from obtaining regular employment (Wagmiller, 2005), consequently inhibiting them from living apart from families due in part to their financial struggles.

Socioeconomic realities may contribute to minority youth continuing to live with their family of origin for a longer period of time. However, to fully understand the concerns related to successful individuation of ethnic minority youth, as evidenced by residing independently,
cultural implications of such a move should also be considered. For many minority youth, the cultural ties that bind families together contribute to their lack of desire to live far from family. Lei and South, (2016), suggest that especially for Black and Latino youth, “families display distinctive cultural practices and preferences that encourage parent-child coresidence” (p. 116).

Minority youth, in particular Black and Latino youth, often begin their educational career in a compromised state with limited access to quality primary and secondary education systems (Goldsmith, 2004). Museus and Ravello (2010) assert that over half of all Black and Hispanic youth will fail to complete a bachelor’s degree within six years from beginning higher education. Hispanic youth in particular are less likely to continue their education after high school and are more likely to have a lower English proficiency rate than any other minority group in the U.S. (Vaquera, 2008). For many immigrant and first generation youth, the amount of time they and their families have been in the country, the use of other languages in the home, and acculturation levels have a direct effect on academic achievement (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2008). Goldsmith, (2004) also found, however, that outcomes for Hispanic and African American youth can be improved in the area of education when positive supports in the form of more minority teachers are made available to them.

A challenge for many adolescents during these years is identity development (Waterman, 1982), and for many youth that includes ethnic identity development. In a study conducted with Hispanic adolescents, self-identification within the larger social and cultural context was seen by study participants as central to successful adjustment to the role of an adult (Sanchez, Whittaker, Hamilton, & Arrango, 2017). For many Indigenous youth, collective self-esteem (Thompson & Johnson-Jennings, 2013) and their ability to successfully exhibit interdependence among their community is valued at a higher rate than independence (Long, Downs, Gillette, Kills in Sight, &
Iron-Cloud Konen, 2006). For others, the pressures of having to navigate between the traditional values of their culture and those of the dominant society can alienate them from informal support systems (Lawler, Laplante, Giger, & Norris, 2012). For many Native youth in particular, geographic proximity to their family of origin, cultural factors and traditions, and the needs of the community are paramount to individual economic and educational needs (Pendley, Brown, Scheuler-Whitaker, & Collier-Tennison, 2002).

**Realities for former foster youth transitioning into adulthood**

The transition from adolescence into adulthood, can be difficult for many young people. This transition involves not only a change in living situation, but also a shift in focus to a more independently driven orientation toward daily tasks. Although youth in foster care share similar desires related to stability and personal fulfillment (Harwick, Lindstron, & Unrah, 2017), many struggle with successfully navigating this transition.

Former foster youth, as a group, struggle to obtain safe and stable housing. Risk factors such as alienation from primary support systems, childhood history of maltreatment and exposure to interpersonal violence, increased mental health concerns, and limited financial resources all contribute to challenges in obtaining safe and stable housing once they emancipate from foster care (Tyrell & Yates, 2017). Consequently, foster care alumni are at a much higher risk of becoming homeless than the general population of young adults. One study by Dworsky, Napolitano, and Courtney (2013) reported that anywhere from one third to nearly one half of their sample population had experienced homelessness at least once before the age of 26. This is substantially higher than the general population of young adults of similar ages (Fowler, Marcal, Zhang, Day, & Landsverk, 2017).
It is well documented that youth who age out of foster care struggle in several areas. Some researchers estimate that foster care alumni utilize mental health services at more than twice the level of their non-foster care peers (Courtney, 2009). Unger, Leibenberg, and Ikeda (2014) found that this population is also more likely to misuse substances. Other researchers have found that minority youth are more likely to experience interactions with the legal system (Nordberg, Crawford, Praetorius, & Hatcher, 2016). Former foster youth are also more likely to be young parents (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). All of these risk factors contribute to youth’s struggles with obtaining and maintaining stable employment (Stevenson, 2017).

Perhaps nowhere are the barriers toward independence among foster care alumni more apparent than in the area of education. Although most foster youth report a desire to continue their education after high school (Schelbe, Randolph, Yelick, Cheaham, & Groton, 2018), few actually realize this dream. Some researchers have estimated that only two percent will complete a bachelor’s degree by the time they are twenty-five (Pecora, Kessler, O’Brien, White, Williams, Hiripi, English, White, & Herrick, 2006). Youth who age out of foster care struggle to maintain their education due in part to their financial struggles, housing instability, physical and mental healthcare needs, lack of formal and informal supports, and social isolation (Hill & Peyton, 2017). Others feel they are not full prepared for the academic rigors of higher education (Lovitt & Emerson, 2008).

Consequently, many programs have been developed to assist youth who have aged out of foster care in the area of education, with varying levels of success. The federal Education and Training Voucher program, funded in part by the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, helps former foster youth defray the financial burden of higher education through yearly
allotments of $5,000 (Hill & Peyton, 2017). Campus based programs which combine mentoring with education and formal supports for former foster youth in college have proven particularly efficacious (Unrau, Dawson, Hamilton, & Bennett, 2017). Programs such as the Seita Scholars Program at Western Michigan University have shown tremendous success in regard to improving graduation rates for former foster youth (Western Michigan University, 2018).

