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Counter-Stories From Former Foster Youth: College Graduates Disrupting the Dominant Narrative

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COUNTER-STORIES FROM FORMER FOSTER YOUTH: COLLEGE GRADUATES
DISRUPTING THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE

by

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my son, Owen, who was compelled to participate in my journey through higher education from day one, when he entered my life in my very first semester at a little community college in the desert. Far from overwhelming me or making me consider giving up on my education, his entrance into my life had quite the opposite effect. It motivated me to pursue an education for him more than for myself. For him I was determined to model the breaking of cycles—which I consider to be the most important and powerful work of all—and which I hope he will continue in his own journey.

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I would also like to thank my family, such as my aunt and uncle, who always show up and support us, as well as my dad, who encourages me to tell the truth, to tell my

story, even to his own detriment, and despite factors which continue to contribute to the marginalization of dads in the world of custody and state foster care. My aunt, uncle, and dad always told me I could do anything—and I believed that. My aunt and uncle also provided me with kinship care in my elementary school years and implemented a literacy intervention, such as reading to me every night, that was critical to my academic success.

I would also like to acknowledge my friends who believed in me, such as Amanda Cullars-White, Patricia Bagley, Anna Howard, Chasity White, Glenn Prince, and Allison Boykin. They answered the phone, spent time with me, patiently listened to my progress, offered advice, and did all the other things that make up the real work of friendship.

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My son, Owen Hales, contributed most of all by being the love of my life and my reason to succeed. After children in foster care, all of this was for him. The PhD is for him.

Last, I would like to acknowledge my editor, Mary Margaret Freeman, who helped me convert my talk to academic language, even during evenings and weekends. She was there from the very beginning of this dissertation. Without her I might still be revising my literature review.

Abstract

In the past decade, research on children in foster care or adults with foster care backgrounds has begun to explore factors that contributed to successful trajectories. Little work has been done, however, on factors that can be controlled, such as resources and support offered by K-12 schools, or for K-12 schooling. In this qualitative study, I explored the beliefs and perceptions of former foster youth college graduates about the impact of K-12 experiences on their academic and life trajectories. After surveying and interviewing five former foster youth college graduates, I used narrative analysis to understand the impact of their K-12 experiences, and other factors during their time in foster care, that positively affected their matriculation into and graduation with a four-year degree from institutions of higher education. According to participants, the most significant K-12 factors that impacted their academic trajectories were relationships with teachers and coaches, opportunities for reading and writing, and access to extracurricular activities, particularly sports and the arts. Additionally, all participants described a notable turning point during high school, and they also provided recommendations for children currently in foster care.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As chair of a county foster care review board in South Carolina, in May 2022, I volunteered with other professionals at an event to help find “forever” families for foster children who were “legally free for adoption.” Photographers took pictures of the children while board members asked the children questions like: What do you want to be when you grow up? Who is your favorite superhero and why? And What kind of family do you want? Afterwards, the sponsoring organization posted the children’s photos and answers online for prospective parents.

During a break, I overheard two other board members having a conversation. As we sat on a curb eating pizza, the man told the woman about a “case” from his county involving a “very bright” 18-year-old high school senior about to graduate with “good grades.” This young woman wanted to attend Clemson University that fall. He asked his colleague for help, but she had no idea what to do.

I jumped in to fill the information gap with the following information: (a) college applications were due the previous October (the beginning of the young woman’s senior year); (b) high school seniors should already have signed an acceptance letter from a college or university; and (c) funding, including financial aid, should already be obtained. The gentleman seemed offended by this information, but I forged ahead, asking about the student’s SAT; the man did not know if she had taken it. Concerning her GPA, he said it

was “in the 2s or 3s.” This fact was discouraging because Clemson is the most competitive public university in South Carolina.

This incident highlighted what I have learned about the failures of the foster care system regarding higher education. Even granting the best intentions to the male case worker, he gave the young woman false hope, either from ignorance or a misguided belief that anything is possible. She had an average but acceptable GPA but had never taken the SAT. She had missed the college application deadlines. As a result, she was also losing the real opportunities still available to her, such as attending a local community college or a state school with a rolling admissions policy. The adults in her life, including foster care professionals, either did not know or neglected to inform her about college options, the application process, financial aid, and campus housing.

Background

The foster care system in the United States is a complex one, marked by administrative inconsistencies and shaped by a dominant narrative that emphasizes the negative experiences of youth in foster care, while assuming low outcomes for those who come to adulthood through the system.

It is true that young people in foster care who have experienced traumatizing childhoods rife with family impermanence, multiple placements, and unstable adoptions, face more life and academic obstacles than their peers from secure, stable families and homes and even those who grow up in poverty. When they turn 18, if they have not been adopted or returned to their biological families, these young adults from foster care “age out” of the system, meaning they are legally independent and thus no longer qualify for most state care and support (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). As a result, they often enter the

world completely alone, with no shelter, no car, no credit score, no money, and little social and cultural capital. Not surprisingly, these vulnerable young adults face significantly higher rates of homelessness, school dropout, incarceration, unemployment, drug abuse, and victimization, including sex trafficking (Rome & Raskin, 2019) than their peers in the general population.

The term “foster care” itself evokes images of broken, traumatized, or problematic children, ineffective and exploitive state systems and homes, and jaded social service and legal professionals who are overworked and underpaid. The dominant narrative paints a homogeneous picture of unloved, abused, and neglected children who fail academically and socially and are never able to integrate into society.

It is estimated that in the United States there are currently over 400,000 children and youth in foster care (2023, [federalregister.gov.](https://www.federalregister.gov/)) The most recent data from The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2021), showed that 55,396 or 14% of this population was between the ages of 16 to 20 years old. The report also noted the disparity among states in how long children and youth are allowed to stay in foster care before leaving the system or aging out of it. Some children leave at their eighteenth birthday, while some stay until age 20.

Another problematic feature of the U.S. foster care system is that it lacks a unified approach to the administration of services for children in foster care. Currently, the individual states implement services in isolation, with methods and regulations varying according to state and sometimes even by county.

The Dominant Narrative

I believe that most people and organizations want what is best for children in care, and that for the most part, they simply do not know what to do for them, or do not wish to

spend the money it would require to improve their life outcomes. In some cases, organizations are also self-preserving to the detriment of children in foster care. However, overall, the source of deficit lenses from research does not come from a wish to implement harm, but instead to explore the depth and breadth of factors which contribute to low outcomes for people with a foster care background.

Similarly, I do not believe that children in foster care, or adults with a foster care background, are often portrayed in media with a deficit lens because anyone wishes to implement harm on this demographic group. Instead, supposed deficits are usually highlighted or exaggerated for the purpose of bringing attention to the plight of vulnerable children in foster care. There are also some self-serving reasons for this exploitation of trauma, such as increased reader and viewer interest, which equates to greater economic value for writers and producers.

Research purposes and media's portrayal of youth in foster care, or adults with a foster care background, may be improving, but still have a long way to go. In research, we are seeing a shift toward qualitative research which explores strengths, as opposed to weaknesses only, and while characters with a foster care background in media are still often portrayed as damaged and socially inept, they are becoming more complex, with character strengths too. Therefore, the dominant narrative is complex, evolving, and fluid. This is a time of transformation in cultural portrayal for children in foster care and adults with a foster care background.

Historically, the dominant narrative, shaped by the deficit lens of some academic research and spread by cinema, popular print, and internet media, has asserted that little to no hope exists for young adults leaving foster care. This narrative is supported by

movies and TV shows that present characters with foster care backgrounds as emotionally and/or economically unstable. For example, Erin Hannon was a character on the popular comedy series *The Office*, which aired from 2005 to 2013. In this show, Erin revealed that she had a foster care background; her culturally inept character had a mental breakdown while out to lunch with Michael Scott, when she hides behind her own hair and says that “in the foster home, my hair was my room” (Silverman et. al., 2005-2013). She was also involved in storylines that included harmful tropes about relationships with incest-like behavior between foster siblings. The audience could not help but feel sorry for Erin. However, many also found her character to be endearing, and toward the end of the series Erin’s character shows increased maturity and can make healthy decisions for herself.

Will Trent (2023-present), a police procedural drama series streaming on Netflix, headlines multiple characters with foster care backgrounds, including main characters Will and Angie. In Season 1, Will, an abandoned “dumpster baby” (Heldens et. al., 2023) confirmed dominant clichés as his character is a loner unable to maintain healthy relationships due to his traumatizing experience in foster care. He slowly revealed multiple horrors he endured in foster care, such as being burned with cigarettes, and exhibited emotionally unstable behavior characteristic of PTSD. In episode 2, Angie goes into a trance while talking in monotone to a suspect and tells him that she “was five the first time [her mother] pimped [her] out,” and that her mom would “leave [her] for days,” “making good money off [her]” (Heldens et. al, 2023).

It is difficult to find characters in books, movies, or TV with a foster care background who are “okay” and who lead typical or exceptional adult lives. Tragedy and

trauma are often exploited and exaggerated. Will and Angie also have observational skills and superpowers which apparently resulted from their upbringing in foster care, where being observant was necessary for survival. This hyperawareness of their environment makes them excellent detectives. It is easy to see how these portrayals are multi-faceted. On the one hand, they are commendable, and even flattering; Will and Angie have superpowers that result in excellence in their line of work, but it is unfortunate that this originates in an exaggerated and exploited trope about the experiences of children in foster care. Most children in foster care were not pimped out by their mothers, nor were they dumpster babies; perpetuating these extreme stories hinders efforts to portray people with a foster care background as typical.

Similarly, media interviews focus primarily on former foster youth who are currently incarcerated or experiencing homelessness (Anspach, 2019; Bauer & Thomas, 2019; Invisible People, 2013). For example, in *Teen Vogue* (Anspach, 2019), one article looked at a young, homeless adult named Randy, who stated he “entered into foster care when he was 10, [and moved] through 13 placements . . . during [his] time in the system” (para. 1). For the *Kansas City Star*, reporters Bauer and Thomas (2019) interviewed a young woman who was a former foster youth who had been incarcerated for various crimes. She was asked about and revealed negative experiences in foster care. Likewise, a reporter from Salt Lake City, Utah, in a YouTube video (*Invisible People*, 2013) interviewed a young man who was a former foster youth who was experiencing ongoing homelessness and unemployment.

The dominant narrative has enshrined a serious list of disorders that is said to afflict foster children. In a blog titled “The Mental Health Effects of Living in Foster

Care,” on the website *VeryWell Mind* (Sheperd, 2022), the author presented a common, albeit reductionist overview of “common” problems among foster children, including:

- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Reactive attachment disorder
- Anxiety disorder
- Depression
- Borderline personality disorder
- Social phobia
- Oppositional defiant disorder
- Conduct disorder
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Separation anxiety disorder
- Eating disorders

Dominant narratives neglect the fact that most of these disorders are among the most commonly occurring mental health disorders in the general population for this age group, and particularly for those experiencing generational or situational poverty (Hutchins, et al., 2022; Cree et al., 2016). Dominant narratives continue to characterize typical former foster youth as problematic and unstable and often experiencing homelessness or incarceration, while speculating about and describing the various causes for this population’s supposed instability. Unfortunately, by restricting their reporting to these sad stories and failing to investigate the stories of former foster youth who have achieved traditional adult milestones and lead typical lives, they perpetuate the myths and

tropes of grim, negative life outcomes that are supposedly inevitable for former foster care youth.

Another part of the dominant narrative is the perhaps dubious assertion that few former foster care youth go on to successfully complete a degree from a four-year college or university. The National Foster Youth Institute (2022), for instance, found that only three percent of former foster youth graduate from college. However, it should be noted that college applicants seeking federal financial aid have only been asked if they have a foster care background since 2015. How is this three percent determined, when we know social services does not follow the trajectories of young adults once they are reunited with biological families or after they age out of care? Regardless, behind that questionable statistic are what we know about high rates of homelessness, low rates of high school graduation, and the over-representation of foster youth in special education and the juvenile (and adult) justice systems. As my study will show, however, it is important that researchers look more widely and dig more deeply to discover the many positive stories of life outcomes and academic success that this population can share with the world.

Assumptions of Current Research

Many studies of foster care have emphasized what goes wrong in foster care, focusing on typical grim outcomes, the low replicability of interventions, and how experiences in or aging out of the system dictate poor life outcomes. Some recent, qualitative research, however, has started to examine the histories and insights of children who grew up in foster care and/or went on to lead typical or even exceptional adult lives (Amechi 2016, Amechi, 2017, Duke et al., 2017, Dumai & Spence, 2021, Lane, 2016, Medlin, 2019,

Miller et al., 2020, Morton, 2016, Refaeli, 2017, Rolock & Perez, 2018, Salazar et al., 2016). Some of these studies examined the stories current or former foster youth college graduates share about themselves, but few look at the factors which can be controlled that they cite for their success. Recent qualitative studies, for example, have explored outcomes of young adult former foster youth in college but neglected to ask what K-12 experiences contributed to or could contribute to their general and academic success. The opening story of this introduction revealed the limitations of the foster care system in supporting young people who want to pursue a four-year college degree. To get an idea of what services might be, or are, available to those aging out of the system, I want to return to my home state of South Carolina, which while it has fewer opportunities for youth aging out of care than do many others, nonetheless offers more help than even many professionals are aware of.

In South Carolina, The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2021) found that about 50% of foster youth drop out of high school. South Carolina, however, offers many services and resources that could improve the life and academic outlooks for foster care youth. The state, for example, requires every school district to offer students one free SAT. Unfortunately, South Carolina does not require that students use this option, and many students do not know it exists. In addition, financial aid exists that would help fund a college education. For example, federal Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) of \$5,000.00 per year, as well as full Pell grants, are available to youth aging out of foster care and to those ages 14 and up in care for at least six months (even if reunified with their biological families). Other funding opportunities, including LIFE and Palmetto Scholarships, exist for first-generation and low-income students. And more than enough

money is available for tuition and campus living expenses. Considering that of the 5,000 children in South Carolina that are in foster care per year, and only a few hundred are high school seniors, we must ask why state universities fail to recruit and support these youth and why social services consistently fail to inform them of these opportunities. In fact, providing such services for high school foster care youth *would not cost that much*.

The Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this dissertation is to question the grim picture of poor life outcomes for former foster care youth, especially regarding the successful completion of at least a four-year college or university bachelor's degree. In relation to that, I explored the limitations of research that has viewed current and former foster care children in the U.S. through a deficit lens. I not only challenge the dominant narrative but present a counter-narrative. To put together a more accurate account of successful former foster care youth, I explored their beliefs and perceptions regarding the impact of their K-12 experiences on their life trajectories—something that other research has not done. I challenge the narrative that there is no hope for foster youth, an idea rooted in the belief that this traumatized foster population will inevitably end up homeless, incarcerated, or as beneficiaries of the welfare state.

Research Questions

To discover and discuss insights into the histories of former foster youth regarding factors that can potentially be controlled, or that are common across all children in care in relation to education, I first needed to ask some general questions regarding the data that has fueled the dominant negative narrative about former foster care youth. For instance, what are the sources of this data? How is it collected? Do individual states track youth

from foster care after they are reunited with biological families, are adopted, or after they age out of the system? Is access to this data limited and how?

As I reflected on the narratives posed by participants, I focused on the following research questions:

1. To what extent and in what ways do former foster youth college graduates believe K-12 schooling served as a protective factor in their childhood experience and academic trajectories? Are there any common themes or experiences?
2. What other factors do former foster youth college graduates attribute to having a positive impact of their academic trajectories? Are there any shared themes or experiences?
3. How do the experiences of former foster youth college graduates impact their beliefs about how to improve the lives of children in care? What do former foster youth college graduates recommend for children in care?

Significance of This Study

This study identified the factors from K-12 experiences former foster youth believe had a positive impact on their life trajectories, especially in addressing and overcoming barriers this group faced in attending institutions of higher learning. This investigation is significant because it is possible to offer blanket resources in K-12 settings to children in foster care for the purpose of improving adult outcomes, since all children in care must attend school and could be reached this way. In addition, I looked at what institutional resources can positively influence successful outcomes for former foster care youth who are pursuing a four-year college degree. I also discussed the

resilient attitudes and attributes former foster care college graduates possess that contributed to their success. Finally, I showed what can be learned from former foster care college graduates about how to improve the lives and experiences of children currently in care.

Just one example of a state resource demonstrates how, as a society, we can better support foster care youth who want to pursue a higher education; this is the implementation of pilot programs called college support programs, or CSPs. These programs can include financial assistance, housing during breaks and the summer, dorm and school supplies, and space for community for young adults who experienced foster care.

California, for instance, currently offers CSPs at all nine of its University of California schools. While important and helpful, the impact of these CSPs is limited; by targeting only young adults who have already been accepted into four-year institutions, CSPs have not increased the number of children from foster care who are prepared to apply to and attend higher education. Without extending CSPs, or offering further supports and resources, other foster children who do make it to college often find navigating educational systems very difficult, making it more likely they drop out or have a less than satisfactory college experience. If we want to move the needle up on the college enrollment and graduation meter for this population, additional help is needed to improve K-12 subject-area academic performance, SAT scores, and application essays.

It is also extremely important to know what foster children say about themselves. How else can we know what they are going through; what they think about their foster home(s) or social workers; what they think about their schooling, lives, and college

hopes; and what real support they need to achieve their dreams. Failure to ask these questions hinders real change. Answers to these questions would create true accountability and change. Talking to children in care and sharing their stories would also create widespread outrage coupled with demands for immediate and comprehensive solutions. However, since these children and their stories are hidden, silence reigns and nothing changes.

The dominant narrative of grim foster youth futures has allowed us to ignore the educational supports needed by foster youth. I believe my insight-based research into what can improve foster care life and educational outcomes can create a healthier culture of foster care that promotes achievement and success as opposed to the tired recitation of poor outcomes. Challenging the dominant narrative, I have explored and explained through the stories of other former foster youth how they managed to graduate from college, and thus demonstrated that foster care children are just like other children, who given the right support, can lead typical and even exceptional lives.

My Story

I am a former foster youth college graduate, and my academic path has been non-traditional. I received little academic help because of the almost universal rule of low expectations. No one believed I could go to college, so I was placed in the lowest level of high school classes instead of the “college track,” and thus I never took the SAT or ACT. No one helped me apply to or enroll in college. I did not understand what a “program” was until I was well into my Ph.D. Prior to starting my Ph.D. and this dissertation research, I had never met another former foster youth in higher education—not in community college nor in my undergraduate or master’s degree programs. Many

resources exist that could have smoothed my path, but I was unaware of them. I never talked with anyone about post-graduation plans, at any level.

So as a former foster care youth and college graduate, I am technically an “exception” to the rule. However, I do not see myself as exceptional. I see myself as lucky and in the right place at the right time, more than once.

Approach to Research

I have chosen to refrain from sharing most of my story from foster care to emphasize the stories of my participants; while my experience has helped me connect to the stories of my participants, I have chosen to focus on them—not me—throughout my research.

I do not believe there is any good way to measure misery, nor any way to account for or to compare types and depths of sorrow. When I talk about children in the U.S. foster care system who suffer, or who suffer through their transition to adulthood, some people will inevitably insist that many children who are *not* in foster care are also abused, and then pointedly, and somewhat nonsensically, talk about hungry children around the world.

Even within the foster care population, it is assumed that a sort of hierarchy of suffering exists. For instance, children who age out of the system, or children who have lived in more foster homes than others, are considered more vulnerable than others. The dominant narrative often reinforces these assumptions. Likewise, children who were adopted, lived in kinship care, or who were returned to their biological families, are also often and mistakenly considered less vulnerable and traumatized than others.

There is no way to measure misery, and the contexts of individual foster children are no exception. Exposure to the foster care system, however, *is* a marker of vulnerability and trauma. End of story. The way children exit care, or their circumstances while in care, are surface-level stories that fail to capture the impact of individual circumstances for any given person. This is true for all people in all situations.

An Ode or an Elegy?

An ode is a poem that celebrates achievements. An elegy is a poem of reflective sadness, often about the dead. My point is that many children suffer, even those not in foster care. Within foster care, the dominant narrative considers some children “lucky” and thus successful and worthy of the praise embodied by an ode. Conversely, others are “too traumatized” to ever achieve high life or academic outcomes and are people to be mourned by an elegy.

The reality is that the experiences of foster children and former foster youth are as diverse as their stories. I hope that this study contributes to creating a new, positive dominant narrative to replace archaic tropes. I consider my research and dissertation work an ode—a celebration—of those former foster care youth who transition to adulthood to “graduate” to successful life milestones, including earning four-year college degrees, despite the challenges, traumas, and tragedies they have faced along the way.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

At any given time, over 400,000 foster children in the United States are in institutional or private-home foster care, with more than 250,000 entering the system annually (Adoption Exchange Association, 2022; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Foster children and their experiences are diverse. Their many circumstances include their lives before placement; the reasons for state intervention; the number of placements and the length of stay in care; relationships with others; and experiences in school or other cultural institutions.

Because these children come from backgrounds as varied and rich as any other demographic group, their outcomes, life trajectories, and narratives also differ. While many of their stories are shaped by trauma and societal inequities, they are also stories of hope and resilience, love and success. These children grow up to be all kinds of people. They are actors (Marilyn Monroe, Emma Thompson, Rosie Perez, James Dean); comedians (Eddie Murphy, Tiffany Haddish); musicians (Cher, John Lennon, Willie Nelson, Ice T, Louis Armstrong); entrepreneurs (Steve Jobs); authors (Nikki Grimes, Regina Louise); designers (Coco Chanel); Olympians (Simone Biles, Greg Louganis); football players (Colin Kaepernick, Alonzo Mourning, Michael Oher); teachers, politicians, mothers, fathers, college graduates, activists, voters, leaders, and many, many more.

Unfortunately, however, not all foster care children go on to lead successful adult lives. To understand why, it is important to examine some basic facts of the foster care system and understand why children are placed in it.

First, it is important to note that by widening and improving social safety nets and reducing income inequality and other forms of social inequity, we can reduce rates of family separation and child placement in foster care. It is unreasonable, however, to believe that we can completely eradicate the societal conditions under which children need to be cared for by adults other than their biological parent/s. The reality is that people die, the tragedies of drug addiction are real, and mental illness can be debilitating; as a result, children are abandoned and placed in foster care. Foster care serves children who are waiting for adoption or whose parents need time to complete state treatment plans—which may or may not be reasonable, equitable, or even possible to complete. Moreover, foster care systems vary from state to state and even from county to county.

Second, of the over 400,000 children currently in foster care, more than 120,000 of these are children whose parental rights have been legally terminated; many of these children will never be adopted (Adoption Exchange Association, 2022; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). In 2020, for example, over 117,000 foster children were waiting for adoption, but only 57,881 children were actually adopted (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) recorded that in 2020, less than five percent of children who were adopted were ages 15 or older, and that annually, the “reason for discharge” of roughly 10% of youth out of the foster care system was “aging out” (Children’s Bureau, 2021), technically known as emancipation. That 10% translates to

20,000 children aging out of foster care every year (Children's Bureau, 2021). Over one percent (roughly 5,000 children) were reported to be on runaway status, and over two percent (around 9,000 young adults) participated in independent living programs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). These statistics demonstrate that the outcomes for both these groups of vulnerable youth are low.

Finally, when compared to their siblings and peers who have never experienced foster care, the children who are returned to their families, or who were adopted, have also often suffered from similar low outcomes as the children who age-out (Brännström, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2020; Doyle, 2007). Social service interventions are intended to intervene in potentially unstable and other at-risk factors within families, factors which impact vulnerable children; Brännström et al. (2020) asserted that "children from potentially unstable families rife with traumatic histories and low systems of support can end up homeless and victimized, never having completed high school, let alone attended college" (p. 383-384). Essentially, entry into foster care indicates the potential for instability and trauma, even after children have been returned to their biological families or are adopted. Clearly, it is not just the children who "age out" the system who are at risk.

Adoption

There is little accountability for the outcomes of children after they are adopted from foster care. In most cases of adoption, a child's social security number and last name are legally changed; they are even issued a new birth certificate with the name of their new, adoptive parents. Additionally, in most cases, once children are legally adopted, social services discontinue investigating their welfare. If these adopted children

do re-enter foster care, they usually are considered first-time entries due to their changed names and social security numbers. Therefore, while we have some statistics regarding the outcomes of successful adoptions, these numbers likely do not represent the complete picture because children adopted from foster care are no longer checked on or accounted for. There is much we do not know about the supposed success of adoption and its impact on adoptees.

The Adoption Disruption and Dissolution report by Child Welfare Information Gateway (2012) found that between 10%-25% of adoptions are disrupted adoptions, meaning they do not result in legal adoption, and roughly five percent are “dissolved,” meaning they are legally severed with the child returning to state care. Again, these numbers are likely artificially lower due to lack of post-adoption accountability. According to this study, the “child factors” that cause disrupted adoptions are the “older age” of the adoptee; the “presence of emotional and behavioral issues”; “strong attachment to the birth mother”; and “being a victim of pre-adoptive sexual abuse” (pp. 3-4). The reported adoptive family factors for disruption included “being a new or matched parent rather than the child’s foster parent”; “lack of social support, particularly from relatives”; “unrealistic expectations”; and, somewhat surprisingly, “adoptive mothers with more education” (p. 4). Finally, agency factors which contributed to disruption included “inadequate or insufficient information on the child and his or her history”; “inadequate parental preparation, training, and support”; “staff discontinuities”; “having more” than one caseworker “involved with the case”; and “not having sufficient services provided” (p. 4).

Research by Smith, et al. (2006) found yet another range of causes for disrupted adoptions. African American child adoptions, for example, were more likely to be disrupted than the adoptions of white children, and again, surprisingly, placing siblings together also resulted in higher rates of disruption. Other causes of disruption were the experience of sexual abuse and the existence of disabilities. Those who entered care due to lack of parental supervision and neglect, and those who had spent more time in care, also experienced higher rates of disruption. The effects of disrupted adoptions, moreover, caused further trauma to these children and increased their history of impermanence. Future research should explore the impact of these frequent disruptions on children in foster care.

The Administration for Children and Families in *The Adoption Disruption and Dissolution Report* (2012) noted the limitations of current data on dissolved or severed adoptions, reporting that “accurate data on dissolutions are more difficult to obtain because, at the time of legal adoption, a child’s records may be closed, first and last names and Social Security numbers may be changed, and other identifying information may be modified” (p. 5). The *Report* estimated that dissolution occurs in 1%–9% of cases varying by state (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). Dissolutions where children experienced brief or even long-term legal adoption were even more traumatizing than disruption because these children were returned to the state for foster care. What happens next has not been as well-studied. As the *Report* observed, “the factors associated with the dissolution or the temporary placement of children back into the child welfare system have not been well examined, but that some reasons that increase the likelihood of dissolution include age of the child at adoption,” which “was more common for male or

non-Hispanic children (p. 5).” It also found that adoption disruption and dissolution rates are increasing.

Even when adoptions are successful, research is limited on how much financial or other support adoptees receive beyond their eighteenth birthday, as this data is not accounted for or reported. Sometimes adoption is financially incentivized at the state level, with support, such as Medicaid, food stamps, and other forms of social welfare and monetary kickbacks, being offered to adoptive families, with the result that adoption and fostering become financially enticing.

A whole series of questions, however, remain to be asked about the outcomes for these children. Are adopted children included in the family will? Do adoptive families pay for the college education of their adopted children? Do they buy them a car, help them establish credit, co-sign for their first apartment, or give them hand-me-down furniture, as they often do for their biological children? What many do not realize is that adoption often makes foster children ineligible for future state assistance, such as free college tuition, housing vouchers, and other forms of aid offered to foster children who age-out of care. Another complicating factor for the well-being of these children is that once they are adopted, they are considered the dependents of their adoptive families; however, it is up to the family to choose to support these children in ways equal to their biological children. Many adoptive and foster families do not provide this support. I have known many teenagers, for example, who were adopted and who, in turn, were thrown out of their homes at age 18 and cut off from all financial or other support.

