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## A Social Worker's Perspective on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

Rachael N. Morris

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*A Social Worker's Perspective on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care*

By

Rachael N. Morris B.S

M.S.W. Clinical Research Paper

**Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University**

**St. Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Social Work**

**Committee Members**

**Katharine Hill, PhD, MSW, MPP, LISW**

**Michelle Lesley, MSW, MPH**

**Elizabeth Scudder, MA**

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for the MSW students at the University of St. Thomas/St. Catherine University School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore what social workers are doing to help youth age out of the foster care system. This research project gathered data in a qualitative study from social workers and how they help youth gain the needed skills to achieve self-sufficiency before they age out at age twenty-one. The researcher was able to obtain ten interviews from interviewees across the state of Minnesota. From the interviews, six themes had been established and categorized as the following: *resources, the model or framework used in the work, supports, relationships youth have, approaches centered on youth strengths and empowerment, struggles youth face and permanency.* Further research is needed to look at how youth are fairing in the foster care system since the *Fostering Connections and Adoptions Act of 2008*. It is important to continue looking at research pertaining to foster care that helps the youth attain self-sufficiency.

### **Acknowledgments**

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### **Introduction**

The *Encyclopedia of Children's Health* has defined foster care as: “a full-time

substitute care of children outside their own home by people other than their biological or adoptive parents or legal guardians” (2013) Children are in foster care for many different reasons. In most cases, they have suffered physical or sexual abuse, or neglect in their home and are removed from their family to be placed in a safer environment. In some cases, children are in foster care due to the parent being incarcerated, substance abuse problems and cannot take care of their children, or parents having mental health issues. Children are removed from their homes for a period of time while a social worker determines if the child will go back home or stay in care (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Kinship care involves an adult from the child’s immediate family circle who is not part of the immediate family but who is willing to take the child into their care and raise them in their own family.

Every year, there are nearly 20,000 youth that age out of the foster care system in the United States (Antle, Johnson Barbee & Sullivan, 2009). This means that the youth have left the foster care system somewhere between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one. The Casey Family Foundation (2005) indicates that most children in the foster care system are being in the system for more than five years without finding a safe, everlasting environment before they emancipate from the system. “Age out” is defined as youth not having a goal of reunifying with their biological family prior to leaving the system before they turn eighteen (Shook, Goodkind, Pohlig, Schelbe, Herring & Kim, 2011). Typically foster care youth are discharged from a county system and are no longer able to receive foster care assistance at the age of twenty-one (Geenen & Powers, 2007).

For most young people, the move into adulthood is an ongoing process that does not happen automatically after turning eighteen. Young adults go off to college or the

work force and eventually will rely less on their parents. They will gradually become more prepared to meet their own needs over time though this does not happen right away. Parents are there to provide support both financially and emotionally, which help youth transition into adulthood. Youth who age out of foster care more often than not do not have the emotional or financial support from family and transition into adulthood on their own. Without parental support, foster youth have higher rates of homelessness and non-marital pregnancies. (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009).

Each state sets guidelines for when youth are no longer eligible to stay in the foster care system and need to be discharged. In the past, children who turned eighteen were typically discharged out of government assistance programs and were left to navigate adulthood on their own. It has been determined that youth who age out of foster care may be less equipped to take on adulthood once they reach the age of eighteen compared to youth who are not in the foster care system (Avery & Freundlich, 2009). An attempt is made to reunify foster care youth with their biological families. Some youth who are able to reconnect can begin rebuilding. Each state has different policies that are mandated by the current legislation of the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008*. This act mandates that children aging out of foster care are eligible for extended services through age twenty in order to move into independence.

Per the *Fostering Connections to Success Act of 2008* youth have the option to stay in foster care until age twenty-one. Also, this Act mandates permanency options to clients as young as young as fourteen up until age twenty-one. Each county or state in the United States has the ability to decide how to distribute foster care funds for extended foster care and how to create their own programming. Also, the Chafee fund provides

education funding to these young people to obtain post-secondary education up until age twenty-three if they apply by age twenty-one.

Most programs are geared toward helping youth develop independent living skills. These funds allocated to states allow programs to empower youth to plan for their future and connects them to community supports and resources. Resources may vary in different states but most states are able to provide financial assistance including assistance with education, basic needs including housing, and skill building. They also have the opportunity to collaborate with various agencies to address barriers and concerns expressed by youth (Okpych, 2012). In general, social workers are spread thin and funding does not always allow for all needs to be addressed. However, states are mandated to make every effort to comply with *Fostering Connections Act of 2008*. This paper will look at how foster care youth can best prepare to transition out of foster care.

### **Literature Review**

Foster care is one of the many components dealt within social work in child welfare. A social worker that works with foster care youth must be involved in bringing that child to permanency by the time they reach the age of eighteen. It is the hope of the child welfare system to reunite that child with his or her family. However, sometimes that is not an option and the social worker must assist the youth in transitioning to adulthood. This may involve teaching youth the skills needed toward emancipation.

Social workers must do what they can to promote skill building to move youth along the spectrum toward adulthood and be self-sufficient once they leave care. The ultimate goal is to transition the youth out of foster care by empowering them with the skills for the future. This paper will address issues on permanency, legislation that led up to services available for foster youth- education and employment, relationship building and transitioning out of care.

### **Permanency**

Permanency can be a number of things to any youth. When a youth is in foster care they may be trying to find legal permanency with a family meaning they are trying to find a family to enter into, to help them go into adulthood. Permanency may be emotional, where a foster youth is looking for someone to be there emotionally while they transition out of the foster care system. In the state of Minnesota, permanency looks different for each youth depending on the county or tribe they reside in. Hennepin County separates foster care youth by age. Foster youth between the ages of fourteen and seventeen try to find permanency through adoption. Those who are still in care after their eighteenth birthday up until twenty-one will move into the Extended Foster Care Program and receive services to help support them once they leave care. In Ramsey County, all

foster youth remain with the same case managers to support them until they age out of foster care.

Pecora (2012) stated the following of permanency:

All children need a caring adult in their lives who is willing to serve as an advocate for them. Helping children find “forever families” increases the likelihood that they will receive the ongoing coaching, training, and support necessary to live successfully as adults in the community (p.1127).

One thing social workers try to achieve with foster youth is permanency.

Permanency, as defined by Avery (2010) is “a relationship that is safe and meant to last a lifetime” (p.403). Permanency gives a youth a sense of belonging. They are connected to a family for support that consists of physical, emotional, and social assistance. Legally, permanency planning must occur for any child in placement away from their family. This includes either reunification with their family or stabilizing them in a more long-term placement (such as permanent custody to the agency, group homes, treatment facilities, or adoption, etc.). Massinga & Pecora (2004) stated that the goal of permanency “is not to help children live in families, it is to have them rejoin or join families” (p.156). Social workers try to place the youth in a family that will promote stability. Most foster youth reunify with their family of origin after leaving care (Massinga & Pecora, 2004).

However, for those that do not reunite, other forms of permanency must be explored like adoption and transfer of physical and legal custody. Youth in foster care who experience multiple placement disruptions have a harder time establishing daily living skills such as managing finances, resolving conflict, and organizing abilities that are usually sustained through relationships with supportive adults (Okpych, 2012).

**How we got there - Policies and mandates**

In 1986, the U.S. Congress passed the *Independent Living Initiative* that gave states \$70 million. The purpose of this initiative was to teach youth between the ages of sixteen and eighteen skills to live independently when they leave care. Policy makers had become concerned with the foster care system when youth exiting care were becoming homeless, incarcerated, or seeking help with welfare. In 1999, the law was changed again by doubling the funding to \$140 million and became the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA). This act allowed states to provide services to youth under sixteen and extend Medicaid coverage to youth up to age twenty-one.

In 2001, ETV (Education and Training Voucher) was added to FCIA. Money was set aside to support post-secondary education specifically for foster youth. Foster care youth, who desire a secondary education, are eligible to apply for grant funds of up to \$5,000 per year until age twenty-three. In 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 allowed states the option to provide youth the opportunity to remain in care. This law allows states to prolong the age of youth leaving care up to age twenty-one. The law ensures states are responsible for providing basic needs to youth in care as well as provide youth opportunities to apply for educational funding. Under this act, Medicaid can be extended beyond age eighteen. Further, housing is available until the youth are discharged if they remain in compliance with the federal regulations of Extended Foster Care (Okpych, 2012). Another important component of this act is to begin permanency planning earlier in the life of the foster care youth. The purpose of this is to give a youth more long-term stability.

Okpych (2012), states that even though Congress created these laws, each state may or may not follow them to the full extent of what the law recommends. Minnesota has eighty-seven counties and many tribes that have implemented the latest legislation on foster youth. These counties and tribes are state and federally funded to implement programs for foster care. They have the option to follow the law as it is or can create their own services that they will provide to youth. Some states have put aside money to create scholarships, tuition waivers, and grants that apply to youth who are in the foster care system but not all states do this. Kirk and Day (2011) research have determined that the youth who are intellectually or artistically bright may not be aware of their educational options. They may believe that college is unattainable because they are unaware of the financial possibilities, procedures, or even the eligibility criteria for foster care youth.