**Outcomes for ethnic/cultural minority former foster youth**

Laws such as the Indian Child Welfare Act (Lidot, Orantia, & Choca, 2012) and the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (Curtis & Alexander, 1996) have attempted to mitigate the reality of disproportionality and support cultural considerations for children and youth in state foster care. However, minorities remain largely overrepresented in the child welfare system, representing approximately fifty-two percent of the children and youth in custody nationwide (Children’s Bureau, 2018). The intersecting realities of minority status and the trauma that many have experienced before and during foster care, further compound the difficulties experienced by youth of color who have emancipated into adulthood (Inglehart & Becerra, 2002).

Researchers have determined that African American children and adolescents experience greater rates of child abuse and maltreatment and represent a disproportionately high number of youth in state custody (Ards, Myers, Malkis, Sugrue, & Zhou, 2003). Following their emancipation from foster care, this subset of the population continue to struggle. A recent study found that among their sample, the subgroup that contained the most struggling parents, was also the subgroup with the most African American former foster youth (Courney, Hook, & Lee, 2012). Rufa and Fowler (2016), discovered that African American youth exhibited behavioral
health concerns and increased problematic externalizing behaviors when placed in dangerous and poverty stricken neighborhoods, even when placed in kinship care placements.

Inglehart and Becerra (2002) found similar outcomes for both African American and Hispanic youth who had aged out of foster care in the Los Angeles, California area. More than twenty-five percent of their respondents experienced homelessness at least once after leaving foster care. Approximately one half had to work in order to support themselves following emancipation from care, and only about one third were continuing their education after high school or completion of their General Equivalency Diploma (GED). After leaving foster care, Native American children and youth continue to struggle, especially in the areas of substance use, crime, and education (Luna-Firebaugh & Tippeconnic Fox, 2014).

One factor generally agreed upon to determine successful entry into adulthood for young people is successful individuation in regard to personal identity development (Pao, 2016). This can prove to be a difficult task for many former foster youth (Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007), but can be especially problematic for ethnic minority youth exiting care. White, O’Brien, Jackson, Havalchak, Phillips, Thomas, and Cabrera (2008) posit that a more developed sense of ethnic identity can serve as a protective factor against the difficulties created by a history in foster care for ethnic minority youth. For Indigenous youth, personal identity, cultural identity, and tribal identity are all paramount to successful transition into adulthood (Kulis & Robins, 2013). Research suggests that Hispanic and African American youth also report a greater interest in connecting with their cultural communities and learning more about their ethnic background than White youth exiting foster care (White, et al., 2008).
Research has suggested that several protective factors can help to support former foster youth. A coordinated approach that identifies individual strengths and fosters resilience can serve as a protective factor for former foster youth (Ungar, Liebenberg, & Ikeda, 2014). Formalized mentoring programs have shown promise in supporting ethnic minority youth (Osterling & Hines, 2006). Individualized support (Graham, Schellinger, & Vaugh, 2015) and proactive approaches to serving youth (Museus & Ravello, 2010) can also support ethnic minority youth exiting foster care. However, to fully be able to support the transition into adulthood for ethnic minority foster youth, educators and practitioners would be better served to have a greater understanding of the unique realities of this subset of the population.

Methods

This study attempted to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience and overall views of ethnic minority youth who have aged out of foster care as they transition into adulthood. As such, a qualitative design and specifically a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was employed as a means to achieving this desired goal. Such an approach is grounded in a social constructivist paradigm, which stresses the importance of social interactions in building basic assumptions of reality as interpreted by the learner (Mayo, 2010).

Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on fully understanding the individual interpretation of reality through the exploration of experiences as defined and described by the research subject (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Consequently, hermeneutic phenomenology serves to guide the research process in regard to exploring the subjective realities of research participants by eliciting stories of their experiences. Through these stories as relayed by research participants, a clearer picture is
established of how the subject(s) create meaning from their experiences to then form their ontological perspective (Kafle, 2011).

**Design**

Data collection consisted of exploratory individual interviews with youth who had aged out of foster care in the state of New Mexico. The researcher traveled to the city or village of residence to interview each youth. Youth were interviewed in the location of their choosing and where they felt most comfortable, while maintaining confidentiality. Therefore, interviews took place in client homes, in university offices, and at state child protective services county offices. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present during interviews.

Interviews consisted of a semi-structured open-ended question format. The interview consisted of twenty-eight questions, designed to illicit youth’s experiences within their biological family, community of origin, foster care experiences, and especially their current life circumstances navigating their transition into adulthood. As the questions were all open-ended, and the respondents were allowed to provide as little or as much as they felt necessary, the interviews varied in length from approximately one half hour to one hour. All interviews were conducted by the researcher.

**Sample**

Purposeful sampling, and more specifically criterion sampling, was used to reach out to young adults who could speak to the experiences of ethnic minority youth who had recently aged out of foster care. The criteria utilized for inclusion in the study were that each youth participant had to be a minimum of eighteen years of age and a maximum of 25 years of age and had been in state child protective services custody on their eighteenth birthday. Former foster youth can be
considered a moderately vulnerable population due to the traumatic experiences they may have lived through before, during, and after foster care (Holland and Gorey, 2004). Consequently, substantial efforts were taken to ensure the physical, emotional, and psychological safety of participants. This included an IRB expedited review approval facilitated through New Mexico Highlands University Internal Review Board, the researcher’s home institution, prior to initiation of the research.

The proposed research project was also presented to the state child welfare authority that serves former foster youth in New Mexico prior to initiation of the study. The research was reviewed by the youth services bureau chief, the head of child protection services, and by legal counsel for the state agency. Youth participants were informed of possible risks of involvement in the interviews and provided with information on formal support services available prior to the initiation of each interview.