The Impact of Foster Care Exposure on Children Reunited with Biological Families

State child welfare systems are notorious for low funding, excessive caseloads for child case workers, high staff turnover rates, and an insufficient number of foster homes in comparison to the number of homes needed. Because of these factors, there is a lack of accountability for outcomes after children have been returned to a biological parent or have exited care. The fact is that parents who complete a range of mandated treatment plans can regain custody of their children; however, these parents often relapse, but because they have learned how to prevent being reported to the state, it is not possible to track the outcomes for their children. Furthermore, children returned to neglectful and abusive parents might be motivated to cover for their parents' relapse, lack of stability, or continued neglect or abuse to prevent being returned to foster care. Since state systems are overwhelmed with cases, and are also consistently underfunded with fewer foster homes than needed for placements, social workers may be motivated to triage their cases and prematurely return children to their biological parents, regardless of the possibility of future neglect or abuse.

The Focus of My Study

Research overall has recognized that the life situations that lead to children being placed in foster care, as well as their experiences and interactions in care, are often traumatizing. Many other factors contribute to trauma; these include abuse or neglect before entering (and sometimes within) the system; the conditions under which these children are separated from their families; high mobility (moving frequently) from placement to placement; lack of educational support within and across schools; and low access to long-term, healthy role models and relationships (Hernandez & Lee, 2020).

These tragedies, traumas, and sad statistics surrounding foster care have been surveyed and reported by child welfare agencies *ad nauseum*, but little qualitative, empirical research has been done in this area until the last decade. Clearly, all children exposed to foster care face certain risks as they become legal adults. As noted above, these children include those who age out of the system at 18, those who go through one or more adoptions, and those who were placed in foster care but returned to their biological parents. What is missing from the research, however, are the stories told by former foster youth about their K-12 experiences, literacy identity and development, and the data that these stories would yield, especially about successes. Some recent qualitative research has been conducted on this population (outlined below), and even some has looked at the stories of foster youth in higher education. However, absent from most research are the experiences common to all children in care, such as K-12 schooling and literacy development—positive factors that could help protect children in care.

Empirical research on foster children is limited because no federal system or unified approach to foster care in the United States has ever existed, so that care systems often work in isolation, with rules and structures varying widely. In addition, as I have noted above, the privacy of these children is highly protected. Because of the limitations of national, de-identified data, it is impossible to draw real insights about and solutions to the problems faced by foster care youth. Increasing the rigor of hierarchical linear or structural equation model analysis also has failed to yield feasible solutions. While the analysis of this quantitative, de-identified data might describe some aspects of this population, *it is not who they are*.

There may be few, if any, demographic groups with greater diversity in experience than foster children and former foster youth. This is because children in foster care represent every race, socioeconomic status, geographic location, family status, gender, and affiliation. They may have trauma in common, but the situations leading them to enter care and their experiences within care, as well as their transitions to adulthood, are as wide ranging in diversity as can be for a demographic group. In general, children experiencing foster care tend to be more vulnerable than the general population and are also often the “tellers” of their life stories. Every time they move homes or schools, they must reintroduce themselves and their histories. Their role as tellers is relevant to this study because the ways in which these children shape their own identities might have an impact on their life trajectories. Therefore, my first and primary research questions explored the ways in which these former foster youth enacted their various selves across time, as well as how they positioned themselves to their audience. They have had more experience than most in actively constructing and divulging their identities and have learned to position themselves in diverse ways according to the context of their childhood experiences. In turn, this may impact their beliefs and adult identities.

Additionally, because so many variables in the foster care experience cannot be controlled, my work explored some experiences that all foster children have in common, and therefore presented areas where support for foster care youth can be increased and improved. Instead of reinforcing the dominant cultural and academic narrative that portrays foster children as problematic, damaged, and derelict, my research filled a gap in the literature by exploring the accounts of these vulnerable—but ultimately successful—

adults, by focusing, in particular, on the experiences and perceptions of former foster youth who graduated from college with at least a four-year degree. These counter-narratives served to humanize this demographic group while building community among them and giving faces to unexpected outcomes such as college graduation. This project made it possible to imagine other realities and potential real-world solutions for kids in and aging out of care.

The Context of This Study

My study explored the beliefs and perceptions of former foster youth college graduates regarding the impact of their K-12 experiences, as well as other factors during childhood, on their academic and life trajectories.

To provide context for my study, I drew on four primary areas of academic research that addressed the following topics: 1) the context of foster care development and its origins; 2) evidence that child service have systems over-scrutinized and unfairly targeted indigenous, Black, low socio-economic status (SES) and other marginalized communities; 3) common outcomes for children exposed to foster care and the impact of aging out; and 4) recent studies that used qualitative methods to explore the perceptions of former foster youth and their experiences.

The first three areas of literature offered a critical lens to assess the classist and racist assumptions of modern foster care, including dominant narratives about foster children and their families, and current understandings of foster youth outcomes and trajectories. The last category of qualitative studies explored the perceptions of this population, which have been critical to the development of my study.

Foster Care and Its Origins

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2022) has defined foster care as “a temporary service provided by states for children who cannot live with their families” and who are placed with “relatives or with unrelated foster parents”; the definition of foster care also included “placement settings such as group homes, residential care facilities, emergency shelters, and supervised independent living” (paras. 1-2). Once local or state child services agencies have determined that a child living with their biological parent/s is unsafe due to supposed abuse or neglect, these children are placed into the foster care system. Foster care is distinguished from adoption, which in the best-case scenario provides a permanent and legal home for children after parental rights have been terminated. However, children who are adopted can still be vulnerable to many of the conditions faced by other children in care. As noted above, at any given time, over 400,000 children are in the foster care system in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021), with child welfare services costing taxpayers over \$30 billion annually (Devooght et al., 2014).

The origins of foster care have a long, problematic history, with the development of modern foster care usually attributed to the practice of child indentured servitude, wherein children were not viewed as inherently valuable and so were compelled to work for food and shelter when placed for any reason with a family other than their own (Rymph, 2017). As this practice became outlawed over time, group care developed, and orphanages became the norm in response to family economic instability or when children lost their parents to disease or war. In addition, impoverished, struggling families often turned to orphanages for temporary care for their children. However, outcomes for these

children were so bleak, and their development was so atypical, that society began to call for another solution for care (Rymph, 2017). A response was offered by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal (1933-1939), which envisioned the creation of adequate social safety nets to prevent the dissolution of families due to economic hardship.

The New Deal introduced public foster care and social services, with agencies and affiliates to protect children and preserve families. The result was a mixed system of public, state, and local government agencies in addition to private, religious, and non-religious entities; each had their own approach, including rules, regulations, and systems for reporting outcomes, if any (Rymph 2017). By the 1960s and 1970s, it was clear that that the New Deal vision would never come to fruition, and to this day the number of children taken from families for economic reasons continues to increase. These mixed approaches to foster care decreased accountability for child outcomes and diminished support to foster children as they transitioned to adulthood; both of these factors increase the likelihood that inherently racist, classist, and misogynistic institutions have disproportionately targeted families of color, single-parent homes, and low SES households.

Evidence of Racism and Classism

As noted above, foster care consists of both state intervention services and private family care providers, but family intervention services have not taken children from families equally. More than 55% of children in foster care are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (Villegas & Pecora, 2012). The absence of a unified federal approach, coupled with an historical lack of accountability and reporting, has propelled inequities in

the treatment of Indigenous and Black families, particularly in states with long histories of racism, such as in the South (Rymph, 2017).

The existence and development of racial bias in the American foster care system was addressed by Simmons (2020), who drew on archived materials to provide an overview of “the conflict between private institutions and the state responsibility for neglected African American children in the early twentieth century” (p. 199). Simmons demonstrated that foster care, until the beginning of the 20th century, was only available to White children and provided only by White families. Simmons further noted that it was only after a long history of exclusion of children of color due to policy that New York City eventually developed an alternative foster care system for foster children. This alternative public system was replicated in states across the U.S. and resulted in our current racialized foster care system, which to this day consistently scrutinizes Black, indigenous, and other families of color, as well as low SES families and other vulnerable populations. While private foster care providers still exist, their approach to equity has remained unknown due to lack of accountability.

Empirical research also has confirmed that children from low SES families comprise the majority of foster children. Rolock et al. (2015), for example, found that community factors associated with low SES, such as the presence of litter and graffiti, as well as the prevalence of cigarette and alcohol advertisements in children’s communities, predicted increased rates of child placement in foster care. White-Wolfe et al. (2021) further explored the “association between community hardships,” such as unemployment, rental rates and poverty (often symptoms of low socioeconomic status) with “foster care entry” (p. 105) and found that “neglect” (p. 106) accounted for about 60% of the

justification for child removal from the home. Their study also remarked on the disconnect between the concept of neglect and its realities: “while child welfare practitioners often conceptualize neglect as a consequence of poor parenting, many scholars argue that neglect often reflects factors that are beyond parents’ control—most prominently economic hardship, and structural racism” (pp. 106–107).

Clearly, the inequity rates of modern foster care, such as separation and the length of stay in care, cannot be accounted for based on socioeconomic status alone. As White-Wolfe et al. (2021) found, low SES does not account for all disparities in family scrutiny and child separation; data showed that race is also a factor in these disparities. They found that Black children are taken from their families more often than White children and are kept in foster care longer. Simply put, race is a determining factor in family scrutiny and separation.

Other studies have confirmed the role race plays in children entering the foster care system. Wildman and Emanuel (2014), for instance, evaluated longitudinal data from the Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and found that “Native American (up to 15.44%) and Black (up to 11.53%) children were at far higher risk of placement” (p. 657) than White children. Carter (2010) also found that American Indian (AI) and Alaskan Native (NA) children were put into care far more often than White children, especially for family drug or alcohol abuse when compared to their White counterparts. They also found that decisions to place AI and NA children into care “may have been influenced by racial bias” (p. 657).

The role that notions of “whiteness” play in foster care placement has also been well-documented. Grooms (2020), for instance, found that Black children are

overrepresented in the foster care system, noting disparities in treatment and outcomes between children of color and their White counterparts, with the increased vulnerability of Black youth who also identify as LGBTQ. In a recent Canadian study of foster care, Carranza (2022) examined the colonialist roots of family separation and determined that “child welfare remains steeped in Western ontologies—reinscribing the norms of whiteness”—and determined that “whiteness continues to mediate the assessment of risks and determination of intervention” (p. 1-2). Carranza concluded that immigrant children were taken from their families at increased rates due to child welfare worker cultural assumptions of normalized whiteness, arguing that this increased scrutiny of immigrant families and determination of neglect perpetuates colonialist ideologies and unfair imbalances of power.

Research, moreover, has indicated that the above categories of race, socioeconomic status, and community characteristics predict the likelihood of family scrutiny and rates of child placement in foster care. Unfortunately, while such middle-class norms of whiteness perpetuate colonialist power inequities and cultural and socioeconomic disparities, we nonetheless know that child placement in foster care is often justified, or so we would like to believe. My next task was to explore whether foster care placement improves child or family outcomes, and then examine its impact on foster care outcomes and aging out.

Common Outcomes and the Impact of Aging Out

Considering the deficit assertions of the mainstream narrative about the current and former foster youth population outlined in the Introduction, it is no surprise that the media emphasizes the negative impact of foster care on child development and adult

outcomes. It is important to note, however, that it is impossible to separate the impact of the trauma that caused family intervention and sent the child into foster care from other traumas they experience during care. Most research has sampled children currently in foster care or those who experienced foster care in childhood, but we cannot know which or to what extent the traumas are caused by neglect or abuse before placement in care. Research has emphasized that children in care often fall behind their peers academically, resulting in low outcomes in adulthood. Causes of low outcomes include trauma; frequent moves and moving during the school year; low attendance at school, new procedures and expectation across different schools. the loss of academic records; and content gaps of knowledge associated with mobility. Additionally, foster parents are often not trained or equipped to address subject-area content gaps and low literacy skills or motivation, let alone the impact trauma has on learning for those children in their care.

The impact of trauma and disruptions on a variety of outcomes have also been the subject of much research. Turney and Wildman (2017), for example, found that when compared to their peers not in care, about half of children placed in foster care or adopted from foster care were exposed to household member substance abuse, more than two-fifths were exposed to parental divorce or parental incarceration, and nearly 1 in 8 children experienced parental death. (p. 118)

Additionally, children in foster care were exposed to ACES [adverse childhood experiences] at a much greater frequency than children in the general population. For example, though nearly half (40.1%) of children in foster care experienced parental incarceration, this was true of 6.4% of children not in foster care. (Turney & Wildman, 2017, p. 118)

Children placed in foster care and adopted from foster care, compared to their counterparts, are more likely to experience adversities including parental divorce or separation, parental incarceration, parental abuse, violence exposure, household member mental illness, and household member substance abuse . . . [and] they are more likely than children in poverty and children in nearly all types of complex family structures to be exposed to ACEs. (Turner & Wilman, 2017, p. 124)

Turney and Wildman (2017) also found that children in care presented lower literacy and numeracy levels, had lower academic outcomes with higher rates of suspension and expulsion, and were at a higher risk for dropping out.

All these outcomes during care impact foster youth as they turn 18 and age out of the system. The National Foster Youth Institute (2022) forecast that going forward, more than 23,000 youth will age out of the foster care system annually, and over 20% will instantly become homeless. Additionally, the NFYI found that “only 1 out of every 2 foster kids who age out of the system will have some form of gainful employment by the age of 24,” and just as importantly, “there is less than a 3% chance for children who have aged out of foster care to earn a college degree at any point in their life” (paras. 7-9). Moreover, the NFYI found that of the girls who age out of the foster care system, seven out of 10 will become pregnant before the age of 21, and that more than 25% of children who age out of the system suffer from PTSD.

These data show that we should not be surprised that young adults who age out of the foster care system, as well as those who were adopted one or more times or who were returned home, are vulnerable to higher rates of homelessness, poverty, high school and college dropout, low access to healthcare, and high rates of unemployment.