Social workers are mandated federally to make reasonable efforts to reunite children, if possible with their families or to help them obtain permanency on their own. Social workers are mandated to follow the *Fostering Connections Act of 2008* and are required to assist as much in helping youth transition out of foster care.

### **Independent Living Skills - What is needed**

Independent living skills training provides youth the skill set to function independently. Many youth receive guidance from their parents and families. For those youth that do not have the opportunity, social workers assist in filling that gap. Their role is to encourage foster care youth to complete tasks before transitioning out of foster care. These tasks may include, education, employment, financial management, identifying transportation needs, health care options, planning for housing, social and recreation

opportunities, and identifying and creating permanent connections. Youth gain knowledge of independent living skills formally and informally (Shin, 2009). Youth in foster care often have a difficult time transitioning into adulthood compared to their peers who have stable support from families. Additionally, youth in foster care are expected to be independent earlier, while their peers who were not in out-of-home care receive additional support from their families. These supports may include financial, physical, and emotional support. Foster youth may not have that advantage. (Schelbe, 2011).

Propp, Ortega & NewHeart, (2003) discuss tangible and intangible skills youth need to achieve self-sufficient. Tangible skills may be measured by education, job skills, finding housing and money management. Intangible skills are less concrete like decision-making, communication, self-esteem and social skills. Intangible skills are often more difficult to teach to youth and requires more relationship building. Youth in the foster care system will need to obtain life skills with the help of their social worker and their social support system. This includes assisting with post-secondary schooling, extending medical insurance to age twenty-one, increase school stability and transportation costs. Older youth have the option to take part in services if they choose and maintain eligibility.

According to Rosemary Avery's (2010) research from 2005 and 2006, "...independent living programs have proven inadequate to prepare youth for "independence" in any meaningful way" (p. 399). She goes on to say that these programs did not prepare foster youth for adulthood and being successfully independent. Foster youth leaving care were unconnected to resources and adults that would help them navigate adulthood, unlike youth who came from supportive homes. Avery went on to

say that giving youth the independent living skills they need for succeeding in adulthood earlier in care would better prepare them for adulthood. She felt that since the *Fostering Connections Act of 2008* was mandated that this was a hopeful sign for the future. It assured that these skills would be taught earlier to have positive results.

### **Education**

Education is an essential independent living skill for youth transitioning out of foster care. Graduating from high school gives youth a sense of accomplishment. Currently youth in America have a dropout rate of 20% (Pecora, 2012). According to the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, in 2003 “of the 387 seniors in a group of youth experiencing maltreatment, 47% successfully graduated from high school” (2006). Youth that are emotionally or physically leave the foster care system before they are ready, tend not to graduate. When a foster youth changes their living arrangements often, school records may not transfer in a timely manner. Within each placement move, the youth may fall behind in school and transfer schools, resulting in a lack of educational continuity. In 2009, four out of ten youth in the foster care system have lived in more than three placement settings (Pecora, 2012). A youth who has placement consistency will have a more positive time in school and in the foster care system (Pecora, 2012). When youth have placement issues and need to be moved, they lose a significant amount of time in school due to coordination between schools and credits being transferred. The *Fostering Connections Act of 2008* has begun to address educational and placement stability but this remains an issue.

Youth who are moved from one placement to another during the school year are at risk of falling behind and school records not being transferred timely. This hinders the

youth by robbing the stability they find at school by placing them into a new educational setting (Pecora, 2012). The more stable the school placement, the better chance of graduation. According to Lenz-Rashid (2006) foster youth are at a disadvantage if they have low reading retention rate and do not graduate high school. Their ability to progress in the “real world” falters behind those who have graduated high school.

### **Employment**

Employment is another important independent living skill necessary for transition. Youth who age out of foster care tend to fall behind and progress at a slower rate than other youth in the labor market (Harris, Jackson, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2009). Before discharge from foster care, employment helps the youth gain knowledge in the areas of social and employability skills that are needed when the youth emancipates from the system. Gaining and keeping employment is important to youth whether in the foster care system or not. Studies have shown that youth who have a work history prior to being discharged from care will have a more positive likelihood to have employment post discharge (Hook & Courtney, 2011). Without employment experience foster youth may be at a loss once they leave the system. Employment helps youth gain experience with personal contacts, teamwork, and social skills that are all necessary in a healthy adulthood. Youth with considerable employment history while in secondary school are more likely to graduate than youth with less experience (Pecora, 2012).

### **Relationships**

Foster youth may feel isolated and disconnected from others in their life which makes it harder for them to build relationships (Stott, 2012). The relationship between foster youth and social worker is one of the most important relationships that the foster

youth will experience. The social worker can model what a healthy relationship looks like. The social worker has to be reliable, supportive, and show the youth how to effectively communicate. The worker is one of the most consistent people in the youth's life (Geenen & Powers, 2007).

Part of transitioning out of foster care is having positive and reliable relationships with others. Research discusses the importance of mentoring programs for foster youth. Mentoring helps empower youth (Kaplan, Skolnik & Turnbull, 2009). Kaplan et al., (2009) states that youth mentoring programs aim to provide positive, long-term relationships that help guide the youth to a positive path when they leave care. Through guidance and support a social worker can help the transition process be more fruitful.

Friendships among youth are an important aspect of growing up. Foster youth may have a difficult time making friends due to being in the foster care system. Shook, Vaughn, Litschge, Kolivoski & Schelbe (2008) state that a youth needs to have friends that they may be able to lean on for support. A youth's friendship with peers help shape the emotional and cognitive developments of how a youth interacts with others. This may help a youth be more confident and have better skills for navigating life. These peers may sometimes replace the family that the youth is missing. If a youth has more positive relationships in their life, they tend to be more successful with independent living.

Sadly, relationships often are lacking with foster youth. Many foster youth feel disconnected and have a hard time forming relationships with others, as they get older. Additionally, their instability in placements makes it difficult to connect with others. Youth feel a loss of normalcy when they have to leave their placement quickly and do not

get the opportunity to say goodbye. With each move, they lose contact with friends and family (Stott, 2012).

“The importance of a caring, stable relationship is depicted as an important foundation of trust upon which new relationships can be formed” (Geenen & Powers, 2007, 1092). Research indicates foster youth have stressed the need of constantly adapting to new rules and expectations with every change in placement affects their sense of self-worth (Geenen & Powers, 2007).

Stott and Gustavsson explain the following:

The loss and disruption of norms, social networks, education, friendships, and significant relationships that characterizes the placement experiences of some youth in foster care can result in youth disconnecting from relationships. The disconnectedness can hinder youths’ abilities to form trusting relationships and thus interfere with their likelihood of attaining legal permanence (2010, p. 619).

Stott and Gustavsson (2010) also stated that placement disruption has been the greatest hindrance to foster youth’s success. Youth mourn the loss of significant relationships due to having limited historical and background information, which could affect their ability to relate to others. Youth need stability while in the foster care system.

### **Transitioning out of care**

As foster care youth approach the age of eighteen, they are more than likely going to be exiting the foster care system. Before they reach this point, funding from the *Fostering Connections Act of 2008* and the Education Training Vouchers gives youth the option to seek out post-secondary school and independent living skills training to prepare for adulthood. “Independent living postulates that youth who age out of the foster care

system must possess certain skills or competencies in order to function autonomously once they are no longer in the care of the state” (Antle et al. 2009, 309). When youth emancipate from the foster care system, they are expected to have social skills and independent living skills, experiences in both education and job training and have money saved (Lenz-Rashid, 2011).

Youth in the foster care system will need to obtain life skills before they exit the system with the help of their social worker and their social support system. With the current *Fostering Connections Act of 2008*, social workers are expected to link youth with services available to them before they are discharged. This includes assisting with post-secondary schooling, extending medical insurance to age twenty-one, school stability and transportation costs provided. Youth have the option to take part in services if they want.

Rosenwald, McGhee & Noftall describe Independent Living Services as a: “set of federally and state-funded service delivery programs for youth to promote “increased educational attainment, higher employment rates and stability, greater interpersonal and relationship skills, reduced non-marital pregnancy and births, reduced delinquency and crime rates” (2013, 148).

These services are mandates of the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008*.

The *Fostering Connections Act of 2008* also requires stabilization and permanency in placement “... youth who have a positive relationship with a stable placement family are twice as likely to complete high school. If youth do not move between homes, they are more likely to develop networks of support and coaching that

can help them further develop their life skills and they have more chance to benefit independent living training” (Pecora, 2012, p. 1124).

Propp, Ortega and NewHeart (2003) explain, “an interdependent framework represents the values of connection and collaboration as a healthy approach to development and growth. This requires involving the voices of youth in ways that traditional child welfare systems often neglect to do” (p.263). Schelbe (2011) explains that interdependence helps youth lead successful lives as adults - not independence. Propp and colleagues explain that youth will learn how to advocate for themselves and be a part of the decision making process while in foster care.