Care was taken to respect the autonomy and anonymity of possible participants through a structured approach to contacting youth participants. This process began with initial identification of possible participants and an initial contact made by the youth’s assigned Youth Transition Specialist (YTS), a master level social worker who had an ongoing professional relationship with each youth. The YTS for each youth explained the purpose of the study, the possible risks involved in participation of the study and the incentive provided to youth should they chose to participate. Youth who agreed to participate in the one-time interview were given a twenty-five dollar Target gift card, provided by the state child welfare authority, Youth Services Bureau, in appreciation of their time.
Once the youth’s verbal consent to participate was given to their YTS, their contact information was then provided to the researcher. A formalized informed consent process began every interview where the youth’s verbal and written consent was obtained to participate in the interview and for the interview to be audio recorded and later transcribed. Every interviewee was also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw consent at any time during or after the interview. Safeguards and support services, as facilitated by their YTS, were also explained to all youth participants at the initiation of the interview.

Eight former foster youth were interviewed from both urban and rural areas across New Mexico. The youth ranged in age from eighteen years old to twenty years old. Four participants self-identified as female and four participants self-identified as male. Five youth participants self-identified as Hispanic, one as White, one as mixed race Black/White, and one as Native American, a demographic sample that was remarkably representative of the race and ethnicity of children and youth in state foster care in New Mexico (Child Trends, 2015). All youth interviewed were continuing to receive structured support services facilitated by their Youth Transition Specialists. Some youth participants were living with family, some with partners, and some living on their own. Only two participants reported being currently employed. Two participants reported not having obtained a high school diploma or GED and reported that they are not currently pursuing education, one reported to be pursuing her high school diploma, one his GED, one reported to have completed her high school diploma but not to be pursuing additional education, and three were enrolled part time or full time in postsecondary education settings.

Data Analysis
Youth interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Immediately following each interview field notes were taken to highlight initial impressions and any emerging themes. An open coding approach was employed in order to explore the lived experiences of ethnic minority former foster youth without any preconceived ideas of outcomes.

This study utilized INVIVO 12 Plus, qualitative data analysis software for the data analysis. Using the INVIVO 12 Plus auto coding feature, an initial round of open coding was completed of all youth responses to all questions to help ascertain the main emerging themes from among all interviews. A word frequency query was initiated to first determine the specific words that were used most often by interview participants. A cluster analysis was then used to determine the degree of similarity between words and phrases that appeared most often. This process helped to inform the criteria for inclusion of similar words and phrases into overarching themes that became the various nodes analyzed. These emergent themes were then corroborated with the field notes and initial impressions from the researcher. Similar themes were combined into categories that adequately represented the combined themes. All categories created were discussed by four or more respondents, demonstrated a 5% or greater overall coverage percentage, and contained a minimum of twenty overall references each.

Utilizing these identified main ideas and themes, nodes were created to further explore each theme. This was then followed up with more detailed coding queries to further illuminate the individual lived experiences of youth interview participants. Sentiment coding was applied to each node to help clarify emotions, attitudes, and overall tone among participant responses in each identified thematic area. This process helped to further illuminate the overall tone and feel of participants as they discussed their various experiences. From responses coded into the
various nodes, exemplar quotes were then extracted that helped to describe and represent the overall sentiment of each main theme.

**Findings**

Through the initial round of open coding employed to ascertain thematic overlap between former foster youth responses, several reoccurring premises began to emerge. These recurrent ideas became the basis for four overarching themes discussed most often by interview participants. The main themes included responses centered on “Education, Family and other informal supports, Community, and Financial Struggles/Work”. The following word cloud provides a visual depiction of specific words used by participants revolved around these main themes (Figure 2).

![Figure 2](image-url)
“My dad and I used to sit there and talk and one thing I promised my dad that I would graduate high school and make a living out of myself” (Hispanic Female, age 18).

Interviewees provided rich detail regarding their educational pursuits. References to education were made by all interviewees a total of forty-two times, a number far greater than any other identified theme. Respondents discussed successes as well as their struggles in high school and beyond. To begin to explore their attitudes related to their educational experiences, a sentiment auto code was completed of responses that mentioned education. Results indicated that more often than not, respondents felt moderately positive at 40.83 %, regarding their overall educational experiences. However, closely following those who felt moderately positive about their educational experiences were those that expressed very negative sentiments regarding education, at 30.02 %. This was followed by those who felt very positive at 16.05 % and those who felt moderately negative, at 13.1 %.

Some respondents described trials in their educational experiences in elementary, middle and high school that have contributed to some of the difficulties they continue to experience. One respondent described his challenges with bullying and social interactions being one of a very few Hispanic children in a predominantly Black elementary school saying,

We lived in a predominantly black community and I would get bullied and picked on a lot because I was just this small little Mexican kid, trying to, like, play basketball and football with all of these bigger kids and like most of the friends that I eventually ended up making, they were all older than me (Hispanic Male, age 19).

Other respondents described the difficulties they experienced as a result of having to change schools due to their biological family moving around, as well as their experiences
changing homes while in foster care. Seventy-five percent of respondents reported having to change schools during elementary, middle, and high school. Two reported changing schools several times. Others described how the stigma associated with being in foster care negatively impacted their education. One youth described the difficulty she experienced being in foster care in a rural setting where everyone knew each other saying, “I’ve gotten told that I’m going to be just like my parents and not graduate high school or nothing” (Hispanic Female, age 18).