To mitigate the problems of young adults who age out of the foster care system, in 2002 the federal government passed the act to amend the foster care independent living program under Title IV-E to provide for educational and training vouchers (ETV) for youths aging out of foster care. By providing federal and state funding to educate these young people, over the next two decades this legislation prompted the formation of many local and state programs to support these young adults in the hopes of improving their outcomes. As of the writing of this literature review, because of this legislation, 35 states now offer some sort of tuition assistance to all young adults who age out of foster care (South Carolina is not one of these states). Tuition assistance, however, is sometimes limited to a certain attained age, the timeframe of aging-out, or the level of education (such as undergraduate education), and it can be restricted to the geographic location where foster care was provided. However, many youths who age out are either unaware that these programs exist or do not have the social capital to navigate application systems effectively. Unfortunately, because of these limitations, the needle has barely moved on improving the statistical outcomes for youth who age out of the system.

While we know relatively little about the experiences of former foster youth, one qualitative, phenomenological study of 19 youths (Rome & Raskin, 2019) explored a typical aging-out trajectory. This study (Rome & Raskin, 2019) found that in addition to experiencing frequent instability, once their participants turned 18 “adverse events began immediately,” with risk factors being “four or more foster care placements, being on probation, accumulating fines, and losing government assistance” (p. 529). The study found it was more important to provide stability to these young adults as opposed to promoting notions of resilience and self-sufficiency. This finding was particularly

relevant to my foster childhood experience, given that so many people remark on my *resilience*. What I really wanted and needed—like other former foster care youth—was something that those who talk about *resilience* take for granted: stability, financial support, and social capital in navigating systems and resources.

The Limitations of Current Research

Historically, most research has used de-identified, quantitative national and state-level foster child data sets to identify problems in foster care. This approach is based on the belief that if we can identify problems, we can solve them. However, this research has not and cannot explore the experiences, beliefs, and stories that foster children tell about themselves. Due to privacy laws, it is difficult, if not impossible, to access children currently in foster to explore their stories and experiences. As a result, research on this population has focused on young adults from foster care transitioning into adulthood; unfortunately, this has been as close as we can get to understanding the experiences of children in care.

The limitations of this dataset and the associated quantified approach were illustrated by a mixed-methods study by Rolock and Pérez, titled “Three Sides to a Foster Care Story: An Examination of the Lived Experiences of Young Adults, Their Foster Care Case Record, and the Space in Between” (2018). Using quantitative and qualitative data from 20 interviews conducted for a project funded by the Child Welfare Administration and from administrative records, the study sought to understand the experiences of youth in care and the resulting frequent outcomes for this population. Research questions included: “1) Are young adults’ perceptions of their permanency outcomes and post-permanency experiences congruent or incongruent with their administrative data records?

and 2) How do young adults' experiences and perceptions explain the congruencies and incongruencies of their administrative records?" (Rolock & Perez, 2018, p. 196). Linking interview data to administrative data at the state level, the researchers reported mixed results regarding congruencies, with the most congruent results related to demographic information, such as race and gender, and the most incongruent results related to perceptions of permanency outcomes and post-permanency experiences. Essentially, the demographic data lined up, but the perceptions of former foster youth about their experiences in care and transition to adulthood did not line up with state records.

This study challenged the traditional, quantitative research of former foster youth, which has contributed to the deficit lens through which we view the foster youth population. Furthermore, Rolock and Perez's findings confirmed that the analysis of quantitative data from national deidentified sets is not representative of the experiences of foster children, and that qualitative approaches are needed to obtain a holistic understanding of former foster youth experiences, beliefs, and trajectories.

Recent Qualitative Work with Former Foster Youth

Like mine, the following studies used qualitative methods to explore the stories of former foster youth regarding their experiences, overall outcomes, and the factors that influenced their academic trajectories. Relying on surveys and interviews to collect data, these qualitative studies employed various methods of data analysis, including inductive, deductive, and thematic approaches, in addition to other coding frameworks. These studies informed the development of my theoretical framework and methods.

Research Themes from the Literature

An overarching and intertwined theme that emerged from this literature is the power of self-narrative. Other themes relevant to my research included childhood factors that affected adulthood outcomes; factors that contributed to the enrollment of former foster care youth in college; factors that propelled and sustained their academic success in college; the impact of their resilience in the college experience; the impact of self-identity and college success programs (CPS), including those addressing mental health issues on the college experience; and finally, how self-authorship among former foster care youth contributed to their success in higher education. While these studies did not specifically ask about K-12 experiences and literacy identity development, they were germane to my research because they revealed childhood factors or other circumstances relevant to former foster youth who graduated with four-year college degrees.

Childhood Factors That Influenced Adult Outcomes

By exploring perceptions of former foster youth who did not graduate from college, the following two studies revealed positive and negative factors that affected youth transition to adult life, and thus are important to the future implementation of foster care.

“I Don’t Know Where I Would Be Right Now if It Wasn’t for Them”:
Emancipated Foster Care Youth and Their Important Non-Parental Adults (Duke et al., 2017), demonstrated the positive power of non-guardian adults in improving the perspectives and life outcomes of foster care youth. This longitudinal, qualitative study of 99 former foster youth and 63 of their VIPs (very important non-parental persons, including teachers) was conducted in California. Applying Coleman’s (1998) social

capital theoretical framework, researchers used interviews and surveys to identify characteristics of VIPs and how they supported these foster youth in their transition to adulthood. The study found that these youth had positive relationships with their VIPs, that the VIPs supported their transition into adulthood, and that these relationships benefitted these youth in many ways.

Another qualitative study addressed the impact of institutional foster care in the context of compulsory military service in transitioning to adult life. “Narratives of Care Leavers: What Promotes Resilience in Transitions to Independent Lives?” (Refaeli, 2017), was conducted in Israel, where most children in state care live in group facilities, and where all children transitioning to adulthood are required to serve two years in the military.

The study focused on 16 former foster youth or care leavers (Refaeli, 2017) to explore their perceptions of their experiences of exiting foster/institutional care to adulthood. Refaeli used resilience theory and holistic narrative analysis of life stories, and drew on recorded interviews to find patterns across participants. He found two distinct groups within interviewees: those “struggling to survive” and those “surviving through struggle” (Refaeli, 2017, p. 1); he further highlighted one participant from each group with a vignette, thus demonstrating the effectiveness of treating narrative as individual stories rather than sorting them into codes and themes. Despite the common ground former foster youth shared with their non-foster youth peers, former foster youth suffered from lower outcomes upon transitioning to post-military adult life. This finding demonstrated the need to identify childhood factors that would propel healthy adult outcomes among former foster care youth.

Foster Care Factors Affecting College Enrollment

A qualitative study titled “Supports for College-bound African Americans formerly in Foster Care: A Qualitative Study of their Influences on Enrollment in College” (Lane, 2016) identified and examined influences that contributed to the college enrollment of its participants. Lane conducted two face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 10 African American former foster youth enrolled, or recently enrolled, in higher education to explore their experiences and perceptions. Participants indicated that they would have benefitted from some sort of support program when applying to college to better understand higher education systems.

Lane (2016) analyzed data using constant the comparison method and the coding of the transcribed interviews. The constant comparisons were used to identify categories, which were constructed into emerging themes. These themes were then converted into findings, which included the context of aging out, as well as the positive impact and contribution of social (defined as people) and communal supports (defined as institutions or organizations). One interesting finding was that participants indicated that they would have benefitted from support programs in applying to colleges as well as in understanding how higher education systems operate. This study was relevant to my work because it confirmed my view that youth in care need supports to improve adult outcomes and higher education graduation rates.

Factors Promoting College Success

The study “Postsecondary Strengths, Challenges, and Supports Experienced by Foster Care Alumni College Graduates” (Salazar et al., 2016) explored how to better support and improve outcomes of former foster care college graduates. It asked three

open-ended survey questions to identify the strengths, challenges, and supports that impacted the academic success of the study's 248 participants, who were drawn from a subset of a larger 2010 study and who were also recipients of various scholarships restricted to foster youth. Serving as lenses of the study were two concepts: a) *resilience*, defined as "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar et. al, 2000, p. 543); and b) *social capital*, defined as matching "the concepts of financial capital, physical capital, and human capital—but embodied in relations among persons" (Coleman, 1988, p. 118)—that was also a "significant factor in a successful adaptation to early adulthood" (Jones, 2013, p. 27). The research questions of the study were "1) What strengths and supports do foster care alumni draw upon to succeed in college? 2) What challenges do foster care alumni face during college? and 3) What are some of the keys to overcoming these challenges?" (Salazar et al., 2016, p. 266).

Answers to the survey questions were submitted to an inductive content analysis followed by open coding. The results yielded seven global themes that were key to overcoming the challenges of foster care youth transitioning to adulthood: "(a) positive self, (b) overcoming, (c) interpersonal relationships, (d) finances and logistics, (e) academic orientation and skills, (f) physical and mental health, and (g) independent living skills" (Salazar et al., 2016, p. 269). Particularly relevant to my research were the findings for (e) academic orientation and skills; these included "personal characteristics, such as IQ, academic curiosity, enjoyment of learning, ability to focus, and love of reading, as well as specific academic skills such as computer skills and being a fast

learner” (Salazar et al., p. 271). These characteristics reflected potential development opportunities for K-12 experiences and literacy development.

Resilience and the College Experience

Three studies examined the qualities former foster care youth bring to the successful college experience, using resiliency theory (Bernard, 1991) as a foundation to examine the strengths and assets of this population, as opposed to a focus on looking at supposed weaknesses.

The first was a phenomenological study, “The Power of Community: How Foster Parents, Teachers, and Community Members Support Academic Achievement for Foster Youth” (Morton, 2016). In the fall of 2011, Morton, the director of the Oregon Foster Youth Connection recruited 11 participants for the study from the records of former foster youth currently enrolled in higher education; the participants were also recipients of the Chafee Education and Training scholarship, a federal grant for former foster youth. Using interviews to explore participant experiences in foster care and perceptions regarding protective factors in achieving academic college success, Morton asked, “What help, tools, or strategies did college-enrolled foster youth use to support their academic goals?” (2016, p. 102). Applying Bernard’s theory of resiliency, Morton examined five primary indicators of resilience: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, sense of purpose, and sense of a future. By analyzing and coding data using Creswell’s model of inquiry (2007), Morton identified five primary resources, strategies, or tools former foster youth used to support their academic goals, including family, school, community, and self-reliance. Of those five strategies, school and self-reliance were particularly relevant to my research.

In addition, two dissertations—some of the first studies of their kind—influenced my theory and methods because they used asset-based frameworks, reasonable sampling methods, and applied narrative analysis to the stories that former foster youth told about themselves.

The first was *Our Stories (Un)Told: A Critical Qualitative Study of High-Achieving Foster Youth College Going Experiences* (Amechi, 2017). As a former foster youth, Amechi understood the vulnerabilities of this population and the potential for trauma inherent in all foster care situations. Amechi recruited 12 former foster care youth for his study and drew on two asset-based theories of Yosso (2005): the community cultural wealth model and the anti-deficit achievement framework. Amechi was able to identify several strengths of this population, which included how their “aspirations for postsecondary education” resulted in their being “high-achieving” former foster youth “currently enrolled in college,” and how they “employ[ed] cultural wealth to enhance their access to selective 4-year institutions” (Amechi, 2017, p. 9). After conducting a qualitative analysis of the 12 interviews, he found that participants reported that “internal and external influences” impacted their aspirations and that they had “resiliency and optimism” regarding the future. Amechi also found that they also drew on five categories of cultural capital— “aspirational, social, resistant, familial, and navigational” (Amechi 2017, p. v)— to access competitive institutions.

The second dissertation, *Fostering the HERO Within: A Narrative Study of Foster Care Alumni in Higher Education* (Medlin, 2019), used narrative analysis to produce counter-stories from former foster youth college graduates that disrupt the dominant narrative. To frame the study, Medlin used positive psychology and the concept of

psychological capital, lenses that also informed my theoretical approach of looking at the strengths of this population, instead of the weaknesses that current research focuses on. Using established criterion and snowball methods (as I have) to recruit seven participants, Medlin presented their stories with three major findings. First, Medlin identified five strengths—termed “foster kid capital” (p. 69)—that propelled the academic success of the study’s participants: (1) “fortitude” (pp. 81-86); (2) “self-reliance” (pp. 87-92); (3) “compassion” (pp. 93-96); (4) “optimism” (pp. 97-100); and (5) “motivation” (pp. 101-106). Second, he reported four developmental processes they used throughout their college journey: (1) “engaging in self-reflection” (pp. 126-134); (2) “learning self-care” (pp. 135-138); (3) “building a support system” (pp. 139-145); and (4) “forging a new identity” (pp. 146-151). Finally, Medlin recommended five primary approaches universities could use to promote former foster youth recruitment, retention, and graduation: (1) “identify foster care alumni to advisers and faculty” (pp. 168-169); (2) “inform advisers and faculty on the unique strengths and challenges of foster care alumni in higher education” (pp. 170-180); (3) “assign and train key personnel” (pp. 181-183); (4) “proactively provide support services to foster care alumni” (pp. 184-191); and (5) “create a campus foster care alumni network” (pp. 192-193).

Medlin’s study contributed to the development of my methodology in several ways. First, the sampling method (snowball sampling) overcame the difficulty of identifying members of this isolated population. Second, the theoretical frameworks looked for strengths as opposed to weaknesses. And third, by employing narrative analysis, as opposed to dissecting participant stories, study participants were given a platform to share their stories. Finally, the findings were presented thematically.

Self-Identity, College Support Programs, and the College Experience

Two studies examined the self-identification and resilience of former foster care youth in relation to the presence or absence of college support programs (CSPs) and how those factors affected college experiences.

Dumai and Spence (2021) examined the development of student identity in former foster youth in college with and without campus support programs (CSPs). They used an asset-based approach and a sociological lens. To select participants, they purposefully sampled data from a larger project that involved former foster youth from diverse backgrounds who transitioned to adulthood. Their participants were former foster care youth, age 18 or older, who had graduated from high school, and were currently or previously enrolled in college. After collecting basic demographic data using a questionnaire, they conducted three focus groups (n=16) and conducted six in-depth interviews. Members of the focus groups were participants in a CSP in a northeastern U.S. university; interview participants had not been enrolled in a CSP. Interviews lasted about an hour each and participants were given gift cards for their time.