Along with permanency planning, research has stated that youth want to be a part of they're own planning. In 2007, Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick & Painter explained that case plans involving foster youth tended to be decided prior to the social worker meeting the youth. Plans tended not be customized or the youth was not consulted with. Foster youth want to be involved in their planning and to be aware of the time line before they exit care. Youth want to be in control of their lives. Geenen and Powers (2007) state: transition planning should involve youth and their own voice in planning for their future. They should be able to choose the path that they would like to take and object to the path that they are not in favor of. In a study done by Geenen & Powers (2007) one youth who participated in the study stated:

We need to see what's out there, what's out there for me, so I can make my own mistakes and I can learn from them. I don't think the case workers should push you into something you don't want to do just because they think it's the best thing

for you. They're not going to hold your hand for you when you get out of care (p.1090).

### **Minnesota**

Minnesota has implemented the *Fostering Connections Act of 2008*, which provides case management services, and extended foster care that gives youth access to resources to the age twenty-one. The case managers work with the youth to provide support, financial planning and help them transition from the system to independence when they reach the age of twenty-one. The counties within Minnesota are mandated to specify what services they will provide to youth who are staying in care until they age out.

According to the Minnesota Department of Human Services website, many counties in Minnesota have adopted Youth-in-Transition Conferencing (YTC) in their policies following the aging out process. The YTC process enables youth to take control of the planning of their future. A YTC brings together all the important people in the youth's life including, biological family, service providers, teachers, kin, and friends to help the youth plan their discharge from the foster care system. These conferences are geared toward being strength-based and driven to empowering the youth (2013).

### **Research question**

Research has indicated that youth aging out of the foster care system have been less prepared to face adulthood than other youth their age. Youth who age out of foster care have not gained the needed skills to complete their education, live independently or be prepared for a job. Without these skills to navigate adulthood, youth leaving foster care have higher rates of homelessness, non-marital parenthood, and are likely to be

incarcerated. Based on the themes found within the research surrounding this issue, the proposed research question is: From a social workers perspective, what skills do foster care youth need in order to successfully transition from foster care?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical framework used for this section of the paper will be the developmental theory. Erikson's developmental theory addresses traveling through one's lifespan by accomplishing certain developmental skills that carry one into adulthood. These tasks include building "trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity, and integrity" (<http://web.cortland.edu/andersmd/erik/sum.html>). By accomplishing these skills, one will hopefully develop into a stable, loving, secure adult. The theory indicates that failure to complete anyone of these stages will create an inability to successfully launch to the next phase.

Again, Erikson's theory describes different stages of development throughout one's life. In the first stage, a baby will gain a sense of trust and will begin to depend on those caring for him or her. As one becomes a toddler, a new world opens up where one begins to let go of this caretaker and begins to gain a sense of self. The toddler starts experiencing independence and able to separate self from others. In phase three (preschooler), the child begins to learn self control and is also able to accept tasks at hand and begins goal setting behavior. Latency age (ages six to puberty) is phase four. Curiosity sets in and the child becomes very inquisitive and interested in his or her surroundings. In adolescence or stage five, one becomes aware of their sexual identity, becomes attracted to others and starts exhibiting testing behavior. The thrust of

adolescence is to form one's own identity and to learn independence. There are three other levels of this theory. However, for the sake of this paper, the definitions will stop at stage six or young adults. In this stage, children become functioning adults who are able to have intimate relations with others, become self-sufficient and are able to demonstrate commitments to others (Ashford, Winston-LeCroy & Lortie, 2006)

The Casey Family Foundation describes transitions as being a normal occurrence and takes place throughout various stages in one's life. Transitions occur due to major changes in life events including marriage, divorce, death, relocation, getting a new job and attending college (2008). It is these life-changing circumstances that can happen at anytime in one's life. They can alter one's outlook on life and totally interrupt the path that one is on. "For adolescents in care, their experience of physical separation from birth parents, child abuse and neglect, an extended stay in foster care systems often negatively influence the normative developmental tasks associated with adolescence" (Shin, 2009, p. 42).

Forming an identity in adolescence is one of the significant tasks that are necessary before becoming an adult. In order to be successful, youth need to have stability over time. However, many youth in foster care have lost that stability by being separated from family and those are the people that help form one's character and uniqueness (Shin, 2009). Erikson indicates that one must accomplish physical, emotional and cognitive tasks in order. Foster care youth often have difficulty transitioning from stage to stage.

Youth in foster care have negative experiences as part of their life. They may lack trust, fail school; make poor choices, lack interest, etc. From the beginning, many

foster care youth experience mistrust, and this sets a pattern which conflicts with all future levels of development. When children are not in their original home and removed for any time, development can be disrupted and can contribute to delays in their growth. Children in foster care sometimes have significant delays in their development due to being placed several times during their stay in the system (Shin, 2009).

In order for a youth to transition successfully into adulthood, it is important to assist that youth to rectify the tasks that were disrupted. By doing that, one can then move that youth forward into transitioning out of foster care and into independence (Salahu & Bollman, 1994). Anywhere along the way, foster care youth must have positive experiences to rectify each stage of life. Stability in placement and adequate skills sets help foster care youth age out of foster care successfully.

**Design**

**Methodology**

Foster care youth age out of the system often before they are ready to take on adulthood. This study has focused on the skills that foster care youth try to accomplish before leaving the foster care system from a social worker's perspective. Qualitative research is a conglomerate of methods and practices (Punch, 1998). A qualitative research method was used to find what social workers do to help youth reach self-sufficiency before leaving the foster care system. Interviews were conducted with twelve open-ended questions (See Appendix B). This researcher selected ten social workers through professional contacts from various agencies that provide services to foster care youth.

### **Sampling**

Sampling is an important part of research. Monette, Sullivan & DeJong (2011) discuss sampling as "a possible glimpse of the behavior and attitudes of whole groups of people" (p.135). This researcher looked to conduct eight interviews with social workers or case managers that work with foster youth in various agencies in Minnesota. Instead, this researcher was able to reach out to two more participants from suggestions of interviewees and ended up with ten interviews. The sample of participants was non-random. Each participant was asked twelve questions pertaining to the research (See Appendix B for questions). An email was sent to several public and private child welfare agencies in January 2014 looking for volunteers to participate in this research study. This researcher looked for interviewees that work with youth between the ages of sixteen to twenty-one in a foster care program. Interviews were held between January 27<sup>th</sup> and February 18<sup>th</sup>. Interviews ranged in time frame of nineteen minutes to fifty-five minutes. After interviews completed, this researcher transcribed each interview. Each transcript

did not have any identifying markers of the participant. Once the interview had been transcribed, this researcher deleted the audio recording of the interview. This researcher then went through each transcript and looked for common themes in the data.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Participants signed a consent form to participate in the study (See Appendix A). Participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were able to see the questions if they wanted to before agreeing to participate. Participants were not identified in the report and will remain anonymous. The data was collected by audio recorder and kept secure in on a password-protected ipod and ensured the confidentiality of all participants. Each interview was deleted once it had been transcribed. A sample consent form can be found in Appendix A. All audio recordings have been deleted and all transcriptions of the interviews will be destroyed May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

### **Data Collection**

The Institutional Review Board of University of St. Thomas gave approval for this study on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2013. E-mails were sent out to agencies working with foster youth the week of January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014. This researcher conducted each interview individually though in one interview it was a combined interview due to time constraints. Interviews ranged from nineteen minutes to fifty-five minutes at a location that was convenient to the participant. This researcher downloaded a few free audio recording apps on to an ipod to use as a recording device. This researcher conducted a structured interview. The questions were pre-planned and approved by this researcher's research professor and the committee that had been previously selected before interviews started. After each interview this researcher transcribed the interviews and began data collecting

by looking for themes within the interviews. Questions pertaining to this study can be found in Appendix B.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was done using a grounded theory approach. Monette and colleagues defined grounded theory as “letting theory emerge from, or ‘be grounded’, in the data. There is a continual interplay between data collection, analysis and theory development” (2011, p.225). It is an established set of demanding research measures leading to the arrival of theoretical categories (<http://www.groundedtheory.com>). Monette and colleagues describe grounded theory as “Proponents of qualitative methods argue that concepts and theories produced by such grounded approaches provide a more valid representation of some phenomena, because they emerge directly from the phenomena being studied” (2011, p.226).

This researcher used grounded theory by coming up with a research question that was of interest to the researcher. The researcher then looked for literature relating to the topic. Once the literature was read, this researcher then assembled the material that lead to forming interview questions. This researcher contacted various agencies to find participants and conducted ten interviews with social workers. After the interviews were conducted, this researcher transcribed all ten interviews. After the interviews were transcribed, this researcher looked for common themes found within the transcripts. This process is called coding. Monette and colleagues (2011) explain that coding is sorting attitude or words into groups. The themes that this researcher set out to look for were a combination of words pertaining to permanency, independent living, and relationships and transitioning from foster care. This researcher will present the findings of the

interviews and other information pertaining to the research in a presentation in front of an audience in May 2014.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Monette and colleagues (2011) explains some of the strengths in doing qualitative research are allowing one's values and meanings to be more personal; research can be done in a natural non-forced way; and the person can describe the words and meanings more easily. Themes can appear within the research from the questions asked. Doing this research as a qualitative approach allows the researcher to ask the social workers working with foster care youth questions that gain the worker's personal experience and knowledge. This allows the workers to voice what has been working and what needs to change. Another strength to qualitative research, as stated by Kevin Punch (1998), is that observation is unstructured and that it allows the natural behavior to be open-ended. It allows events to proceed naturally without being influenced.