Those respondents, who were not currently enrolled in formal educational settings, provided varying reasons for why they were not pursuing education. For some, education seemed to be something that seemed foreign to them. One young man described his disheartening experience at freshman orientation saying in part, “it was just like real discouraging going to a place where everyone was going to be there with their parents like, and it’s like a real proud moment and I wasn’t going to have it so it was kind of discouraging. I didn’t even want to go” (Hispanic Male, age 19). He went on to say that he appreciated the support of his Youth Transition Specialist who attended the orientation with him. Others described other life circumstances as barriers to continuing education. One youth described his constantly changing living situations as deterring his efforts to remain enrolled in college classes. Another described his current account balance at the university he was attending as prohibiting him from reenrolling. He stated he was currently working to try and pay off the bill so that he could return.

Several of the youth interviewed described family obligations and the inability to have family support in educational pursuits as a contributing factor to the difficulties they have experienced. One youth, a young parent to a toddler who was pregnant with her second child, reported that she wanted to pursue a higher education as a means to providing a better life for
herself and her children, however described in great detail her struggles with parenting, attempting to work, and child care as a central hindrance to her educational pursuits. She stated,

I feel like there should be more help within the foster care system for people who have children. Because, I’m pregnant right now and I’m not really able to work or anything, and like things happen where you end up working and it’s hard to find daycare (Hispanic Female, age 19).

Other youth described feeling that family obligations must take precedence over their individual educational pursuits. One youth reported that she felt obligated to care for her elderly grandmother. Another stated that he felt he had to work hard to make sure that his younger sisters were taken care of even though they remained in a relative foster placement. Another young man stated that he was currently in counseling working on his issues related to anger as a means to repair the relationship with his mother saying in part, “I don’t get angry anymore really. So that’s like, uh, that’s like the main thing… that helps me and my mom’s relationship” (Mixed Race Black/White Male, age 19). Another reported that he moved farther away from where he was attending college in order to be closer to his family saying, “I stay with my mom now, but my siblings come over like every day from eight to eight in the evening” (Native American Male, age 19).

Among ethnic minority former foster youth interviewed, only one of seven was able to identify family members who had continued education after high school. When describing this concern, one young man declared, “Nobody in my family has ever graduated college. Like, none of my aunties have, none of my uncles have, my parents didn’t even finish, my parents dropped out sophomores, as sophomores in high school” (Hispanic Male, age 19). However, although
many felt that they didn’t have family they could look to who had preceded them in higher education, several youth reported that their family were supportive of them trying to further their education. One young woman reported, “my dad and I used to sit there and talk and one thing I promised my dad that I would graduate high school and make a living out of myself” (Hispanic Female, age 18).

Six of eight respondents were able to identify federal and state funded educational support programs as avenues that they could pursue for assistance with paying for college should they choose to attend or continue to attend. Those programs mentioned by youth included a state funded tuition waver that was instituted to support former foster youth in New Mexico, as well as federally funded Educational Training Vouchers. Youth interviewed reported that they were made aware of these services through their interactions with their Youth Transition Specialists.

“My father, he was a very good father, um… but he kept getting deported back and forth like about five times” (Hispanic Female, age 20).

Many former foster youth interviewed described their coming of age in regard to the benefits and struggles related to reconnecting with their biological families. Seven of eight youth reported reconnecting with biological family after their emancipation from foster care, with the lone exception being a young man who was adopted shortly after birth, not ever knowing his biological family. One young man who described a long and complicated relationship with his biological father described a recent reconnection saying,

I actually just very recently got back in contact with my dad. It’s been about, like, five months I would say since I’ve talked to my dad and been about like seven since I’ve
actually seen him. And he finally reached out to me about two days ago (Hispanic Male, age 19).

One youth communicated her challenges related to wanting to be there for her family even though this meant using her own limited finances to support them as best she could. She described wanting to have a close connection with her family more than anything else, but added that it has not been easy. When discussing her relationship with her biological family she stated, “It’s kind of iffy usually, because they only contact me when they need something. It could be like money or, it’s usually money that they need, or a ride somewhere” (Hispanic Female, age 19). Another described having to travel far distances from where she was attending school to see her sister saying,

I used to go see her in El Paso but I just barely got a job again so I was pretty strapped on cash so I wasn’t able to go see her very often because it’s pretty expensive coming back and down and then it’s just hard (Hispanic Female, age 20).

Two of the youth discussed their concerns related to their parents’ immigration status as well as the complexities involved in having family members both in the U.S. and outside of the country. One discussed feeling conflicted between wanting to visit with family and not wanting to travel outside of the country. Another described her relationship with her father as difficult as he was deported several times during her childhood. She reported the last time that she saw him was several years ago. She also recounted that the circumstances related to his deportation caused additional strain on her relationship with her mother and was a contributing factor to her involvement in the foster care system in the first place stating,
My father, he was a very good father, but he kept getting deported back and forth like about five times. Um, so in the end, before I got into the whole situation why I ended up in foster care, I was living with my dad and then my mom called immigration on him ‘cause if she couldn’t have us, you know, no one else could. So then that was like the last time I ever saw him (Hispanic Female, age 20).

“Coming back to their community and making it better… with better jobs and with more support for youth” (Native American Male, age 19).

Several youth made references to the importance of their communities of origin throughout the interviews. A sentiment auto code for references made to community by youth participants revealed that approximately thirty-four percent had made positive mentions and sixty-four percent made negative mentions of their communities growing up. Five of the eight former foster youth described difficulties that they experienced due to the communities where they grew up.