The researchers highlighted text relevant to the research questions in the transcripts, followed by multiple rounds of coding to identify critical life course stages, such as time in foster care, transition to college and independent living, and time in college. Next, they coded for “educational expectations and aspirations, resilience, persistence, and independence; developing an identity as a college student; social capital and trust; and mentorship, social support, and structured supports” (Dumai & Spence, 2021, p. 141). In the final rounds of analysis, they searched for predetermined codes, which they constructed to answer their research questions.

Their data analysis found that former foster youth across both groups (those enrolled in and not enrolled in a CSP) believed first, that people had low expectations of them; and second, because they had suffered mistreatment or abandonment from trusted adults in the past, they did not immediately trust the adults in charge of the various support programs. This belief led to a third finding: these former foster youth adopted strategies that allowed them to navigate their transition to adulthood and college on their own. Without a CSP, they were forced to grow up faster and did not have the luxury of focusing on the college experience. The group that was involved in a CSP, called a “dormitory crew,” were provided heavy support systems, especially financial wrap-around services and emotional support that made them feel like part of the community, which participants said greatly benefitted them. They were not forced to be overly self-reliant. This study is significant because researchers found that realistic, doable CSPs greatly benefitted FFY children transitioning from care to college with improved trajectories and graduation rates.

A second qualitative study, “Exploring College Student Identity Among Young People with Foster Care Histories and Mental Health Challenges” (Miller, Blakeslee & Ison, 2020), explored the experiences of former foster youth (n=18), ages 18 to 26, at a college in the Pacific Northwest who had self-identified as having mental health stressors and who were already enrolled in a CSP for the same. Semi-structured, in-person interviews were conducted at the university to explore the participants’ identities as foster students, their experience of mental health stressors, and their perspectives on available formal and informal support sources, including campus-based resources. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then loaded into web-based software for

qualitative analysis. The researchers conducted a thematic analysis, first coding transcripts inductively at the semantic level to develop initial codes, and then organized them into themes and patterns.

Four major themes emerged. Participants described 1) feelings of “otherness” (Miller et al. 2020, p. 3); 2) they experienced “stacking stressors” (p. 3), meaning that their stresses piled up and compounded, intertwining stress from both foster care and student factors; 3) they experienced tensions between “self-reliance and support-seeking” (p. 4), with many of them feeling it necessary to both be self-reliant while finding it difficult to ask for help; and 4) they also gave suggestions to “improve support services” (Miller et al. 2020, p. 4), such as having supportive staff with a background in mental health services who specifically understood the foster care experience.

This study is relevant to my research because it looked at what possible supports could be offered to FFY students experiencing mental health problems during the college experience. However, while providing insights into how to improve CSPs, it was limited because it did not identify factors that could improve outcomes for youth while in care.

Narrative Self-Authorship

Another qualitative narrative study by Amechi (2016), “There’s no Autonomy”: Narratives of Self-Authorship from Black Male Foster Care Alumni in Higher Education,” was especially important for my research in that it demonstrated the power of self-authorship for former foster youth in higher education. Amechi employed the theoretical lenses of constructivism and Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-authorship (2001); the latter explains how young adults, through the telling of their stories, begin to look internally to negotiate cognitive dissonance and dissatisfaction to answer three basic

questions: “1) How do I know? 2) Who am I? and 3) What relationships do I want?”

(Amechi 2016, p. 21).

Amechi recruited four young, Black, male former foster youth from diverse foster care backgrounds and experiences through student affairs administrators at two research universities in the Midwest. Participants were first given a demographic survey and then participated in 90-minute semi-structured interviews, which were recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. The three questions asked were: “1) How do BMFCA [Black Male Foster Care Alumni] make meaning of their experiences in the foster care system and higher education? 2) In what ways do BMFCA develop self-authoring ways of knowing? And 3) How does self-authorship contribute to Black male success in higher education?” (Amechi, 2016, p. 22).

To create the narratives, Amechi analyzed the transcripts, identifying relevant inductive and deductive themes and codes, which he wrote in the margins of the transcripts. Next, he re-storied the interviews into chronological sequences to create a grand narrative for each participant, identifying three major findings or themes across participants: 1) the BMFCA “entered college self-authored, having endured challenging experiences and adverse environmental conditions related to foster care”; 2) “Self-authorship development may require a sense of autonomy or independence”; and 3) “The development of self-authorship enhanced the success of the BMFCA in terms of their academic self-efficacy and ability to cope effectively with and respond to difficult situations in college” (Amechi 2016, pp. 25).

Gaps in the Literature

Although research has indicated that we can improve outcomes for foster youth by increasing stability and decreasing time in care, the reality is that we cannot directly control conditions without overhauling the many foster systems across the U.S. Even with improved racial, socioeconomic, and gender equity in family interventions, we cannot ameliorate the need for out-of-home foster care placement.

It is my view, therefore, that research should focus on what goes right for children in foster care, studying the stories of recipients who present typical adult outcomes that contradict the dominant narrative of failure—a narrative that conveniently allows us and those in power to look away and assume that there is no hope for successful lives for this population.

The thematic literature reviewed above examined the stories of former foster youth as directly or indirectly related to this population's enrollment in, experiences during, or graduation with a four-year degree from higher education. This research paralleled mine because I used college graduation as an indicator of positive adult outcomes. Where my research differed from the literature is that I explored factors of childhood experience that are potentially controllable, such as K-12 experiences and literacy development, neither of which have been researched in any detail. By researching and applying positive, doable interventions in these areas, I believe we can then provide these children with appropriate resources, such as quality academic support, to improve their life and academic trajectories. My study is one such attempt to do that.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Frameworks

In this chapter I present an overview of the three theoretical frameworks I used to frame this study. Due to the diversity of the experiences of children in care, and the complexity of transitioning into adulthood from inherently traumatizing circumstances, no single theory can completely address these nuances of these factors, nor give an effective, comprehensive approach to analyzing results. Therefore, I have chosen three powerful, interrelated theoretical frameworks as lenses for data analysis.

The first framework is an identity theory; specifically, I looked at the narrative identity metaphor (Luke and Moje, 2009) and examined how participants used retrospective stories to tell others who they are. This approach is inherently relevant to any narrative analysis. Next, I reviewed critical race theory, which I used to examine if and how participants talked back to power. Last, I looked at counter-storying, situated within CRT, to examine the concept of participant success as a counter-narrative, and to see which participants defied dominant narratives about foster youth and their adult outcomes.

These three frameworks fit together to analyze my data because collectively they situated my data within the context of storying identity and provided a framework for analyzing the ways in which these former foster youth responded to power, dominant narratives, and if, or to what, they attributed their own counter-stories.

Identity

Identity is a construct of interest across disciplines, and five dominant metaphors for conceptualizing identity have been articulated in contemporary scholarship. Luke and Moje (2009) posited that the metaphors for identity found in the literature include “identity as (1) difference, (2) sense of self/ subjectivity, (3) mind or consciousness, (4) narrative, and (5) position” (p. 416).

Three common assumptions converged across these five metaphors. Luke and Moje (2009) asserted that, first, “identities are social rather than individual constructions” (p. 417). People develop and share identity within societies that have structures and hierarchies. Second, “identity is no longer conceptualized as a single, stable entity that one develops throughout adolescence and achieves at some point” (Luke and Moje, 2009, p. 418). Instead, we usually refer to identity in plural terms now, based on the understanding of multiple identities converging in a unique intersectionality between race, gender, socioeconomic status, achievement level, and much more. Last, “identity is recognized by others,” and the “person is called into an identity by the recognitions or assignments of others, and the meanings the person makes of the identities available to him or her serve to constitute a sense of self or subjectivity” (Luke and Moje, 2009, p. 419). People recognize these alignments because others acknowledge and reflect them.

Researchers across the social sciences, such as Davis, Love, and Fares (2019), and Stets and Burke, (2000) agreed that there are many similarities between two of the most prominent identity theories: identity theory (IT) from sociology, and social identity theory (SIT), grounded in the field of psychology. These theories assert that the “self is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself

in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 224). The reflexive self can reflect on itself when comparing itself to others, and this reflection is mediated by “self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-consistency, and self-regulation” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 233), among other mediating and moderating factors, such as access to resources.

While the jargon regarding components of identity varies across disciplines, most theories indicate that the process of “identification” (from IT) or “self-categorization” (from SIT) contributes to how “an identity is formed” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 224). Essentially, people understand who they are individually or within groups by recognizing that groups exist, and then by comparing themselves to other individuals or groups. Identity theorists have posited that “a person’s positions in the social structure” have an impact on “the likelihood that those persons will activate one identity over another” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 230).

Another commonly identified claim of identity theories is that “individuals view themselves in terms of meanings imparted by a structured society” (Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 225). A fundamental, underlying assumption of most identity theories is that people live within cultures with rules, structure, and ranked groups that are either concretely or perceived to exist within hierarchical orders.

This hierarchy generates power structures among people and groups, and theorists posit that “a person’s positions in the social structure” has an impact on “the likelihood that those persons will activate one identity over another” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 230). Where we perceive ourselves in the hierarchy of social status and power affects the group values and goals we align with. Equally important is McCarthy and Moje’s (2002)

assertion that “identity also matters because people can be understood by others in particular ways, and people act toward one another depending on such understandings and positionings” (pp. 228-229). We are positioned within these hierarchies of social status and power, which impact how we are treated by others, which in turn reinforces or breaks down the perception of that position. The groups we align with are inherently and inevitably situated within a hierarchy of power.

It is important to note that “using the term ‘identity’ has the potential to suggest stability or identity as an entity, which has the potential to infer a more static view of these processes” (Shultz, Hong, and Cross, 2020, p. 66), when this is not the case. Instead, identities continuously fluctuate as “goals, standards, and beliefs; the perceived constraints and affordances within current activity settings; and the influences that emerge within their immediate and social-cultural contexts” (p. 66) fluctuate over time.

Across these five metaphors and three assumptions, McCarthy and Moje (2002) asserted that identity “shapes or is an aspect of how humans make sense of the world and their experiences in it, including their experiences with texts” (p. 228). These texts include the symbols we consume and produce when reading and writing, but also includes the oral stories we tell and hear. Communication of identity to others is important to consider because an intuitively fundamental component of identity is how we use our bodies, language, and resources to project and align ourselves with our perceived in-groups. Narrative identity is one such theory that explains how people use stories to understand and project their perceived identities.

Narratives and Narrative Identity

Social scientists are fascinated by the unique and universal ability of humans to use language to narrate, reflect upon, and share experiences about interactions, time continuity, and situation (Clandinin, 2006), and for good reason. Narratives have been defined as “the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 68). Moreover, they are embedded in the context of “the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (Clandinin & Roseik, 2007, p. 42). Storying, or narrating, is a common method people use to understand and communicate their experiences situated within time, social spaces and interactions, and to process relationships and change (Phelan, 2022). We use narratives to express “identity development, interpersonal affiliation, and ideological solidarity” (Razfar & Rumenapp, 2014, p. 287); furthermore, we can “study the distinctive nature of narrative and its various structures, elements, uses, and effects” (Phelan, 2022, p. 1). There is abundant evidence from ancient (Anderson, 2000) and Indigenous (Martinez, 2021) cultures that people have been using stories to teach, persuade, and express as long as they have been using language to communicate. Narratives are powerful, and storying is not new. Analyzing the elements of the storying process and the impact on identity, culture, and socially situated individual identity is often described as a narrative identity theoretical framework in the social sciences (Luke and Moje, 2009; MacDonald, 1997, 2001; Phelan, 2022; Razfar & Rumenapp, 2014; Sfard & Prusk, 2005; Wortham, 2001, 2004).

Many theorists would argue that storying is used for more reasons than to teach or express, and that sharing narratives has an indirect or direct impact on identity

construction. Luke and Moje (2009) stated “that identities are not only represented but also constructed in and through stories people tell about themselves and their experiences” (p. 427).

However, there are many different beliefs about the relationship between narratives and identity. Some theorists, such as McAdams (1997, 2001), believed that the identity is developed over time through life experience and is only accessible to others through stories about those experiences. This understanding is sometimes referred to as the life-story model. Others, such as Sfard and Prusk (2005), posited that the narrative itself is identity. Both theorists asserted that the narrative itself is representative of the actual embodiment of an individual’s identity.

Others viewed narratives as interactive and have asserted that the telling or enacting of narratives constructs identity in real time. Wortham (2001, 2004) and Mishler (2004) believed that narrative identities are dialogic and recursive, and that the interactions between story tellers and audiences are important processes for the constructed self. Luke and Moje (2009) noted that “regardless of one’s take on identity, it is difficult to argue against the idea that identities are at least in part represented in and through language” (p. 427). There is a range of theories regarding the relationship between storying and identity, but all acknowledge this relationship to some extent.

McAdams (2001) used a life-story model and defined narrative identity as the processes of generating “an internalized and evolving life story that gives us a sense of purpose and helps us to synthesize our life experiences to create a unified, distinct self” (p. 117). This unified self consists of layers that develop and are added to over time, linking many identities, and relayed through multiple narratives. McAdams (2001)

described two key elements of narrative identity development that both fluctuate and are recursive: synchronic and diachronic integration. These two forms of integration describe how our identity develops over time and the complex process of storying.

Contrary to many mainstream belief systems riddled with religious epistemologies that often dictate “black or white” dichotomous thinking, many things can be true at once, including within one’s story and one’s identity. McAdams (2001) described this intersectionality as synchronic integration, which allows us to identify with multiple (and sometimes even conflicting) groups concurrently. Shultz and colleagues (2020) expanded this idea, asserting that “synchronic integrating attempts involve efforts to make sense of our various, different, and sometimes conflicting roles,” and that “one aspect of our developing self-understandings involves a dialogical relationship between the potential multiplicity of our sub-identities and the idea of a unified self” (p. 67). This study maintained that “our identifying narratives are important to how we see ourselves and tend to be told and retold,” and that “it is through our narratives that we attempt to integrate our various selves (e.g., father, teacher, introvert)” (Shultz, et al., 2020, pp. 66-67).