Monette and colleagues (2011) explain that a limitation to research could be a lack of communication from the researcher and how the interviewees may interpret the questions. Another limitation could be limitations by legislation. In spite of all knowledge of transitioning foster youth, there is little information after age twenty-one. This study is limited to the two most populated counties in Minnesota and how they are preparing foster youth discharging from the foster care system. It does not address how the rest of Minnesota counties are handling youth aging out of foster care. This study is only seeking information from a small population. Limitations to qualitative research are that the questions and the people interviewed are subjective. It looks at a targeted

population but is only a small sample of the bigger issue. Also, interviewees may not have enough experience to answer the questions asked during the interview.

### **Findings**

This researcher used a semi-standardized process during the interviews. This allowed the researcher to ask questions in a numerical order. If clarification or follow up questions were needed, this process allowed for it. This researcher sought out participants who specifically worked with foster youth. The researcher was able to interview ten social workers from different agencies in Minnesota. Each interviewee has experience working with foster youth.

Participant one is a female who has worked with foster youth for fifteen years. Currently participant one's role has changed within her agency and does not work with foster youth in the way she had previously done. Participant two has only worked with foster youth for six months and is also female. Participant three who is female has worked with youth for three years. Participant four who is a female has worked within her agency for fourteen years and has had various jobs working with youth. They have a different role within the agency, which brought a new perspective during the interview process. Participant five who is a female has worked with their agency for seven years. Participant five works with a specific foster care population within the agency. Participant six is a male and has worked within the agency for eight years. Participant seven is also a male and has worked with foster youth for six years. Participant eight is a male and at the time of interviewing just became a supervisor within his agency. He has worked with youth for seven and a half years. Participant nine is a female and is an

executive director of an agency and has worked with foster youth for six years.

Participant ten is also a female and has worked with foster youth for twenty-four years.

The researcher transcribed the interviews and then coded and analyzed the data. Seven major themes appeared during the coding process. The seven major themes are *resources, struggles youth face, the model or framework used in the work, supports, relationships youth have, approaches centered on youth strengths and empowerment, and permanency.*

### **Resources**

Resources and lack of resources, which are services and programs available to foster care youth, were mentioned quite often during the interview process. Resources are used for a variety of reasons. This researcher saw resources used in four subthemes. These subthemes were extended foster care, Youth-In-Transition conferencing, external resources and lack of resources. These speak to what services are available and unavailable to these youth.

#### **Extended Foster Care**

Extended Foster Care is a program for youth ages eighteen to twenty-one who continue to reside in foster care. Three participants had discussed extended foster care during the interview process. This is what they had said about it.

Participant four said:

*Every client who is in foster care at 17 ½ gets a letter from Hennepin County.*

*That letter, which is required by the Federal government, describes services that are available to youth in foster care and also after foster care.*

Participant eight expressed the following:

*The criteria for services to this group includes that the foster youth must be in some sort of educational arrangement. They basically need to be in high school, college or some post secondary education including barber schools, fork lift driving or any other type of training. They have to be working at least eighty hours per month and they have to be in a program designed to remove barriers to employment. So, basically, some type of program that helps them get employed or build skills. If they are medically unable to perform tasks, that needs to be determined by a doctor.*

Participant ten:

*“Extended foster care provides case management, but it also provides the financial support. Not all counties are in a position to do that”.*

Participant three said the following:

*Kids actually can stay in care up to age twenty-one now. Prior to that, their social worker/county worker and (don't quote me on time frames) must within that year, really provide support. They must also offer resources that are available to them to help them launch themselves if they choose to leave at age eighteen. They do have the option to stay in their foster home or they can live independently on their own and still get financial support from the county.*

### **Youth-In-Transition Conferencing (YTC)**

YTC involves a youth driven meeting and its purpose is to plan for emancipation to independent living. Participants explain more about this in the following:

Participant four explained the YTC process:

*It's a series of meetings and the very first meeting we talk about...well back up, the youth is there, the case manager is there and possibly a guardian ad litem.*

*They get to invite whom they want and whom the youth considers as family or who is important to them. The most supportive people in their lives and that can be birth family, teachers, church family, or anyone they consider family who are supportive. In the YTC process, we talk about the youth's strengths and needs.*

Participant six said:

*"YTC's are available to all youth in foster care age sixteen and older. Their worker needs to make a referral and the youth can decide if they want to have it or not. Either way is fine".*

Participant nine stated:

*It is a program offered to them and also one way to help the worker; the youth and the supportive people involved start talking about their future. It used to be that the foster youth would only look to their current situation and not beyond it. What is critical now, is that this YTC gives them a road to look down toward future planning. But, if they don't have anyone talking to them, it makes it hard.*

Participant ten:

*"However, with YTC's, there is really a process. We talk about resources that are available to them along the way so they can continue to plan to help make informed decisions".*

### **External Resources-what can the youth expect from the community**

External resources were mentioned quite often in the interview process as well.

External resources are classified as resources within the community and mentioned in the following segments from the interviews:

Participant one shared:

*We collaborate with Wings Financial, and they have been wonderful. They provide opportunities for young people to learn credit and what it means.*

*Checking account, savings account, how to write a check, how read a credit bureau report are some of lessons available. The foster youth go through that program for three to six months and upon successful completion, they receive money and open an actual account. It's like \$100 or something like that. That's one resource that we have really collaborated with in teaching life skills.*

Participant two said: *They also get an independent living skills person through the YMCA so they have someone who works specifically with them on this.....* Participant four said: *"YMCA life coaches, are a contracted service. What a case manager can't do to help walk along side the youth the life coaches do".....* Participant eight said: *"YMCA, is probably the most used. Life coaches assist our clients and help them with basically everything. They meet one on one weekly, they help get food, go shopping, teach them budgeting, etc.*

Participant seven:  
*While they are working with me, they can access our life coaches from the YMCA. I offer that to all of my clients. Some want it. Some don't. They can also participate in Connections 2 Independence (C2I) and start that at age fifteen or sixteen depending on their skill level but that's something that can follow them beyond two.*

Participant three:  
*If there are a number of youth that are saying they need help with college tours etc., we try to do a group thing so there's that. We also have ongoing leadership opportunities through the agency office and in all of our programming. We try to*

*be youth driven in what we do. We really try to put our money where our mouth is.*

Participant six:

*“I refer clients to YouthLink all of the time. I have had clients work with SafeZone over in St. Paul to get housing assistance”.*

Participant seven:

*We frequently use the Youth Opportunity Center. YMCA, etc. There are a number of places, including the Division of Indian Works that we use frequently. If we have clients out of state, we try to find resources for them in their area. There is a program called Connections 2 Independence that is based in Sabathani. If someone is involved in that program prior to them aging out (usually from age fifteen on) there is some grant money that allows the client to continue meeting with staff until the age of twenty-three. They can receive services, case management and caseworker support. Clients who are attending college can apply for ETV funds up until age twenty-four as long as they have applied for it in past years.*

Participant nine:

*“If there is a mental health issue, we try to get them into Front Door service. A good portion of our youth is diagnosed with some type of mental health issue”.*

Participant eight:

*Connections 2 Independence has programming on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays every week. They have fun stuff in the summer. It’s an agency that helps them build social skills too. We utilize the shelters here and have access for our youth with Avenues, Hope Street, People Serving People, and Harbor Lights. A lot of educational services like TRIO are in community colleges. We push that because it is basically there for first year students who are non-traditional*

*students and they help them with their funding for school, tutoring, etc. We provide everything that goes with education including, help with FAFSA, college applications, etc. There are check in hours to do any type of job skill that they want to do including job search and programming. Housing is another big thing- especially with our clients. They all want to move out and be on their own so we provide a lot of opportunities for housing. We have built significant relationships with apartments around here to help the youth build rental history. The ultimate goal is to build self-sufficiency and to teach the clients the skills to live on their own.*

### **Lack of Resources-those that are missing and those never started**

Two participants disclosed what they believe is a lack of resources;

Participant seven:

*There are fewer resources now than in the past. We only have one contracted housing resource. That is extremely limiting. When the youth get into the extended foster care program many have not held a job. There really isn't adequate resources offered to get work experience, which is extremely important, and they often end up with inadequate skills.*

Participant nine:

*We do not have our own housing program and housing is a huge barrier to success for our young people. There aren't a lot of housing options out there and youth in extended foster care receive an \$800 stipend. They aren't always ready to live in an apartment on their own. So we work really closely with The Link now and their different housing programs.*

### **Struggles Youth Face**

Youth struggles are the sixth major theme that had appeared throughout the coding process. This researcher recoded this major theme into six subthemes: past history, leaving care, mental health, lack of skills, transportation.

### **Past History**

A child comes into care as a result from many life situations. These situations dictate how the child will respond to any future endeavors. This section addresses how their choices become impacted.