One youth described the various challenges that he experienced moving from a large Midwestern city to a much more rural town in New Mexico. He reported experiencing a culture shock of sorts and struggling to make friends in the mostly Hispanic community where he now resides. He reported, “I didn’t really go a lot of places, I mostly just stayed around the apartment building. That’s mostly all” (Mixed Race Black/White Male, age 19). One young woman described feeling that she never belonged to her ethnic and cultural community as her family was Columbian. Growing up in the U.S. she didn’t feel welcomed in the community. She elaborated, So, the community wasn’t very welcoming, you know, I had it hard at home and in the
community for reasons I had no idea, you know. I don’t know I just didn’t feel like I was in the right place. Maybe it was my culture or I don’t know. (Hispanic Female, age 20).

Another youth described feeling alienated from others due to the opinions of her family held by many in her small rural community saying, “I’ve gotten told that I’m going to be just like my parents and not graduate high school or nothing… but I told my dad, uh-huh, I’m gonna prove them wrong” (Hispanic Female, age 18).

However, among those youth who reported positive feelings related to their communities, some spoke at length about their appreciation for their informal supports growing up. One former foster youth described feeling that he was accepted and supported by members of his community, discussing how he would walk around and clean his neighbors’ yards as a young teen for money. Another discussed good memories of working in the grapevine fields of California with his father as a young boy.

Another young man spoke fondly of the small tribal village where he grew up in western New Mexico saying, “it’s much more quiet and peaceful than living in [city name], because you always be hearing trains every day, and it was irritating, so here at [village name] it’s just peace and quiet” (Native American Male, age 19). This same youth discussed one of his motivations for seeking education past high school completion was that he wanted to be able to change the living situation for many in his small tribal community. In describing why he felt that people should pursue education he stated, “Um, them like coming back to their community and making it better… with better jobs and with more support for youth” (Native American Male, age 19).
“Well, like I took out a car loan, and it’s expensive, and, um, younger people have really high insurance rates and it’s hard to find a job some places, it’s hard to keep jobs for some people” (Hispanic Female, age 20).

All eight former foster youth described the difficulties that they experience in relation to the everyday struggles of independent living. Financial stressors in particular were independently mentioned in one hundred percent of client interviews when asked to describe their lives at present. Although all eight reported that they were receiving financial support from the state youth services bureau in the form of an independent living monthly stipend, fifty percent reported that they were also currently employed.

One young woman described her struggles as a single mother trying to continue her education, work nearly full time, and care for her young daughter. When asked what difficulties she had experienced as she tried to continue her education she replied, “bills”. She later elaborated saying in part, “I took out a car loan, and it’s expensive, and, um, younger people have really high insurance rates and it’s hard to find a job some places, it’s hard to keep jobs for some people” (Hispanic Female, age 20). Another young woman interviewed described her struggles with transportation as well as food insecurities as barriers to her pursuits toward living independently saying,

I can take care of all my bills but in order for me to feel healthy and like well enough to like man, yeah, let’s go take care of this day, like, to me, food is a big thing… yeah food has just been like the biggest problem. I was having a problem with like transportation, but I took care of that. Um, but I’d have to say, for the most part, transportation was probably the second biggest and I know that for a lot of other youths too, because we
DEFINING SUCCESS

don’t really have parents like, ‘oh, here’s your first car’ or ‘hey, let me go cosign for you’
you know, so food and transportation are by far the two biggest. And definitely are
mental barriers too. (Hispanic Female, age 20)

One youth, however, relayed that he felt that he had matured as a result of living on his
own for the past couple of years. He also reported that although he had struggled with his
education and finances in the past, he felt that he was now in a position to where he was
correcting his mistakes slowly. He described his current financial situation saying in part,

I can still get the tuition voucher or tuition waiver. So, that’s what I’m relying on mostly
for now. But, I am saving money. Because I am making enough to where I afford all my
bills, all my gas, and then I, I have a loan that I’m still paying off for my house. I only
have like two hundred dollars left to pay on it. I took out a big chunk out of it when I got
my income tax I took, out of all the debts I had I put like at least two hundred dollars
towards each one. And then, um, I still have a little bit of money left over so I just put it
in the bank. (Hispanic Male, age 19).

One young man described the struggles that most young people from his tribal
community face in regard to finding adequate employment, even those who had not been in
foster care. He envisioned a time when programs could be widely available to help Native
American youth gain the skills necessary to become employed and be provided with supports to
find a job describing such a program as,

helping them get a job, any job. Without them saying, being saying no you can’t get this
job, because most youth in New Mexico, in the state of New Mexico they can’t get a
job… most are homeless, so. With that, with a program they will have like someone
there who can make sure they get a job, and start like getting us a job and house and other supports instead of them being homeless (Native American Youth, age 19).

Discussion

The eight former foster youth interviewed in this study provided a deep and reflective glimpse into their everyday lives through the retelling of their stories. Through their willingness to share the past and present realities of their lives we, as educators and helping professionals, have been provided with a richness and authenticity of the lived experiences of ethnic minority former foster youth that cannot be achieved through the examination of statistics alone. Although many of the well documented struggles of former foster youth were echoed by study participants, most notably difficulties in education, employment, and financial stressors, this group of respondents provided additional insights into the complexities of intersectionality that ethnic minority former foster youth must grapple with as they attempt the transition into adulthood. Through the application of a social constructivist paradigm, the unique realities of each participant are illuminated as they relayed their past and present experiences, and in how they interpreted the questions presented to them.