Additionally, what was once true can be an element of what is true now, and still not contradict the truth within a story or identity; instead, it can indicate compounding layers that present results in slices of ever-changing time. Our identities, like our stories, are not linear chronological outcomes but rather are complex systems of understanding that fluctuate and continue to develop over time; they are influenced by oscillating perceptions about ourselves and our varying filters gleaned from experience, which then shape perceived and real relationships among ourselves, others, and the world. According

to McAdams (1997, 2001), our diachronic sense is a second element that continues to fluctuate and develop over time. Diachronic sense references in some cases how people felt one way or believed one thing, but now feel differently or believe something else. Both our synchronic and diachronic integration are expressed in narratives for audiences in McAdams' life-story model.

In "Telling Identities: In Search of an Analytic Tool for Investigating Learning as a Culturally Shaped Activity," Sfard and Prusak (2005) critiqued widely accepted beliefs about the term "identity" in educational research and "focus[ed] on the reasons for its current popularity, on its present shortcomings, and on the conceptual work that has yet to be done before the notion of identity can fulfill its promise" (p. 14). They contended not only that narratives are representative of identity, but they also "*equate[d] identities with stories about persons*. No, no mistake here: We did not say that identities were *finding their expression* in stories—we said they *were* stories" (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 14). Luke and Moje (2009) asserted that their "reasoning for establishing identity and narrative as isomorphic was that identities are reifications of activity and experience" (p. 427). For example, transitioning from a person who repeatedly earns high grades in school to a person who is bright (the transition from an action to a state of being) is accomplished in the stories we tell about ourselves and that others tell about us. (Luke and Moje, 2009, p. 427)

Therefore, through this lens, both the story itself is the identity of the teller, and the telling is also representative of their identity. Wortham agreed with the "representational power of narrative discourse," described by McAdams (1997, 2001) and Sfard and Prusak (2005) above, pointing out that "autobiographical narrators

represent themselves in recognizable story lines” (Wortham, 2002, p. 1). Wortham (2001) also noted the transformation power of this kind of narration, saying that “telling a story about oneself can sometimes transform the self” (p. xi); he gave the example of a narrator who might “represent herself as moving from passive victim to agent of social change” and that by “representing herself as an agent, the narrator might come to think of herself as, and ultimately come to act like, a more active and assertive person” (Wortham, 2001, p. 1).

Wortham (2001), also advised researchers to consider the interaction between the storyteller and their audience because narrative identity as a representative framework can “oversimplify[fy] the process of narrative construction” (p. 7) by “function[ing] not only to represent characters and events but also to establish relationships between the narrator and the audience in the interactional event of storytelling” (p.1). He understood that scholars across disciplines have attempted to use a representative framework with good intentions, such as a “therapeutic tool” for “reshaping a patient’s life story so as to foreground a more healthful direction” (Wortham, 2001, p. 6). This representative framework has also been used to “provide a powerful vehicle for resisting oppressive social orders” and “can [also] be used to improve education” by allowing students and teachers to employ their stories to foreground “more educationally promising characteristics and free themselves from less productive story lines” (Wortham, 2001, p. 6).

However, Wortham (2001) also contended that the representative model ignores how “autobiographical narratives position the narrator in an ongoing dialogue with other speakers,” asserting that “autobiographical narrators act like particular types of people

while they tell their stories, and they relate to their audiences in characteristic ways as they tell those stories” (p. xi). He argued that “this kind of interactional positioning helps explain how autobiographical narration can partly construct the self” (p. xi-xxi), noting that “while telling their stories, autobiographical narrators often enact a characteristic type of self, and through such performances they can become that type of self” (p. xxi). In other words, narrators construct identities not only through selecting from their experiences and through telling the content of their stories, but they also enact their character as the narrator in the present, and position themselves in relation to their audience, which also impacts their self-formulation.

As an example, Wortham (2001) described a narrator, Jane, who moved from being the victim of heartless child caregivers to becoming a strong and heroic protector and survivor. He argued that narrators “ventriloquate these voices and thus position their storytelling selves,” and that by “positioning their narrated selves to the voices represented in the narrative, autobiographical narrators can identify with some voices and distance themselves from others” (p. 154).

According to Wortham (2001), however, the power of constructing and telling the story, and selecting and positioning the narrator to various past selves, does not fully capture the construction of self in narrating. He added that “narrators also use this voicing and ventriloquation to position themselves with respect to their interlocutors in storytelling events,” and that the way they position “themselves and their audiences in characteristic ways in storytelling events . . . also contribute[s] structure to their selves” (Wortham, 2001, p. 154). He concluded that “the voicing . . . is part of the represented

content, plus the ventriloquation and the enactment” and belongs to “the storytelling,” positioning the “narrator in parallel ways” (Wortham, 2001, pp. 154-155).

Positing that various selves are enacted by narrators “depending on the interrelation of representation and enactment,” Wortham (2001) argued that this interrelation enacts various past selves because “by definition, autobiographical narratives involve the doubling of roles for the narrator” (p. 137). He drew on the work of prominent theorists (Stahl, 1989; Bruner, 1987; Crites, 1986; Mishler, 1986) to define the genre of autobiographical narrative, which in his view “presuppose[d] the biographical identity of the narrator (in the storytelling event) and the main character (in the narrated event)” (Wortham, 2001, p. 137). Drawing specifically on Bruner (1987) and Mishler (1986), he argued that “the connection between narrated and storytelling selves gives autobiographical narrative its power for constructing the self,” and that “autobiographical narrative artistically bridges the gap between past and current selves, and thus it helps construct a coherent identity for the narrator” (Wortham, 2001, p. 137).

As Luke and Moje (2009) acknowledged, there are various theoretical frameworks and academic beliefs regarding narrative identity. However, most would agree that, at least to some extent, generating and telling stories does have an impact on identity. I found the lens of narrative identity useful for framing my work with former foster youth college graduates because I considered the impact of narrative construction on identity formation helpful in articulating my research purpose, questions, and methods (narrative analysis). I also centered the narrators in their stories by using language and stories from participant transcripts to construct grand narratives in order to present my findings and analyze trends across participants.

Using a narrative identity lens has been particularly relevant to the stories told by disenfranchised and marginalized groups, or those who see themselves as belonging to “out-groups” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2437), because marginalized people have often encountered a plethora of barriers to enacting agency and autonomy within dominant culture. Narrative identity theory allows these people to use the autobiographical narrator as an autonomous teller of their own stories and centers their agency.

Critical Race Theory

Next, I look at how the framework of critical race theory (CRT) contributed to my analysis of counter-storying and my participants’ narratives.

Critical race theory has attracted an astonishing level of national attention recently and is often widely misunderstood. It is unfortunate that CRT has become a political buzz-phrase used by conservative partisans and media to accuse K-12 teachers of allegedly teaching young White children to hate themselves, their race, and their country (Tremoglie, 2021). These controversies, however, are not the subject of this dissertation. What is important to my study is that critical race theory, and its earlier predecessor, critical legal theory, have been taught and used for decades in various professional sectors, including law, economics, public health, and social work. In educational research, it has served as a theoretical framework for analyzing qualitative data in the social sciences.

Having said all that, it is important to understand that critical race theory does not ask White people to hate themselves; it does not imply that Americans are inherently bad; it does not elevate one race over any another. What CRT as a theoretical framework can do, however, is to potentially discomfort those who want to believe—or who actually do

believe—that race has no impact on human experiences, opportunities, or outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Definition and Context

Critical race theory is a set of ideas that explores the impact of race on marginalized groups, especially people of color (POC). It also asserts that race is inherent and systemic in American culture and institutions, benefitting some (White people) and oppressing others (everyone else) (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2010, 2017). In fact, notions of race are so inherent and entrenched, that to many—particularly White people—the fact of different races does not appear to exist or is uncomfortable to acknowledge. Phrases like “color blind” are an example of a usage adopted by people who are unable to, or have chosen not to, recognize the impact of race in America on nearly every facet of life for all people—Whites (dominant) and non-Whites (non-dominant).

Critical race theory developed in the 1970s to address issues of racism, classism, and misogyny in the legal system (Donnor and Ladson-Billings, 2017). It was “both an outgrowth of and [a] separate entity from an earlier movement called critical legal studies (CLS)” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 10). According to Delgado (1995), “Derrick Bell (an African American) and Alan Freeman (a [W]hite) . . . were deeply distressed over the slow pace of racial reform in the United States” (p. xiii). They and other scholars believed that critical legal studies were not properly and appropriately attending to race, so they started their own workshop and “called their work ‘critical race theory’ (CRT) to distinguish themselves from CLS and to place race at the center of their inquiry” (Donnor & Ladson-Billings, 2017, p. 193). They asserted that the consequences of race-issues for people of color were too complex, culturally entrenched, and impactful to be reduced to

and conflated with class and gender. They additionally acknowledged that the slow and even stagnant pace of racial reform encouraged by the law was perpetuating racism ad infinitum.

Although critical legal theory had its origins in the law, it only took a few decades for CRT to spread to other disciplines and institutions such as medicine, religion, government, and education, with many scholars in education, for instance, using “CRT’s ideas to understand issues of school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, controversies over curriculum and history, and IQ and achievement testing” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012, pp. 3-4). Research using the CRT lens called into question the use of hegemonic, blanket school discipline policies, standardized assessments, and funding policies which often favored White children and harmed children of color.

Donnor and Ladson-Billings (2017) observed the relationship between the various strands of theories in CRT and the creation of counter-stories, which rely on intersectionality (i.e., the nexus of race, gender, class, and so forth), a critique of liberalism, the use of critical social science, the denial of neutrality in scholarship, and the incorporation of storytelling, or more precisely, “counternarratives” to speak back against dominant discourses. (p. 193)

The role of the CRT framework for my study was important, because for some former foster care children—including some participants in my study—race influenced their childhood experiences and created obstacles for favorable outcomes in their lives, before, during, and after foster care. Some of these obstacles included not having access to fresh, healthy food, and other resources—like medical care and understanding the legal system—that affected the health and economic mobility of their biological families; other

obstacles concerned the likelihood of going to and paying for college, getting a job, having access to home ownership (which influences access to high-achieving school districts)—all of which affects social success within every American institution. Slow, incremental change has not eliminated these barriers or even significantly advanced outcomes for POC (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012).

Of course, one of the most powerful methods for challenging entrenched assumptions and shifting social beliefs is through research, because research narratives have been used to justify institutional power structures and promote so-called shared cultural values. One of the tasks of my study was to ask what stories the research narratives tell, and what stories go untold. CRT has asserted that the stories of marginalized groups go untold far too often, and so dominant groups, or in-groups, have the privilege of being unaware that they even exist.

Delgado (1989) insisted that “stories, parables, chronicles, and narratives” are “powerful means for destroying mindset—the bundle of presuppositions, received wisdoms, and shared understandings against a background of which legal and political discourse takes place” (p. 2413). He argued that these stories serve many purposes, including (but not limited to) humanizing the non-dominant groups to dominant culture.

CRT has made space for other types of critical discourse, including LatCrit, TribalCrit, AsianCrit, QueerCrit, ParentCrit, and more. These offshoots of CRT use the same theoretical framework as race to explore the impact of inequity on other outgroups living on the fringe. CRT provides a useful approach to understanding diaspora and other forms of social inequity. Should we propose a FosterCrit framework that draws on tenets of CRT inquiry to explore the marginalization of children exposed to foster care, the

impact of this marginalization, and to imagine a different world experience for this population? This new “crit” would not override critical perspectives on race, instead intersecting with other marginalizing aspects of being, including race, of children in foster care.

The CRT framework assumes that we can change society by elevating marginalized voices. It is therefore the responsibility of researchers to elevate marginalized groups by using research foci and methodologies, including narrative inquiry and counter-storying, as respected and effective methods for propelling a shift in discourse and power. Thus, the third paradigm I used to analyze interview data is counter-storying, which is a tenet of CRT, but also an independent theory and methodology.

Counter-Stories

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) defined counter-story as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society), and which serves as a “tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging” dominant narratives (p. 32). Delgado (1989) expanded the notion of counter-stories, saying they “can shatter complacency and challenge the status quo” (p. 2414). Solorzano and Yosso (2001, 2002) further agreed with Delgado (1989) about the humanizing effect of stories, claiming that the first function of the counter-narrative is to “build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice” (p. 475).

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) critiqued traditional research methods as “deficit social science storytelling” (p. 30) and attributed the purpose of this “cultural deficit

majoritarian lens” to the promotion of “cultural assimilation” (p. 31). Essentially, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) believed that dominant research narratives explore what is wrong with people who are not achieving dominant ideals of success. What happens when we ask research questions with a deficit lens is that we find people to be deficient. In contrast, the counter-narrative approach explores cultural factors that contribute to diverse outcomes and, more importantly, challenges the traditional research notion that people are failing if they are not properly assimilating. Counter-storying defies these notions of traditional research assumptions. The way forward, according to Solorzano and Yosso (2001), was to “provide a context and challenge the perceived wisdom” (p. 475) by asking formerly marginalized people to tell their stories and valuing the stories that they tell.

Solorzano and Yosso (2001) identified four functions of the counter-story. The first and crucial function or step in helping a marginalized group was to identify them as a community with specific common experiences; furthermore, as a community, they need to be cognizant that they already know or relate to other people in their group and that they are not so different from each other. Building community of the marginalized provides them with a safe space to connect; this community then reveals to the dominant culture that other cultures do indeed co-exist in the same spaces, and that they are not, in fact, a threat to the dominant culture.

The second function of counter-storying, according to Solorzano and Yosso (2001), was to “challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems” (p. 475). In addition to building community, counter-narratives destroy harmful and incorrect assumptions about

non-dominant people and groups (Solorzano & Yosso). Delgado (1989) agreed with this assessment, noting that while many theorists have focused on the community-building aspect of counter-storying, “counterstories can also serve equally important destructive functions: they can show that what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel, and they can show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion” (p. 2415). While the destructive function may seem to be contrary to community-building among marginalized groups, the destruction of thinking that is “ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel” can alter the perceptions or thinking of the dominant community about the new community created by the counter-story. The result is that the dominant culture can become a culture with more empathy toward the formerly marginalized.