Participant one said:

*“I have seen this over and over and I wish we could fix it. You can’t erase what the youth has experienced. These experiences definitely impact their judgment”.*

Participant two said:

*I just find that our youth are in a vulnerable position in terms of having to grow up quicker than other youth who haven’t experienced the same. That is unfair because I find that youth want to do what their peers are doing.*

Participant nine:

*“I personally don’t think anyone can overcome trauma but be able to manage it and to live with it. These kids have experienced so much”.*

Participant two:

*“I think for a lot of our youth, they have a life of a forty-eight year old by the time they are ten”.*

Participant three:

*“Staying in school is very difficult for highly mobile kids. They are all over the place in their relationships with their biological families, foster families, etc. The system is impossible”.*

### **Leaving care**

Leaving care came up once during the interview process when asked the question “Do youth know what is available to them if they terminate at age eighteen?” Participant three said the following:

*I guess it depends on why they want to transition out of care. Some youth want to stay in foster care because of the benefits and assistance they receive. Examples include; help finding apartments, financial assistance and support. It is my understanding that when you leave care, you only get state assistance.*

### **Mental Health**

Mental health is a major factor in how one perceives their future. It dictates how one sees themselves in the bigger world and how they approach different facets of their life. This subtheme came up often when discussing the question “What are some struggles youth face?” Two participants stated the following:

Participant four:

*I think mental health is a big one [struggle]. Therapy may have been shoved at them since entering the child welfare system and the youth are like” I don’t want to keep telling my story over and over”. However, therapy can help see the process that the youth has been through.*

Participant ten:

*“Mental health goes unaddressed quite often and that manifests in every different way as people age and don’t deal with it. Not addressing the trauma that youth endure each time they move from placement to placement becomes a roadblock”.*

Participant nine:

*I think the mental health piece is really challenging. Finding staff that can understand this population is hard work. You are dealing with kids who have experienced trauma and don’t know what their triggers are. Witnessing their*

*triggers by watching them experience their triggers can be hard to handle. Sometimes kids have experienced more trauma than what was previously known. We don't read their files; we just get the basics because we want to not taint an image of them. We want them to tell their story over time. I think that is also very unique of us. Youth put up walls and we help break them down to start the healing process. Teaching them why we care.*

### **Lack of Skills**

Two participants discussed the lack of skill they see in foster youth when they enter into the extended foster care program. The participant stated the following:

Participant seven:

*I don't think pushing it out is enough time to actually teach them all the skills that they need. They may not have had an opportunity to use these skills when they were younger. Sometimes our kids don't even get an allowance. All of a sudden they have moved out on their own and receive a stipend of \$800 and are expected to budget it out and pay rent. They don't know how and sometimes will go get things but when asked if they paid rent they say "no". Really, it is teaching them how to budget money and how to plan for money when it isn't there anymore.*

Participant eight:

*The three big struggles I see are continuing education because a lot of them are intimidated to go because of school loans. School in general may have been difficult for them. The other struggle I see is budgeting. To our clients it is a lot of money. They get \$800 a month to budget, to pay their rent, and a lot of them aren't good at budgeting or saving money. When they hit twenty-one, that check goes away and they are living at a different level.*

### **Transportation**

Two participants discussed transportation as being a struggle and stated the following:

Participant three:

*One thing that I keep thinking of is the transportation piece. We can set up for the youth to complete driver's education classes. But they don't have a car to practice on before taking the behind the wheel to get their license. So things like that. For some kids they can use their parent's car or a sibling's car but our kids don't have the same options.*

Participant four:

*"Transportation is sometimes a real hassle and barrier. One cannot afford a car or lives in a place where the public transportation isn't readily available".*

### **Model or Framework Used**

The participants were asked about a specific model or framework used in their work with foster youth. During the coding process, the following subthemes appeared throughout this question. The subthemes are; The Bridges Transition Model, Trauma-Informed Care and analogies that apply to youth.

#### **Bridges Model**

The Bridges model is about transitions and will be discussed in more depth in the discussion section. Two people discussed the Bridges Model during the interview process.

Participant one:

*The Bridges Model is based on transitions. All of us experience transitions in life. So with transitions- there are three phases. Ending, neutral zone and new beginning. This is looked at, especially with kids, because they are going through*

*that. What's really nice with this framework is that understanding it is in itself a goal. Not only staff but more importantly the foster parent would be able to apply this theory in order to understand where that youth is at. That helps one not make judgments about the child. It is important to focus on seeing beyond the individual to what lies underneath. The ultimate goal of transitioning is being in new beginnings.*

Participant three:

*We do we use Bridges transitions model. Our youth were part of that group. I think it is really important to have something like that... we are trying to figure out what models really fit with the work we are doing.*

### **Trauma-Informed**

The second subtheme was trauma-informed. Participants stated the following;

Participant two:

*"We are now moving into a more trauma informed environment and what that is going to look like. We are in flux right now. Right now we are very flexible with our work with kids".*

Participant three:

*People look at strengths as icing on the cake. We really like to look at strengths as the cake. That really is the core of what we are doing. It starts with the strengths and we build from there. It is amazing how hard that is for some people.*

### **Analogies**

The third subtheme the researcher found was a mixture of analogies' that can be looked at as a framework. Four analogies were discussed. They were the iceberg effect; Triple E; Tape analogy; CORE.

Participant one is credited at saying the next three analogies during the interview process:

**Iceberg Effect**

*“Picture an iceberg and look at the top. Then look at the reflection of what is underneath. The concept of this is to not focus on what one see’s on the outside but what lies below the surface”.*

**Triple E:**

*“We do provide education on trauma informed and triple E, we renamed it but the concept comes from dialectical behavior therapy. It is a spinoff. Triple E is what we do. Emotions, Education and Effectiveness”.*

**Tape Analogy**

*Kids in care often are disappointed, to be very honest. I use the analogy. Think of using a piece of masking tape. Take a piece of tape off the roller and apply it to your sweater. The first time it sticks real well. Pull it off your sweater then put it back on. After the fifth or sixth time it doesn’t stick so well. It’s similar to our kids. When they have been hurt or disappointed, initially their hearts remain open. By the time the fifth or sixth time comes, they aren’t going to be as open which is rightfully so.*

Participant two shared with the researcher the following concept:

**CORE**

*“CORE stands for creating ongoing relationships effectively. It is about establishing support that would extend beyond one’s years in foster care. The*

*biggest barrier for our kids is getting over their own trauma that they have experienced”.*

When the question was asked, does your agency use a specific model or framework in their work with youth, three participants responded:

Participant six:

*“So as far as specific model, I have no idea. What I try to do is a common sense approach to deal with all of our clients”.*

Participant eight:

*To be honest our agency is at the point where we have set the bar for the whole state in our planning. We go far and beyond what the state expectations are. I know some of the bigger counties are trying to model after what we are doing. It’s kind of a nation wide model at this point. We developed our own program.*

Participant seven:

*“I don’t know models.... I failed that one”.*

## **Supports**

The third theme that was apparent in this research was regarding supports in a youth’s life. The researcher recoded this theme into subthemes. The subthemes are: worker support; lack of worker support; communication; and circle of supports.

### **Worker Support**

Worker support was mentioned quite often during the coding process. This researcher coded it six times from the interviews. Worker support is when the worker involved provides emotion support, problem solving, and resources to their client and their caretakers. Worker support is discussed in the following segments from interviews.

Participant one:

*“We provide support to the foster home. We are there two to four times a month. This means face-to-face contact. We are also meeting with kids in care”.*

Participant four:

*It is up to the worker to provide individual planning for the client. The worker should figure out what the need is, what the youth wants to do, what they want to accomplish as a goal and how to make that happen. There are various people who will take on that lead role to really help the youth accomplish that.*

Participant eight:

*Yes, so what we do is a transition plan with them upon termination. We explain to them that they can come back into foster care. In this county, we don't turn anyone down as long as they are meeting criteria.*

Participant nine:

*The youth develop Independent Living Plans (ILP's) in those 5 focus areas I have mentioned before in direct line with their social worker. So we send monthly reports to their social workers and what the youth are working on, how many times they have been to programming, what they have been working on and has been accomplished.*

### **Lack of Worker Support**

The next subtheme under the Support theme is the lack of worker support. This theme appeared four times throughout the interview process. There are always the social workers that care more and others that care less. The more involved social workers are usually much more forthcoming with information and services. Those that are more apathetic and uninvolved do not always provide the support needed by foster youth.