In regard to the most pronounced theme identified during interviews, education, study participants discussed the barriers to success they have experienced. A common theme discussed involved the lack of familial role models who have been successful in formal educational settings. Study participants also identified family obligations, stereotypes surrounding who their families were, and the realities of the communities they grew up in, as hindrances to their educational pursuits.
Several youth interviewees, however, seemed hopeful that with support, grit, and dedication they could be successful in changing the trajectory of their families through education. Most study participants also reported a clear understanding of, and appreciation for, the formalized support from their youth transition specialist as well as for the financial backings made available to them for living independently and continuing their education. These findings support the research that points to the effectiveness of structured financial supports for former foster youth in supporting their efforts at continuing their education after completion of high school or their GED.

Another theme common among study participants involved respondents’ strong connection to, and a feeling of responsibility for, their biological family. Filial piety, a theme commonly discussed in much of the literature when referencing ethnic minority youth, especially Asian youth (Canda, 2013), was echoed by study participants, suggesting similarities in respect and appreciation for elder relatives among Hispanic and Indigenous youth. This manifested itself in interviewees who discussed feeling personally and financially responsible for their biological parents, children, siblings, and even their grandparents. This feeling of responsibility proved to be an additional barrier to successful transition into adulthood for study participants, especially in relation to their educational pursuits and financial independence. This common expressed reality seemed to be further complicated by those youth dealing with family outside of the country and family navigating immigration policies. These findings point to the need for continued exploration of the impact of familial responsibility and how this effects ethnic minority foster youth as they transition into adulthood.
Study participants further gave voice to the importance of community in their lives as they attempted the transition into adulthood. Several respondents discussed the struggles that they experienced in their communities growing up, as well as feeling like outcasts within their communities. Others articulated a sense of separation from community in addition to separation from their family of origin. However, other study participants described the strong sense of identity that they experience in relation to their communities of origin. One Indigenous youth participant in particular discussed that the main motivation for pursuing education should be to improve the lives of others from within your community.

Financial stressors and insecurities, although a well-established reality for former foster youth, appeared to be especially pronounced among interviewees of this study, supporting the efficacy of state funded structured support programs for foster care alumni. Many former foster youth interviewed discussed common stressors of everyday financial struggles in the area of food and other basic necessities, transportation, and housing. Others discussed difficulties that they have experienced in acquiring and maintaining steady employment. Such realities could be due, at least in part, to the access to social capital present within ethnic minority former foster youth, as members of two marginalized groups.

One highly motivated and resilient young man, conversely described how he has been able to rise above his previous economic hardships and gain some degree of financial solvency through his various employment endeavors and conservative fiscal practices. It should be noted that this respondent also discussed an ongoing and supportive relationship with his biological aunt and uncle, as well as feeling especially supported and mentored by his youth transition specialist social worker.
The preceding experiences, as discussed by study participants, give voice to the unique realities of eight ethnic minority former foster youth. Through the telling of their stories these young people elucidated the fact that they must grapple not only with the challenges related to their experiences in foster care, but also must navigate a transition into adulthood as dictated by their community and cultural influences. Such intersecting realities create an additional burden for these youth in establishing their distinctive identity as adults, giving credence to previous studies that have suggested that ethnic minority youth’s identity development is centered in their larger cultural communities. This reality is one that must be recognized by social workers, educators, and other professionals serving this unique subset of the population.

The applicability of this research to the wider population of youth aging out of foster care must be tempered by the limitations of the study itself. This study focused on a qualitative exploration of the experiences of study participants, each participant with their own unique experiences and interpretations of their environment. The very nature of a constructionist qualitative study suggest that realities will be unique to each individual. Consequently, it would be inappropriate to automatically suggest a wider generalization of all findings to other ethnic minority youth or to foster youth in general.

The small sample size is also a distinct limitation of this study. Further studies would do well to attempt a larger sample size. Although the sample of study participants was reflective of the larger population of youth in foster care in New Mexico in regard to ethnic and cultural identity, it is not reflective of ethnic minority foster youth in other states or nationally. In addition, in order to more accurately explore the realities of Indigenous foster youth, additional studies must include youth served by tribal social services. One final limitation of this study is
the fact that only youth who were age eighteen or over, and who were currently participating in independent living services through the state child welfare youth services bureau were included in this study. This means that youth who were under the age of eighteen and preparing to age out, as well as those youth who have emancipated from foster care but who are not voluntarily involved with youth services were not interviewed.

Foster care alumni continue to represent an especially vulnerable population as they attempt the difficult transition from adolescence into adulthood and into independent living, especially in regard to traditional measures of successful emancipation. Many structured support programs through state agencies, non-profit entities, and higher education institutions have shown some progress in espousing success for youth. However, in order to truly encourage a strong start to adulthood for these young adults, we must be able to recognize and support their individual identity formation, taking into account their sociocultural background as well as the experiences they have had. We must also continue to examine what a successful transition into adulthood might look like for youth from various communities. Diversity must be accounted for and included in establishing a network of formal and informal supports to promote a successful transition into adulthood for ethnic minority former foster youth.
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Foster Youth Transitioning into Higher Education: Applying a Sociocultural and Situative Lens.