The third function of counter-storying, according to Solorzano and Yosso (2001), was to “open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing the possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrate that they are not alone in their position” (p. 475). Marginalized people may be led by dominant media to believe that they are alone, and that they are alone because of their own deficits. However, by countering this ideology with real, human stories which the marginalized can relate to, the marginalized can recognize that they are not, in fact, inherently deficient, and they can therefore question mainstream beliefs about themselves and their cultures.

The fourth and final function of counter-storying was to “teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone” (Solorzano & Yosso 2001, p. 476). This function presents at least two possibilities for further research. First, as Delgado (1989) observed, patterns of perception become habitual, tempting us to believe

that the way things are is inevitable, or the best that can be in an imperfect world.

Alternative visions of reality are not explored, or, if they are, rejected as extreme or implausible (p. 2437).

By listening to and examining the voices and stories of formerly excluded voices, dominant and non-dominant groups can begin to recognize that the current state of reality in the culture is not concrete or inevitable, but, in fact, is perpetuated by our own participation in it.

Second, the dominant culture may be forced to conclude that if they refuse to participate in this perpetuity, that the reality will change. At this point, newly constituted communities of formerly marginalized groups can and do encounter issues with buy-in from dominant groups, who continue to refuse to acknowledge that deficit thinking about non-dominant groups impacts nearly every facet of life for non-dominant groups.

When marginalized groups begin telling their stories with agency and autonomy, they experience several positive effects related to the concept of causal coherence (McAdams, 2001). According to McAdams (2001), this theory about narrative identity is connected to the effort to “provide narrative accounts of one’s life that explain how one event caused, led to, transformed, or in some other way in meaningfully related to other events in one’s life” (p. 105). How people understand the world and their place in it is synthesized in the telling of stories because “traits, beliefs, and preferences may now be explained in terms of life events that may have caused them” (McAdams, 2001, p. 105).

In the telling their stories, marginalized people might also identify an “overarching theme, value, or principle that integrates many different episodes in [their] li[ves] and coveys the gist of who [they] are” (McAdams, 2001, p. 105). These stories

can challenge dominant narratives that describe marginalized people as problematic by recognizing life events that are out of the control of people. This realization, in turn, has the potential to shape new identities that serve healing purposes. The counter-narrative approach shifts the blame from historically underserved people to an understanding that they truly were positioned as powerless.

Delgado (1989) also noted that counter-storying gives the outgroup member “psychic self-preservation. A principal cause of the demoralization of marginalized groups is self-condemnation. They internalize the images that society thrusts on them—they believe that their lowly position is their own fault” (p. 2437). Through the telling of stories, historically underserved people can articulate the compounding events of their lives and are able to recognize the self-condemnation that they have internalized.

Delgado explained that “therapy is to tell stories. By becoming acquainted with the facts of their own historic oppression—with the violence, murder, deceit, co-optation, and connivance that have caused their desperate estate—members of outgroups gain healing” (p. 2437).

Finally, one of the powerful outcomes of the counter-narrative, according to Delgado (1989), is that through the telling of their stories, the (former) outgroup can attack...complacency. What is more, they can do so in ways that promise at least the possibility of success. Stories are the oldest, most primordial meeting ground in human experience. Their allure will often provide the most effective means of overcoming otherness, of forming a new collectivity based on the shared story. (p. 2438)

While the interviews conducted and subsequently analyzed in this study are unlikely to “attack complacency” or to propel “healing” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2438), researchers must

start somewhere. The first step I took as a researcher was to seek stories from former foster youth college graduates that would contribute to shifting the research and dominant narrative about the group as a whole. However, we can always hope to have an even wider impact, such as the impacts Delgado (1989) explained above.

Conclusion

Narrative identity theory, critical race theory, and counter-storying provided a framework to determine the best methods for exploring the perceptions of former foster youth, as well as for analyzing their stories and experiences. Former foster youth are inherently “othered” and oppressed by dominant culture and mainstream research, and thus constitute a marginalized group. First, I used narrative identity theory to look at the content of the stories themselves, asking how the telling of the story and their enacted selves impacted the self-construction of identity and gave the autobiographical narrator autonomy to position themselves. This approach proved to be an effective and ethical framework to better understand the experiences of these former foster care youth; they got to own the telling of their stories, as opposed to the deficit research descriptions and findings that the dominant narrative currently asserts. Additionally, many former foster youth have, to a great extent, already used storytelling over the course of their lives as the primary bearer of their memories, as they have moved from family to family, or from institution to institution. They literally have had the responsibility of narrating their histories and identities for others, and so they are likely already very comfortable with story-telling skills.

Critical race theory provided the framework for analyzing stories with cultural responsiveness; it also foregrounded the impact of dominant culture on this group as

marginalized people. CRT also provided a lens for considering how the marginalized speak to power and how people from outgroups talk back to dominant discourse. The CRT framework shifted deficit beliefs about the marginalized in order to situate disenfranchised people and groups within the context of dominant beliefs. CRT also asks us to challenge and react to dominant, deficit beliefs via activism.

Counter-narratives are a critical component of implementing a critical race theory framework and in shifting the research lens from deficit thinking to asset-based thinking. CRT, as I have discussed above, also builds community among the marginalized. Identifying outgroups and making space for them within the dominant culture destroys false assumptions about deficits and inevitable dismal outcomes. Counter-stories challenge the negative dominant, mainstream narrative about former foster youth and show them, and everyone else, that former foster youth do indeed go on to lead typical and even exceptional adult lives.

Finally, the counter-narrative approach can offer other ways of imagining how to understand marginalized people and gives them agency and autonomy in the construction of a new narrative for their lives. In the telling of these new narratives, it is also possible that the stories themselves could propel their tellers to attribute meaning to the chronology of their experience, thereby promoting healing and the possibility of creating a future they had not previously considered possible. Ultimately, counter-narratives humanize outgroups, giving a face to their alternate stories and realities and propelling a shift in dominant beliefs about them by making space for conversations about inclusivity and equity.

Chapter 4: Methodology

My qualitative study is a narrative inquiry that explored stories from former foster youth college graduates about their K-12 experiences. The accomplishments of these former foster youth contradict the dominant narratives found in media and popular culture, which are propelled by the historically deficit lens of research. Those who read their stories will find themselves asking why so few resources were available to this group and their peers through their K-12 years of schooling as they transitioned into adulthood and higher education.

In this chapter, I describe the methods I used to conduct a narrative inquiry. First, I explain my researcher reflexivity and how I positioned myself to my participants as a former foster youth. Next, I describe the participants in my study, including their demographic information, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and recruitment processes. I follow this with an overview of my research questions, which provided context for the types of data I collected and the tools and methods I used to do so. Last, I describe the types of data I gathered, how I collected this data, and explain my tiers of analysis. Finally, I discuss participant agency during data analysis, including the member-checking process, and the rationale for my organization of the findings section. I conclude with a summary and a call to action.

Researcher Reflexivity

My personal experience as a former foster youth impacted all aspects of this research, and I planned for this fact in advance. For instance, I was aware that my own

beliefs and opinions about children in foster care and what we could do to improve their experiences was not the topic of research; therefore, it was not my job to teach my participants anything. There were times when refraining from doing this was difficult, particularly with one participant, who believed children in care do not need more resources. However, I addressed this issue by regularly conferring with my chair and a colleague in social work to check my biases and approaches to conversation and analysis.

In some ways, my foster care experience was helpful. For instance, one participant noted multiple times how powerful our conversations were for her because “only another foster kid can truly understand” the impact of our histories and experiences. However, I refrained from over-sharing my experiences or writing about myself because I wanted to elevate participant voices and not my own. Nonetheless, it was impossible to take myself and my experiences out of the research completely. I cannot escape my lived experience as a former foster youth and my beliefs about their needs; nor can I ignore dominant and counter narratives in our culture about this demographic group. Therefore, I acknowledged my beliefs and experiences, talked about them with colleagues and my committee, and did my best to do what was necessary to answer my research questions fully and accurately while honoring the participants of this study.

To provide context during interviews and in other communication, I shared my status as a former foster youth and some of my experiences with participants, but only to form a connection with them when it was appropriate or would elevate trust levels. My intent was to provide a safe space for participants to openly share their life stories by relating to their experiences while centering their histories and voices. For this reason, I

did not give them more information about myself than they asked for, and I did not elaborate more than was necessary. I clearly stated my connection to foster care and other former foster youth to increase the confidence my participants offered, as well as to clarify the lens with which I made meaning to produce this dissertation. I did not include myself as a participant in this study.

Additionally, I conferred with colleagues within the social work field during interview implementation, as well as data analysis, to discuss my feelings and biases regarding the beliefs and perceptions my participants shared with me. I chose to confer with social workers with experience in working with foster youth and their families because they have diverse perspectives that I do not have, even though I experienced foster care. For instance, because I experienced foster care as a White girl in the 1990s, it was important to consider the different ways boys or people of color (POC) experienced foster care during different decades. Another purpose of conferring with colleagues from social work was to get feedback on my own perceptions and beliefs and how they could and were impacting my interactions with participants and the analysis of their data.

Participants

The participants in this study were five former foster youth college graduates who ranged from ages 26- to 70-years-old. These participants currently reside in five different states, including California, Louisiana, Michigan, North Carolina, and Utah. Four of five participants asked that their names and stories be de-anonymized to increase their autonomy and agency over the telling and the content of their stories. Therefore, the identities of four participants are included, and one participant is anonymized.

Currently, there are few communities or spaces for former foster youth college graduates to connect with each other unless they attend an institute of higher education that provides a college support program (CSP) for former foster youth. I did not attend a school with such a program because I attended institutions of higher education in South Carolina, which does not offer this support. Therefore, I used the snowball method to recruit participants, whom I found at conferences, via social media, or from other contacts connected to foster care. The following table provides basic demographic information about participants and the order in which their stories are presented in the findings chapter (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Basic Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Religion	Degree/s
Daniel Harris	33	Male	White	None	BA, MEd
Joshaline Douglas	28	Female	Black	Christian	BSW, MSW, PhD
Dillon Forest	26	Male	Black	Christian	BA
Chris Rice	70	Female	Bi-racial	None	BA, MFA, MLIS
Robert Mooney	44	Male	Bi-racial	Mormon	BA, JD

Inclusion Criteria

To participate in this study, recruits were required to have experienced foster care at some point during their childhood and to have obtained a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution of higher education. Obtaining a diverse sample was my secondary objective. Sample diversity, in this context, included, but also extended beyond

traditional concepts of diversity (e.g., race and gender) to include conditions for entering care, experiences while in care, and conditions for exiting care. Thus, after initial requirements were confirmed for prospective participants, the categories below present the secondary selection criteria that ensured a diverse sample.

- Race: As discussed in the literature review chapter, children of color are overrepresented in foster care, with a higher percentage of Black, Brown, and Indigenous children being separated from their families than their White peers from similar backgrounds. Therefore, four out of five participants identified as Black, Brown, and/or Indigenous.
- Gender: As also discussed in the literature review chapter, boys in foster care are adopted less, exposed to the juvenile justice system more, and enrolled in—and graduate from—college less often than girls. Therefore, it was important to recruit male participants, and three of my five participants are men.
- Context when entering care: Significant contextual factors included 1) how participants entered care (e.g., taken from home with parent present, taken from school, found alone); 2) why they entered care (e.g., parent death, incarceration, public reporting, abandonment, school/doctor referral); and 3) age when they entered care. Attending to contextual factors that accompanied foster care placement ensured a range of participant experiences.
- Experience in care: 1) length of stay; 2) mobility; and 3) living situations (e.g., private family home, group home, incarceration).

- Context when leaving care: Significant contextual factors included 1) reasons for leaving care (e.g., reunion with biological family, adoption, placement in kinship custody, aging out); and/or 2) situation when leaving care (e.g., running away).

Selecting diverse participants was an important goal for the purpose of disputing and/or complicating dominant narratives about former foster youth who successfully graduated from four-year institutions as *special cases* or an *exception to the rule* due to race, gender, or conditions of foster care.

Exclusion and Selection Process

I initially identified nineteen adults who volunteered to participate in my study. Of these, four were excluded because they were adopted very early in life, and so they could not genuinely speak about K-12 experiences while in foster care. Additionally, another seven were excluded because they did not receive a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution of higher education. Some had received an associate degree, some came close to earning a four-year degree but never graduated, while others received certificates or degrees other than or less than at the bachelor level. The last three were excluded because they did not respond to the survey within 10 days, which was my requirement, or failed to respond at all. Therefore, five participants remained, and I worked with these five women and men to conduct this study.

Research Questions

My research questions are as follows:

1. To what extent and in what ways do former foster youth college graduates believe K-12 schooling served as a protective factor in their childhood

experience and academic trajectories? Are there any common themes or experiences?

2. What other factors do former foster youth college graduates attribute to having a positive impact of their academic trajectories? Are there any shared themes or experiences?
3. How do the experiences of former foster youth college graduates impact their beliefs about how to improve the lives of children in care? What do they recommend for children in care?

Data Collected

To answer my research questions as completely as possible, I collected three types of data. First, I administered a screening survey to all recruits; this allowed me to select diverse participants, mentioned above, based on my primary and secondary selection criteria. Based on survey responses, I narrowed my participant list down to five. I then conducted two one-on-one semi-structured interviews, which were spaced roughly one month apart. I used analysis of the responses from Interview 1 to construct the protocol for Interview 2. To honor participant time and willingness to share their stories, I offered the participants ultimately selected for this project \$100 for completing the screening survey, participating in both interviews, and being willing to review their personal grand narratives and provide feedback. Last, I submitted the grand narratives to each participant to review, and I met with them individually to discuss the text and then revised it based on their recommendations. I used this final data to clarify grand narratives and to contribute to the analysis and discussion.