Participant two:

*That's debatable...a lot of it depends on who their county worker is and what information is provided to them. Prior to the youth turning eighteen, the county worker's responsibility is to communicate what benefits would be provided to them if they stay in care. If they exit care, they don't receive any benefits.*

Participant one:

*I think they are not as consistent [county workers] when a youth is going to be transitioning. I think they do a terrible job in preparing them for just living on their own. I don't think there is enough pre-planning that happens a year before. I can't remember if federal guideline is a year and half or six months. I think it needs to be more than that, I really do. I think their needs to be pre-planning well before a year. It is hard to say because kids can move from home to home and it is really tough. When a kid comes into your home, you may not know what has been done already. You know, in terms of their skill level and abilities. I think it is really based on a case-by-case basis as to where that kid is functioning and where that youth's needs are.*

Participant three:

*I think sometimes it just depends with their worker. They can be burnt out or having all kinds of stuff going on and doing the best that they can do. I don't think it is just the worker but I think they are primarily a big part of this. They have the legality of it so it is really going to be key as to how they communicate information. This information could include; what are the needs, what's been accomplished, what's been tried. A lot of that I think is going to be upfront and I don't think workers often do that. Sometimes they come into meetings and they don't know the kid from Adam at all.*

Participant four:

*“Again, it is hit or miss as to whom their county worker is. Those resources are available and a lot of what we are doing, these are things that are supposed to be lined up for them”*

Participant seven:

*Obviously, they don't have a generally large support network or the network that they have isn't high quality. They don't have a lot of options regarding networking that help to try and find jobs, or a larger family who can help them by giving them a place to stay occasionally. By not having been pushed early on and not learning independent living skills, we see a lot of total dependence on the system. There are a lot of clients, who haven't had to do their own laundry or grocery shopping. They don't have those skills. So learning those skills is a very tough thing for them.*

Participant two:

*A big thing I see is sometimes my clients have six different workers. They have to see them at least once a month in order to get certain things. This, on top of school and work makes it difficult. Then managing all those things on top of school and work and then also just having someone enter your life and having to trust them and be connected to them because that is there job becomes quite a lot to handle.*

Participant six:

*Youth who have been in the system often come to us without having money management skills, an inadequate support system, permanency, long term supports, lack of work history and difficulty getting and maintaining jobs. Sometimes unhealthy relationships or involved with drugs. Mental health issues*

*are difficult to address because they are adults. Some clients come to us who have been in the system for a very long time and have become dependent on the system and entitled and not use to being able to be on their own so they lean on the county for support as much as possible.*

### **Communication**

Communication between case managers and youth was the third subtheme. It appeared countless times throughout the coding process.

Participant one felt that communication between the youth and worker is pretty critical and the youth should know all options that are available to them. Participant ten believes working together collaboratively works best as a collective team. Participant nine believes that youth need to be in charge of their lives and one needs to talk and listen to the youth.

### **Circle of Supports**

Two participants who were interviewed discussed their own circles of support within the agency they work for.

Participant two:

*When the youth are fourteen and up we meet in a group called the circle of support and that is really an opportunity that happens quarterly. This pretty much gives the youth the opportunity to share their voice. To share what they want in terms of their life goals and independence. People who are around the table are people that are going to help that youth obtain the goal.*

Continued support was discussed once with the following:

Participant three:

*We do offer continuing support to any kids who want to stay connected to us. If they reached out to us over the holidays we had ten \$100 gift cards that we gave away to kids who had aged out of foster care or who were in extended foster care and had contacted us.*

## **Relationships**

The fourth major theme that appeared was relationships. Relationships are key in everyone's lives. With this theme, the researcher broke it down even farther into three types of relationships. They are relationships between youth and social worker, youth's relationship with other youth, and relationships based on honesty.

### **Relationships Between Youth and Social Worker**

The relationship between youth and social worker can be a critical tie to fostering growth and progress through adolescents into adulthood. If this relationship is positive, the youth can grow from it. However, if this relationship is negative, it can forever stall any positive move forward.

Participant four:

*It's them identifying what support they need and all the adults on their team coming together to discuss how to best meet or support them. So, a lot of their agenda items are geared toward preparing them for the extended foster care program.*

Participant nine:

*What we have learned is that the key is in the relationships. That creates new pathways for learning and that if a child or youth knows that, there is trust. When they have that trust that is when you can start to build and be able to increase their skills in whatever their desire is. Building trust is often a tough piece*

*because they feel such loss in their life. They have to learn that it is not their fault that their parents were unable to care for them. You know, it's got to be hard to be in their position- knowing they feel emptiness and often rejection.*

Participant one:

*All kids fall and make mistakes that is just part of learning and being young. You know, even when you are older, you make mistakes. However, if you can get that and be able to allow for that-that's great. The challenge is that kids in care don't have that option. In comparison, someone who has not been in foster care or home placement or homelessness, doesn't know what that's like. You know that those who have not experienced that can go home and say "oh I am going to go home for awhile, not need to pay rent, those basic needs because someone would take care of them. For kids in care, I think the biggest challenge is lacking the safety net. Even if they do build that relationship with biological parents that doesn't mean they are in a position to be able to care for them.*

When talking about the relationships social worker's have with foster youth, three participants had these snippets about how they help youth find these relationships outside of the foster care system: Participant two: "... *The littlest stuff means so much more for our kids.* "Participant four: "...*Biological family will always have a role in your life but family is more widely defined* "Participant seven: "...*Learning how to wash clothes can be explained but if you aren't doing it yourself, you don't know. I feel foster parents are getting better at that. They should be focusing on the day to day things*".

Participant ten:

*Foster care workers are also good at helping youth decide who is going to be in there family, and who is their supportive people. Who can they going to call at*

*3am when the heat goes off. Help the youth figure out who are the most important people to them.*

Participant four said: *“It seems foster parents are much more clued in on independent living and what that means and how to practice those things in the foster home”.*

Participant nine:

*Personal development includes five core competencies, which are literacy, employment, housing, education and personal wellness. Those competencies are dependent on relationship development. Everything we do, our outcomes etc., is based on the relationships. We meet the youth where they are. Once we have a solid relationship with them it is pretty strong.*

### **Youth’s Relationships with other Youth**

Two participants discussed the relationships foster youth have with other foster youth in the following excerpts.

Participant two:

*“They call each other their brothers and sisters even if they aren’t living in the same home”.*

Participant nine:

*“I think getting the kids together with each other centers them”.*

Participant three:

*“So facilitating, fostering and offering a community- literally a place where the kids connect with each other- is a place where they can form lasting and supportive friendships with each other and can normalize the experience”.*

### **Relationships Based on Honesty**

A relationship based on honesty is the last subtheme in the relationships main theme. Three participants talked about being honest with their clients and stated the following:

Participant eight:

*It is very important to establish a very solid relationship with a client and be very direct and clear about expectations consistency. Hold them accountable when needed. Treating each client as a real individual with strengths and challenges and tailoring their case plan to the realistic.*

Participant seven:

*“I work with teenagers and I really feel that they need to know that you are real. You have to meet them where they are at and kind of the best thing is to be open and honest. Don’t beat around the bush; let them know how it is. Teenagers have much more respect for that than coddling”.*

Participant nine:

*“...They are kids. Treat them like kids. Too many times they are treated like foster youth are labeled. They are youth. Treat them like people”.*

### **Approaches Centered on Youth and Empowerment**

The fifth theme that appeared throughout the coding process was the approaches social workers use that center on youth and empowerment. Four subthemes had been recoded into: road to independent living, empowerment, youth being youth, and real world approaches.

#### **Road to Independent Living**

This researcher coded road to independent living sixteen times throughout the coding process.

Participant four:

*“There are eight different life areas that we cover that are identified.*

*Independent living skills are areas that youth need to have some experience in.*

*Education, employment, housing, finances, health, documents, life skills and circle of support”*

Participant two:

*I would say really having the youth have a say in their planning. Sometimes it is just an introduction in what they see for themselves. Youth haven't really thought about it before. Giving them the opportunity to think about it and what resources are available is forward thinking.*

Participant five:

*“I guess that is another thing I do...making them attempt to do it first before asking for help. I feel this helps them try it on their own first before relying on someone else. Our program provides a sense of stability for them and provides more services than it use to. I think it is beneficial for the youth staying until twenty-one. The system should start preparing them at fourteen so when they do turn eighteen, they are in the same position as any other eighteen year-old would be who comes from a solid family.”*

Participant six: *Let's see...when a kid is approaches twenty-one, we have to do something called a ninety-day transition plan. It is a fairly generic form that provides some basic community resources that they can access such as; food assistance and so forth in the future.*

Participant seven:

*I really put it on them. They really seem to want to take it too. I have noticed that for the first time throughout the foster care system when they client comes to our*

*program they are in charge. There is no court telling them what they have to do. They get a choice. Do they want to work or go to school.*

Participant six:

*We encourage them to go and do these things on their own and learn first hand while working with them and showing them how it is done. Instead of ordering it and getting it done. Again, just about everything we do is geared toward empowerment. We try to get them to do it on their own. Give them the resources to get to it.*

Participant five:

*...Almost every contact we have with a client, we are going over their plan and that is really their contract between us. Everyone has a program that is updated at least bimonthly, and that covers all the independent living skills, education, employment, transportation, medical, housing, social life. Our program uses this document that includes nine components to independent living.*

Participant eight:

*Age fourteen is the beginning age for the SELF-funding. I would say that the county is really actively involved in their planning at sixteen. That is when we typically start having YTC's. It is completely youth-driven. They run the meeting. Their independent living skills plan is due at sixteen and then every six months after that, however our team does it way more than that.*

Participant nine:

*It is really scary because in foster care they don't make decisions. They are told where they are going to live, what to wear, what to eat, this is our religion you have to go with what we are doing here. So for someone who comes to them asking what do you want, they go like "what". So it is building that relationship*

*first and then sitting down later on and asking what they want to achieve, what is their dream, where do you see yourself and help them set those goals. They can pick the big goals and sometimes they need help with the smaller steps to get to those big goals.*

### **Empowerment**

The next subtheme that was coded was empowerment. Youth need to feel that they have a say in how their life will go and make decisions for themselves. This is different than road to independent living as it is how the youth feel internally which is what drives them. Participants said the following:

Participant three: *“Stuff like instilling a lot of leadership opportunities into their programming. Facilitate stuff that they can put on their resume. Ownership of their own lives“...That’s why we ask our kids to be accountable for what is going on. It is their life, it is not our life”*

Participant two: *“We really do try to empower the kids in everything we do”*

Participant nine:

*They let us know what they are interested in. We have a resource manager who will go out and look for resources that are available in the areas of interest. We have a partnership with Search Institute and their Sparks curriculum. So when we do the Sparks piece with them we look at what gets them excited and create a career around their “spark” though it is youth focused. We think it is critical that if you have a youth program you need to have youth involved and heard in what you are developing. They have an active role in our program.*

Participant ten:

*“It’s teaching youth how to advocate for themselves. So that comes with feeling empowered to make decisions for themselves, feeling like they have a positive self-esteem and that comes with our programming”*

### **Youth being Youth**

The third subtheme within this theme is youth being youth. This researcher classified this theme to include the youth being like other youth and blending in. The participants had this to say:

Participant two:

*We let them do really natural things. A bunch of my boys just decided they wanted to go paintballing. That is something they are really interested in and would love to do. So just letting them do things that normal kids do.*

Participant three:

*We let kids be kids. You see what I am wearing, I am not going to go into someone’s house and hang out with a kid in a suit. It’s their home; it’s their life. They are not asking to be with me. We are with them.*

Participant nine:

*“They can have fun just being kids. I treat them like any other youth. Let’s find out what services are needed to be successful in life”*

### **Real World Approaches**

This subtheme came across in the recoding process twice. The researcher thought it still applied to the main theme and included it in the research.

Participant five:

*We created the check pick up where they come to us every month to make it more realistic to the real world where you have to go pick up your check. No one just hands you anything. Responsibility is key.*

Participant five:

*They have to experience things hands on and be interested in it. We have tried to create interactive ways. We did a general car maintenance...they showed the youth who to put the car on the lift, check oil and change tires. None of them had a clue and we try to let them experience things for themselves.*

Participant seven:

*One of my coworkers had developed a basic lay out of classes offered sometimes jointly with C2I and YMCA. These classes are required all new clients who haven't had their own apartments yet. In order to access the SELF-funds, they need to complete these basic classes before the funds can be used. The money can help with a damage deposit or an apartment application fee or access to household supplies. There are two classes that are required. One of them is rent wise and we sort of make it sound like college. You need twelve credits and rent wise is an all day workshop for six credits. Another two-credit class is money management and then two electives. Any client that we are getting nearing aging out, gets this information.*

### **Permanency**

The ultimate goal in planning for any child is to eventually reach a permanent plan for that child. If a child has reached the age of majority in foster care, it is essential to assist that child in having a life plan set before them. Hopefully, the eventual goal is to maximize a child's skills and support network so they can succeed in to adulthood. This researcher did not recode this theme into subthemes. Five participants discussed the importance of permanency.

Participant one:

*If you are going to be successful in permanency, you have to start with the basics. That has to be something that is never compromised, to be honest. I think you always have to have housing, clothing, food and water. If you have a program that can provide the basics and also therapeutic support, that is key.*

Participant three:

*[Adoptions]... I think once you are fourteen, you can decide if you want to be adopted or not. Prior to that, the county tries to get the youth adopted. We see kids who come back who are in and out of the system. The adoptions have failed multiple times. They have been promised permanency multiple times and they are back.*

Participant four:

*Kinship happens when a child protection case starts. I mean, it is supposed to be throughout the life of the case. The family information is recorded on paper with family names and contact information. Family can include kin. When a child protection case first opens, usually the focus is on the placement of the kids. If kids stay in non-relative foster care, they often lose connections with extended family that can be valuable resource for them. If they want to access their family, we can help them do that.*

Participant nine:

*Even before the youth goes back home, family therapy should happen. There should be visitation and gradual trial home visits. Parents sometimes may be compliant for six months and then slip back into old habits. There are a lot of things that are not in place right now that need to be in place in order for it to be a healthy transition back home. It creates trauma all over again. I think the push for permanency is too hard at times. It needs to be what is in the best interest of*

*this child. What is the healthiest way to get this kid back to a loving home- whether it be family, kin, foster home, relative, etc. Teens often know what they want but as often don't know what they want. Permanency planning has to take all of that into consideration. Permanency is difficult to address as "higher up's" make the rules, which are often not based realistically. Important work has to be done before permanency happens.*

Growing up in the foster care system is hard on youth. When they get close to the legal adulthood age of eighteen, they have a choice to stay in foster care or leave the system. If they choose to stay, they have access to continued services, a possible stipend until they are twenty-one and access to continuing on with education or receiving help obtaining job skills. From the ten interviews conducted, many social workers agree that foster youth stay in the system to receive the assistance geared to help them build self-sufficiency before aging out at twenty-one. What the researcher found was that youth want to be in charge of their life and the planning that comes with it from the people they see as supportive. Once the coding process had been done from the interviews and the findings had been discussed, this researcher noticed more was needed for foster care, in general, youth to be successful when they leave the system and the assistance behind.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to look at the skills foster care youth need to transition out of care successfully. By comparing what literature had discussed and what was found in the findings, there appeared to be similarities. The questions formed for the interview process were based on the literature discussed at the beginning of this paper and what the researcher wanted to know from those who work with foster youth.

### **The Bridges Model**

Many of the respondents discussed the Bridges Model in relation to their work. This model is about transition one has in one's own life. The transition model is named after the creator, William Bridges who wrote a book that was published in 1991. He made a distinction between transitions and change and realized that people dislike change and become afraid of change. He explains changes happen to people as a natural growth and developmental process. Transition is what is going on in the person's mind as that change is happening. Change often happens faster than transition, which occurs at a slower pace. According to the interviewees, the Bridges Model does apply to foster youth who experience multiple transitions during their time in the foster care system. Foster youth have to transition more often between foster homes and/or group homes, changing schools, adjusting to new rules and environments and often not growing up in supportive homes like their peers.

This model has three stages that one goes through during transition according to *Mindtools*. The three stages are ending zone, the neutral zone and then new beginning. People experiencing transition go through the stages at their own stride. In the first stage, which is ending zone-one could feel resistance and be against the change that is causing the transition. Emotions experienced would be fear, anger, frustration, and a sense of loss (2014). Foster youth experience this ending zone when they have to transition from one foster home to another foster home or school. They feel the resistance and must learn new routines. A social worker can help the foster youth in this zone by accepting the youth's resistance and allowing the youth the time to accept the change.

The second stage is the neutral zone. In this zone, people experiencing this may feel disorganized, ambiguous and intolerant. According *Mindtools*, which discusses William Bridges transitions model, an analogy is used to describe this stage as “a phase as the bridge between the old and the new; to some, people will still be attached to the old, while they are also trying to adapt to the new”. In this stage, one could feel bitterness, possibly low morale, and become a questioner about change (2014). Foster youth may experience this phase in the model if they had liked their foster home or school and felt connected. During this transitional stage, a social worker could help the youth by guiding them with a sense of direction by reminding them of the goals lying ahead. Also, the social worker could help a youth discuss their feelings.

The third and final stage from *Mindtools* on this model is titled “new beginning”. In this stage, one is ready to accept the transition. When one is in this stage, the feelings one may feel are a sense of energy and willingness to learn and hopefully be committed to this change (2014). With all the transitions that happen, it may be difficult to get to this stage. One may continue to experience the ending zone or neutral zone. When in foster care, it may be harder to reach this stage due to all the transitions that could happen in a foster youth’s life while in the system. One can reach the new beginning only when they feel content in their transition.

All of the interviewees applied the Bridges Model while working with foster youth in transition. It should be noted that half the interviewees had taken training on the Bridges Model through the Minnesota Department of Human Services. This was a pilot program that was tried with various agencies throughout the community. The

interviewees that trained in this model voiced that they had a better understanding of foster care transitioning.

### **Trauma-Informed Care**

Klain and colleagues explain that children, especially foster youth, can experience multiple forms of trauma and end up having severe and complex responses that disturb their abilities in emotions, behaviors and cognitive skill (2013, p.3). Klain et al., also state “children in foster care often have not had the benefit of safe and stable homes that aid in building resiliency” (2013, p.3). The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative uses trauma-informed therapy as “ a practice that provides supports and opportunities to promote healthy recovery and optimal brain development throughout adolescence and emerging adulthood” (2012, p.1). Trauma-Informed therapy is a new look into the foster care system and the youth that are in it. The participants that were interviewed during this research process seemed to focus on treating the trauma of foster youth as critical to successful transitioning.