Benjamin T. Bencomo

Author Note

The author currently serves as a Visiting Professor in the Facundo Valdez School of Social Work at New Mexico Highlands University. Correspondence should be addressed to the author at the Facundo Valdez School of Social Work, New Mexico Highlands University, Box 9000, Las Vegas, NM, 87701. Phone: (505)454-3346. Email: bbencomo@nmhu.edu.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that the author has no conflict of interest.
Abstract

Social work educators have long been at the forefront of social work practice innovations and initiatives. It is of paramount importance that social work education explore the needs of ethnic minority youth exiting foster care and develop collaboration with practitioners to better serve their unique needs. While programs designed to serve former foster youth are somewhat commonplace and have helped to lessen some of the barriers to success in traditional measures of achievement in transitioning into adulthood, most have failed to fully honor the uniqueness of each youth. The following presentation encourages a broadening our understanding of successful transition into adulthood incorporating a healthy degree of cultural humility, by honoring the fact that racial, ethnic, and community standards for transitioning youth may counter or complicate realization of adulthood as measured by the larger society. This presentation provides a conceptual framework and orientation from which to accomplish this feat, coupled with preliminary research findings from a qualitative exploratory project to better understand the unique needs of ethnic minority former foster youth. The presentation was delivered as an oral presentation entitled “Foster youth transitioning into higher education: Applying a sociocultural and situative lens”, at the 64th Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education.

Keywords: Foster youth, ethnic minority youth, transitioning youth, transition into adulthood, success, sociocultural, situative, diversity
Foster Youth Transitioning into Higher Education: Applying a Sociocultural and Situative Lens.

The 64th Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education took place in Orlando, Florida from November 8 to 11, 2018. The conference was entitled *Expanding Interprofessional Education to Achieve Social Justice*. This author was invited to provide an oral presentation entitled *Foster youth transitioning into higher education: Applying a sociocultural and situative lens* on the third day of the conference. This presentation, delivered as part of the child welfare track of the conference, was based on a conceptual manuscript and preliminary findings from a qualitative study which are part of the author’s banded dissertation. Attendees at the presentation included social work educators from different areas of the United States, as well as at least one current social work practitioner presently working with adolescents in foster care.
**Figure 3.1.** The following oral presentation summarized here focused on the ways in which social work educators can work together with practitioners to support the needs of ethnically and culturally diverse former foster youth as they transition into adulthood. The presentation began with an introduction to sociocultural and situational theory. The author discussed aspects of his own experiences as a first generation Mexican American and how these experiences helped to shape how he interpreted, internalized, and created meaning of experiences throughout his life, particularly in regard to experiences in education at all levels from elementary school through doctoral education. Examples of how these experiences were markedly different from those of peers from other ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds were presented.

![Image](image.png)

**How have we traditionally measured a successful transition into adulthood?**

- Physical separation from family
- Independent living
- Success in Higher Education
- Career Initiation
- Financial Independence

**Figure 3.2.** Following the initial introduction and framing of the presentation, traditional measures of successful transition from adolescence to adulthood were discussed. Many traditional measures of success, namely; physical separation from family, living independently,
enrolling in and successfully completing higher education programs, career initiation, and financial independence were used to illustrate the customary measures applied to quantify success for youth experiencing this life stage. These measures are rooted in a Euro-western tradition, which values individualism and personal success over collectivism and mutual success (Pao, 2017).

Figure 3.3. When applying these conventional markers of success, foster care alum lag far behind their peers on all measures. Due to their status as former foster youth, many begin this transition in a markedly disadvantaged state. Many are isolated from informal support systems to include their immediate and extended families and cultural communities (Curry and Abrams, 2015). Due to this separation and isolation many are unable to access the very supports that assist them as they transition into adulthood.
Former foster youth lag far behind their peers in regard to academic achievement. Many youth in foster care also experience several changes in school settings resulting from their multiple home placements (Clemens, Lalonde, and Phillips Sheesley, 2016). These placements at times result in difficulties related to consistency in academic instruction and expectations which can severely hinder their successful completion of requirements in primary and secondary education settings (Pecora, Williams, Kessler, Hiripi, O’Brien, Emerson, Herrick, and Torres, 2006). Academic success for current and former foster youth is also negatively impacted by traumatic experiences they have had before, during, and after their involvement in the child welfare system (Bruce, Naccarato, Hopson, and Morelli, 2010). The academic struggles of former foster youth during childhood and adolescence has a direct impact on their educational pursuits following high school and GED completion. Few enroll in institutions of higher learning and even fewer progress to graduation with a higher education degree (Salazar, 2013).
Figure 3.4. For ethnic minority youth in general, a transition into higher education settings in particular can be wrought with barriers to success. Ethnic minority youth are overly represented among first generation college students and for many, college campuses may seem like a foreign and unwelcoming land (Tijerina and Deepak, 2014). Many struggle to feel that they belong on college campuses when they struggle to see themselves represented among other students and faculty (Castellanos, Gloria, Besson and Harvey, 2016).

Youth of color may also find it difficult to navigate the sometimes conflicting messages related to identity development as an adult when tempered with the expectations associated with identity development as dictated by their ethnic, racial, and cultural community (Roller White, O’Brien, Jackson, Havalchak, Phillips, Thomas, and Cabrera, 2008). This can be especially true for youth from Indigenous communities who must many times leave the protection and support of their communities (Lawler, LaPlante, Giger, and Norris, 2012). Others may struggle with the contradictory pressures associated with independence expressed by the dominant culture and that of interdependence stressed by the traditional values of their community (Long, Downs, Gillette, Kills in Sight, and Iron-Cloud Konen, 2006).
Figure 3.5. Among African American youth transitioning into adulthood we see additional barriers to success. These young people continue to be at greater risk for overt hate, violence, and discrimination (Reynolds and Maryweather, 2017). They must also learn to overcome the obstacles to success presented to them as a result of higher incidences of poverty and poorer education systems. These difficulties many times are also manifested internally through internalized racism, hopelessness, and higher incidents of depression (Goldston, Molock, Witbeck, Murakami, Zayas, and Hall, 2008).