The respondents had discussed how they were beginning to address the trauma that foster youth endure while in the system. Before starting trauma-informed care with foster youth, a worker needs to have a solid understanding of trauma. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration defines trauma as “Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being”. (SAMHSA, 2014) Klain et al., explains that trauma-informed care helps readdress how one goes about treating the trauma that youth undergo. It focuses on

treating the essential roots of the youth's trauma and applies medical, physiological and psychological therapies that help maximize safety and help build the youth's resiliency.

This model applies to the participant who mentioned the "iceberg effect". When working with youth in foster care one needs to look past the reflection on top of the iceberg and address the issues that are underneath. Moving into this approach would be able to help foster youth address mental health issues and any other issues that they have not been able to focus on.

Weiner, Schneider and Lyons (2009) discuss evidence-based treatments in their article. One treatment option for trauma-informed care is Structured Psychotherapy for Adolescents Responding to Chronic Stress (SPARCS). This targets youth that have been exposed to traumatic stressors. When using SPARCS, it is flexible in where it takes place and used in groups (2009, p. 1201). Weiner et al., (2009) describe SPARCS as

An aim to enhance adolescents' abilities to cope more effectively in the moment, to cultivate consciousness and to create connections and meaning. It draws upon mindfulness and interpersonal skills from Dialectical Behavior Therapy, problem-solving skills, and enhancing social support and planning for the future (p.1201).

One interviewee applies the SPARCS curriculum to the youth they work with.

Connections 2 Independence is an organization that applies SPARCS. It began in 2002 under the name Connections Program that began through Summit Academy OIC. This program was formed to help foster care youth after leaving the system. With help from Summit Academy OIC and Hennepin County, Connections Program was able to help prepare youth with a positive transition to adulthood. Connections Program broke

ties with Summit OIC and became it's own non-profit organization in 2010 and renamed itself Connections 2 Independence or C2I.

The mission that C2I has created states “unique programming and advocacy for foster care youth, ages 15-21, to promote a successful transition to living independently as they reach adulthood” (Connections 2 Independence, 2010). The services offered within this agency teach independent living skills to the youth participating in the program. Relationships are built with each youth. This organization offers classes three days a week in obtaining housing, education and personal growth. The purpose of these classes is to help fortify each youth with skills that are needed to become self-reliant.

It is clear from the research and many discussions that building relationships with this population hold the most significance. There are often barriers to this based on personalities, resources and lack thereof, and accessibility. Helping these youth to become successful adults requires teaching them the “how to’s” toward emancipation. The people that were interviewed all reflect a strong commitment to this process. It is this writer’s belief that most social workers dealing with this group of kids are dedicated to the success of their clients.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

The research that has been conducted by this writer has underlined information about the skills social workers require in order to assist foster youth in their aging out process. Much research, both federally and on a state level, has impacted social work practice, in that the legislation has changed and allows foster youth to stay in the system until age twenty-one. It has also mandated more services to help in that transitioning process.

It is important for social workers to keep working with youth and to help them learn about resources, building relationships and support networks and having their own voice when it comes to achieving self-sufficiency. According to the findings that were discussed throughout this paper, youth want to make decisions for themselves and build on their independence with guidance. Social workers who work with foster youth can help support them by continuing to allow the youth to lead through Youth-in-Transition-Conferences and Circles of Supports.

Youth also need to build a positive support network that they can utilize once they leave care. When a youth feels support from their worker and community support, achieving self-sufficiency will come easier. It is of key importance to foster care youth that the social worker be extremely involved and aware of resources in order to give that youth the best chance for the future. Social workers that are lazy, burnt out, or uninterested can neither be helpful to that youth nor a positive motivator for the future. If a youth in the foster care system has a support network and resources available to them by the age of sixteen, the youth may be able to transition more easily into an extended foster care program.

### **Implications for Policy**

Since 1986, federal and Minnesota state legislation has been changing when it comes to what foster youth can access. In the current legislation, youth in foster care are mandated to have a transition plan developed six months before they are to exit care. Participant ten stated the following: “We need to start the process earlier, not six months before they age out. We need to start at sixteen”. Participant six agrees with preparing youth at a younger age for independence. Three participants (one, six and ten) all agree

that planning for the day the youth ages out should begin earlier than the legislation states.

Under Minnesota statutes, currently, a letter must be sent out at age seventeen and one half providing a list of resources and services available for the youth to access. According to participant six this list of options should be discussed at an earlier time. This writer agrees with the participants that felt that the process should begin earlier than the youth's seventeenth birthday. This writer believes also that age sixteen is a much smarter age to begin.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

A strength that came from doing this research was that the researcher has a few family members that work in the field of social work. This provided ideas and help to continue working with the research topic. A second strength is the availability of information provided regarding what Minnesota is doing to help foster youth successfully transition. A third strength was the knowledge that the researcher's home county is doing so much to aid in this process.

One strength and limitation for this research was the amount of interviews the researcher obtained. The researcher sent out an email to various agencies that work with foster youth and had a hard time getting responses from several of them. The researcher reached out to the researcher's committee to seek out avenues to try to obtain interviewees. A goal that this researcher had was to obtain eight interviews. Fortunately, this researcher was able to obtain ten interviews. During the interviewing process, the interviewees suggested names that may be beneficial to this project. This researcher did not disclose the referrer's name when seeking out the last two interviews.

Another limitation to this research was the wording of the questions. When asked during the interviews, this researcher had to explain some of the questions in more depth. One particular question was number ten that asked ‘*does your agency use a specific model/framework in their work?*’ This question had to be explained and was more leading than the researcher intended it to be. The researcher had to then give examples of models or frameworks. Also, when asked, interviewees could not remember names of models such as Bridges Transitions model, Trauma-Informed Care, etc.

A third limitation, was not seeking out responses from foster care youth and their experiences. It also did not address what these youth feel needs to happen to make the foster care system easier to succeed in. This is a limitation because it is not getting opinions from the people who are most effected by policy changes. More research needs to be done to gain insight from youth in the foster care system since the *Fostering Connections Act of 2008*.

### **Future Research**

On a broader scope, current research is lacking since legislative changes in 2008. More research needs to be conducted and discussed to see how the *Fostering Connections to Adoptions Act of 2008* has helped decrease homelessness, increase job retention, decrease youth crime and increase education and independent living skills. Current research needs to be done to see if this new legislation for foster care youth has been more successful than other legislation.

### **Conclusion**

It is this writer’s conclusion that transitioning out of foster care is a fascinating and forever changing process. Fortunately, youth aging out of foster care, now have

options that were not available to them in the past. There have been federal and state mandates that have opened up requirements and services and opportunities. Foster care youth in transition on most occasions are no longer thrown out into the wider world without tools. They are hopefully armed with the skills that can provide them a healthy path into adulthood.

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## Appendix A

### CONSENT FORM UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS GRSW682 RESEARCH PROJECT

#### **Social Workers role in preparing foster youth for adulthood**

I am conducting a study about social workers and their preparation with foster youth aging out of foster care. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you have history working with foster youth who will be aging out. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Rachael Morris, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas and supervised by Katharine Hill.

#### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is: to find out more information on what social workers are doing to help foster youth prepare for adulthood.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: participate in an interview that will last no more than an hour that will be audio taped, allow the data gathered from the interview and look for themes in the information gathered, and be discussed in a clinical research presentation in May 2014.

#### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

The study has no risks. You are only answering questions related to your experience with individuals aging out of foster care.

The study has no direct benefits. There will not be any monetary benefits for participating.

#### **Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept confidential [for this study]. As a protocol, I will not publish any of this material. Research records will be kept in a locked file in a private safe. I will also keep the electronic copy of the transcript in a password-protected file on my computer. The research found from the interviews will be discussed with my Professor to go over the themes found. Transcripts will occur on the interviews and will be destroyed on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

#### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the interview at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used in this study.

#### **Contacts and Questions**

My name is Rachael Morris. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at ----- or -----@stthomas.edu. If you have any questions for my instructor you may call Katharine Hill (-----). You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study and to be audiotaped.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Print Name of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Researcher**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

**Appendix B**

Question: From a social workers perspective what skills do foster care youth need in order to successfully transition from foster care?

1. How long have you worked with foster youth?
2. How many youth on your caseload are between the ages of 16 and 18? 18 and 21?
3. If clients terminate from the system at 18, do they understand what services are available to them?
4. What top 5 services does your agency provide to foster youth who are aging out?
5. What services outside of your agency are you familiar with for youth aging out of care? Do you use any of them?
6. How do you ensure that the youth on your caseload are receiving independent living skills? What resources are used to advance these skills?
7. What do you see as some of the major struggles youth face?
8. What steps do you take to empower youth to take an active role in their own planning, etc?
9. At what age, are foster care youth allowed to be involved in their own planning?
10. Does your agency use a specific model/framework in their work?
11. Do you have any ideas that would contribute to improving permanency for youth?
12. What in your opinion works best in working with foster youth? What in your opinion is more of a challenge in your work with foster youth?