For Hispanic young people, there appears to be a direct relationship between acculturation levels and academic success, specifically the higher the degree of acculturation, the higher the degree of success in educational settings (Altschul, Oyserman, and Bysbee, 2008). For many, language may become a barrier as this minority population of youth has a lower English proficiency rate than any other (Vaquera, 2009). Recent political posturing and changes to
immigration policy have also resulted in higher levels of anxiety and fear among youth from Hispanic communities (Zamudio-Suarez, 2017).

**Figure 3.6.** In order to accurately assess the needs of youth who are members of both a minority ethnic group, as well as formerly in foster care, a sociocultural and situative theoretical lens was applied. Sociocultural theory describes the interpretation and retention of new learning as an internal process that is highly influenced by the environment (Fernandez, Mercer, Wegerif, & Rojas-Drummond, 2015). Situational Learning further posits that the immediate environment is central to how new information is internalized by the learner (Järvenoja, Järvelä, & Malmber, 2015). Through the combination of these theories as applied to learning and skill acquisition among ethnic minority former foster youth, we are given a more complete picture of their needs as they transition into adulthood, a depiction that is consistent with the person-in-environment focus of the social work profession.
Figure 3.7. As social work educators and practitioners, it is incumbent upon us to thoughtfully and systematically address the needs of this vulnerable population, a population that experiences oppression on multiple levels. It is essential that we explore the complex individual needs of each ethnic minority youth exiting foster care, while honoring the multiple influences that frame their unique reality. To begin to accomplish this, we must broaden our understanding of what constitutes an effective transition into adulthood in a way that allows for cultural interpretation of markers of success. We also have a duty to also assist our young people to reach out to formal and informal support systems on college campuses and from within their communities of origin.
Figure 3.8. In order to fully realize this challenge, the preceding three branch conceptual model for supporting ethnic minority former foster youth is proposed. The visual depiction of the three branches of the tree helps to illustrate that in order to understand and support each individual young person, we must assess their needs on three levels; the individual level, their needs as former foster youth, and their needs as ethnic minority youth. At the individual level, former foster youth often require support to help them deal with the multiple incidences of trauma they have experienced, which in turn helps to account for their higher levels of advanced behavioral health needs. As former foster youth, we must explore their needs relative to the well-known struggles of foster care alumni. These include, but are not limited to; housing, educational assistance, financial support, transportation needs, and life skills development. It is of paramount importance for ethnic minority youth that assistance is provided to them that aids and supports their efforts to help to increase their connection to family, community, and cultural support systems. These efforts help to sustain their efforts toward ethnic identity development and
broaden our definition of success to include the norms and cultural values of their communities of origin.

*Figure 3.9.* The research component of this banded dissertation involved a qualitative exploratory study designed to attempt to get a clearer picture of the everyday realities for foster care alum from ethnic minority communities. This endeavor included a series of individual interviews with youth who had recently emancipated from foster care, that were later evaluated using NVivo qualitative analysis software. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was utilized to try and ascertain main themes expressed by interview participants. Findings from preliminary analysis were discussed with presentation attendees. These findings illustrated that themes most commonly expressed by interviewees were related to what they felt were most pressing concerns in their present lives. These items illustrated both themes common to all youth
transitioning into adulthood including education and finances; however, also included two additional themes that centered around family affairs and concerns relative to their community.

Figure 3.10. As the sample size for the qualitative study was relatively small and included only youth from one rural southwestern state, future research considerations included first a recommendation for deeper evaluation of the needs of ethnic minority former foster youth applied to youth from various types of communities across the country. Secondly, testing of the proposed conceptual model is recommended. Following these endeavors, it is recommended that the results of such research pursuits inform the development of formal policies and procedures to help serve ethnic minority youth during and after their involvement in the child welfare system.
Figure 3.11. Social work educators must take the lead in working toward more completely and accurately serving the needs of this vulnerable population. As many ethnic minority former foster youth are already on college campuses, we must reach out to them and allow ourselves and our social work departments to become a hub of support for them. We can begin by identifying campus based and community supports and provide this information to those vulnerable youth.

Social work educators can also work to expand mentorship and support programs designed for first-generation and ethnic minority youth, both groups largely represented in this subpopulation of college students. Advocacy can be modeled through efforts to encourage understanding and support for family and community obligations of these young people that may present themselves in their lives and assist them to meet those obligations while maintaining their success in their educational endeavors. Expansion of programs and services to serve the behavioral health needs of former foster youth are also warranted. Perhaps most crucial to working toward better serving ethnic minority former foster youth is to increase communication
and collaborations between social work educators and social work practitioners to more fully understand the diverse needs of ethnic minority former foster youth. It is essential that these efforts include supporting youth not only on traditional measures of successful transition, but must also include support for diverse measures of a success that may be indicated by their ethnic, cultural, and geographic communities. Following the previous slide, a short question and answer period was engaged in. Questions and discussion centered around recommendations for ways in which social work educators and practitioners can better support ethnic minority former foster youth as they transitioned from care into adulthood.
References continued


Figure 3.13