Screening Survey

The screening survey was developed after my research proposal was accepted in April 2023 to identify qualified and diverse participants for my study. The first draft of this survey was constructed based on my background in survey design and on examples from other surveys in the literature. I conducted a pilot study and sent the draft screening survey to my committee chair and five colleagues, two of whom were experts in survey design, and three of whom had a background in social work (one of these was Dr. Seay, who is on my committee). Based on feedback from my advisor and pilot-study participants, I revised the survey and obtained approval to administer the revised survey in May 2023.

This survey was conducted via Survey Monkey. A link to participate was sent to 19 prospective participants of which 16 responded within 10 days, the specified time frame for study inclusion. The beginning of the survey provided information about the study, the incentive, anonymity, and consent. All participants were informed that there would be no consequence if they chose not to participate, and they were also given my contact information if they had any questions about the study or the survey. The screening survey (see Appendix A) consisted of 33 total questions divided into five content sections: consent, demographics, higher education experiences, foster care experiences, and interview suggestions. Section 1, consent, included three selected response questions regarding permission to participate in the survey, the interviews, and preference for anonymity. Section 2, demographics, contained 13 selected response and open-ended questions about race, gender, religion, marital status, and contact information. Section 3, higher education experiences, contained eight selected response and open-ended

questions about the completion of a bachelor's degree, institutions attended, degrees earned, and understanding of financial aid. Section 4, foster care experiences, contained seven selected responses and open-ended questions about conditions when entering care, experiences in care, and conditions for exiting care. In this section, "other" was given as an option for selected response questions, and space was provided for elaboration. Section 5, interview suggestions, contained two open-ended questions which asked if there was anything specific participants would like to share during Interview 1.

Interview 1: Initial Exploration of K-12 Experiences

The protocol for Interview 1 was semi-structured and exploratory, with the first draft developed as part of my dissertation proposal. Examples of interview protocols from the literature, as well as relevant theoretical frameworks, were considered during survey construction. Based on feedback from my committee about the proposal and the protocol, I revised my research questions, and based on those revisions, the interview questions. This new draft was shared with my committee chair and two colleagues in the field of social work. Based on their feedback, I revised the protocol once more and conducted Interview 1 between May 16th and May 31st, 2023, virtually via Zoom. The intended length of Interview 1 was 60 minutes. The actual length of Interview 1 was between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours, depending on the participants. The reason for this difference in interview length is because some participants had a lot of content they wanted to share before I began asking questions from the protocol, while others wanted to answer only the protocol questions.

The first interview protocol consisted of 11 primary questions (See Appendix B). In addition to the 11 primary questions, I used prompting strategies to elicit details if the

content participants shared was brief or unclear. Questions addressed the participants' current lives, their K-12 educational experiences and perceptions, beliefs about these K-12 experiences and their impact on academic trajectory, and recommendations for resources or support that could be provided to children in foster care to improve life trajectories. Perceptions about identity were also explored.

I took notes directly on the printed protocols and recorded all interviews via Zoom. Video and audio files were uploaded to Panopto on the University of South Carolina's online academic platform. I used Panopto to transcribe all interviews and uploaded these files to a free, online software program called Subtitle Tools. This program allowed me to extract all time indicators, so that the interviews were organized into one long, continuous conversation. These files, along with the original video and audio files, were saved for analysis to the "Dissertation" folder on my private Google Drive.

Interview 2: Experiences by Level and Turning Point

I constructed the protocol for Interview 2 following the initial analysis of data from Interview 1. The purpose of this initial analysis was to identify additional content I needed to explore to fully answer my research questions. I discovered that I needed to break down K-12 experiences by level to better understand participant beliefs and perceptions and how they changed over time. Additionally, I noticed that all five participants revealed a "turning point" during high school, and I wanted to explore this as well.

Therefore, I constructed the first draft of Interview 2 protocol in the beginning of June 2023, and I shared it with my committee chair and my two colleagues from social

work. Based on their feedback, I revised the protocol and conducted Interview 2 between June 12th and Jun 28th, 2023.

The protocol for Interview 2 consisted of five sections with a maximum of 43 questions. The first four sections were divided by level (early childhood, elementary, middle school, high school) and the same questions were repeated for each level, such as the number of schools attended, feelings about teachers, memories from school, reading and writing, and extracurricular activities. Section five explored high school turning points. Altogether, there were 10 identical questions in the first four sections (40 total), and three questions in section five, for a total of 43 questions.

In most situations, it did not make sense to ask all 43 questions. For instance, one participant told me in section one (early childhood) that he would describe himself as a student in the same way through high school, so it was not necessary to ask this question three more times across levels. Another had already shared the number of schools they attended by level in Interview 1. Therefore, the protocol was semi-structured, and each interview was unique.

Interview 2 was designed to last between 60 and 90 minutes. The actual length, similar to Interview 1, ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours. Again, some participants had more content to share than others. I took notes on the printed protocols and recorded all interviews via Zoom, which I again uploaded to Panopto for transcription and saved to my Dissertation folder within Google Drive for future analysis.

Participant Feedback

The final type of data I collected was participant feedback. Once all the interviews were conducted, I constructed grand narratives for each participant; these focused on

their K-12 experiences and answered my research questions. I sent these narratives to my chair for review, and after I revised them based on her feedback, I emailed them to participants to read and provide feedback. There were multiple options for the format in which they could provide feedback. I used track changes to make notes about feedback and make revisions in the texts, so I could review and revise the texts after initial feedback conversations. Afterward, I sent participants the revised versions and repeated this process when necessary, saving all versions of grand narratives with notes in track changes.

Analysis of Data

A Three Tier Analysis

In the sections below, I have provided a table and in-depth descriptions of each tier of my data analysis process. I provide both a narrative description and a table (see Table 4.2). Beginning in Tier 1, I drew on narrative identity, critical race theory, and counter-story frameworks to analyze participant interview data. Before Tier 1 analysis, I administered the screening survey and conducted Interview 1.

Post-Interview 1, I conducted Tier 1 analysis to construct grand narratives for each participant; during this process, I was mindful that these narratives would shift as additional data was collected, especially given that I drew on Interview 1 to construct the protocol for Interview 2. The purpose of this second protocol was to help me complete grand narratives for each participant and to be able to draw conclusions and address my research questions.

After completing Interview 2, I conducted Tier 2 analysis, again applying the theoretical frameworks used during Tier 1 (i.e., narrative identity, CRT, and counter-

Table 4.2 Three Tiers of Data Analysis

Analysis of the Narratives	Use of Narratives/Member Checking
1. Drawing on Interview 1 transcripts, begin to organize stories into chronological order to construct grand narratives for each participant. To provide structure, use level of schooling to organize transcript excerpts chronologically. Levels include 1) early childhood, 2) elementary years, 3) middle school, and 4) high school. Thoroughly read through the narratives to check for themes and relate content to theoretical frameworks.	1. Use transcripts and notes from Interview 1 to understand what additional content needs to be explored to fully answer research questions and develop Interview 2 protocol accordingly. Begin to outline individual life histories using screening survey and Interview 1 data to structure participant grand narratives by level of schooling.
2. Drawing on new data from Interview 2, insert new transcript excerpts into K-12 level organization to provide additional clarity and insight. Read transcripts thoroughly and chronologically. Highlight quotes within transcripts using coded colors to identify 1) my own words, 2) important events, 3) important quotes or language usage, 4) patterns across participants. Take notes regarding considerations within individual stories as well as emerging themes and trends across participants.	2. Complete construction of grand narratives for each participant using survey and interview data, paying careful attention to participant voice.
3. Share grand narratives with dissertation chair and revise according to feedback. Share individual narratives with participants to elicit their opinions and feedback. Use notes from Tier 1 and 2 to construct the discussion chapter which identifies 1) themes within individual stories, and 2) themes and trends across all five stories that are relevant to research questions.	3. Member-check grand narratives with participants; elicit their feedback. Revise accordingly until they are satisfied with the presentation of their stories. Drawing on content within and patterns across stories, use notes from Tier 1 and 2 to construct discussion chapter, relating insights back to the literature review and theoretical chapters.

storying); this allowed me to add to the narratives created during Tier 1. Next, I crafted detailed chronological stories about each participant in response to my research questions. To construct individual grand narratives, I organized the stories, or these “chunks” within the transcripts, by academic level and life events, highlighting stories that were emphasized by the participants.

Finally, I moved into Tier 3 analysis, where I conferred with participants about their grand narratives. I gave them three options for reading and responding to their stories and I revised accordingly until they were satisfied. Finally, I reviewed my theoretical constructs once more to structure conclusions, which are presented in the discussion chapter. Below is a table that describes the three tiers of analysis.

Data Analysis: Tier 1

The purpose of my Tier 1 analysis was to use my theoretical frameworks to analyze participant survey and Interview 1 data and to begin constructing the organized transcripts that I would use to write the participants’ grand narratives. Following Interview 1, I used Panopto to transcribe the data and create individual documents for each participant, within which I pasted the interview transcripts. I omitted most of my own words except when they provided necessary context. Next, I crafted stories within the transcripts by chunking the content into paragraphs; I then made notes about these narratives and emerging trends in a separate document, which was later expanded upon to construct the discussion chapter. I identified short stories and organized them into a chronological transcript featuring typical story structures including beginnings and ends, rising and falling action, and, in some cases, resolutions. Other indicators of small

narrative boundaries included entrance and exit talk and other story-bracketing devices (Riessman 1993), including story elements (e.g., orientation, setting, plot, characters).

I again read each transcript thoroughly, making notes to inform the development of the Interview 2 protocol. I discovered that my participants provided a lot of information but that it was hard to draw conclusions because their stories were not yet organized by age or schooling level. In hindsight, I recognized that the Interview 1 protocol was exploratory.

Beginning in Tier 1, I drew on narrative identity, critical race theory, and counter-story frameworks to analyze participant survey and Interview 1 data. To do so, I considered participant responses to protocol questions in the context of my frameworks. For instance, I explored how participants described the importance of writing in their lives as children and adults; what they reported writing about; to what extent the telling of their stories as children every time they moved impacted them as narrators and agents of their histories; and how this information related to narrative identity. I also considered how they responded to questions about helping kids currently in care, the source of their recommendations, such as personal experience, and how this related to their own understanding of the systems of oppression and the power of low expectations. Finally, when I created individual chronological outlines of their transcripts, I looked at their overall, holistic stories and noted the degree to which their narratives were, or were not, counter to the dominant narrative, and how this should impact the development of Interview 2 protocol.

During this process, I recognized my need for more data and the affordances of organizing their transcripts chronologically. In addition, I wanted to ask more questions

that would illuminate the participants' experiences with power, how they responded to power, how power impacted their beliefs, and how these factors had shaped their identities.

Therefore, I made the decision to use schooling level to organize the Interview 2 protocol. In addition, I used headings to indicate schooling levels (early childhood, elementary school, middle school, high school) within each participant's increasingly organized transcript. Next, I cut and pasted their chunked stories in accordance with schooling levels to reveal any gaps in what I needed to know to answer my research questions. In addition, I wanted to explore a trend I noticed during Interview 1, in which all participants described a "turning point" that they experienced in high school. For all five participants, an incident occurred which altered their trajectory and changed their perceptions and motivation. My suspicion was that understanding these turning points would reveal insight into dimensions of power and the participants' resulting counter-stories. Therefore, I also included a question in the Interview 2 protocol that specifically explored this turning point.

Data Analysis: Tier 2

The purpose of Tier 2 analysis was to synthesize data from three data sources (i.e., screening survey, Interview 1 and Interview 2) to provide information needed to complete the grand narratives for each participant, which would be the basis for my analysis of participant experiences. As I conducted Interview 2, I used the same methods used in Interview 1 to record, transcribe, save, and organize interview data. These included pasting their texts segments from transcripts into the organized transcripts from Interview 1 by chunking their small stories and organizing them by schooling levels. Therefore, for

each level, I combined multiple small stories from each participant from both interviews about their individual K-12 experiences and their lives. Many of these stories were repeated or extended across the two interviews. In each organized transcript, as participants expanded upon the interview questions I asked, I intentionally added sections in which I discussed their turning points, higher education experiences, and adult life.

As a result, I was able to read through chronologically arranged stories that addressed experiences in early childhood, elementary school, middle school, high school, turning points, higher education, and adult lives. I read through each transcript thoroughly and continued to make notes about individual transcripts and patterns across the transcripts which might be discussed in my discussion chapter.

Additionally, as I read through each transcript, I used a highlighter to mark text that I thought would be important to note or include when finalizing the individual grand narratives. First, I highlighted in light green my own words that I had included to provide context. Second, I highlighted in yellow the incidents that were important to participants (e.g., repeated, marked by increased volume or emphasis, described as important by participants). In bright green, I highlighted specific quotes and language I might want to quote directly. I also inserted a note in the margin of each document that summarized each story, or chunk, and identified what it contributed to my understanding of the experiences of successful foster youth. Finally, in light pink I highlighted those texts that reflected patterns across participants and also added questions to myself in the margins.

At this point, I was ready to use the organized transcripts, as well as the notes recorded on physical copies of the protocols during each interview, to create grand narratives. I started by drawing on my notes to write an outline of the life events for three

participants. However, upon reflection, I found that while the events were different, the voices sounded the same. This was problematic because my participants were very different from each other, and each told their stories in a unique voice. Therefore, I employed an additional method as I began to construct the fourth grand narrative.

To create this additional method, I split my computer screen in two. On the left-hand side I viewed the organized transcript, and on the right-hand side was a blank document. I read the transcript on the left and used the fourth participant's voice to write her grand narrative, drawing mostly from her own words. This transcript document was already organized by life level, so producing a grand narrative in chronological order was intuitive. After reading the rough draft of this grand narrative, I was much more satisfied with how well I captured the unique voice of this participant. I used this same method for the fifth participant, and then went back and used this method to revise the first three grand narratives that I had crafted. I paid special attention to how each story began and ended and used as many of the participants' words as possible.

Next, I wrote a summary for each participant, pointing out important incidents or circumstances that I wanted readers to note as they considered these unique, individual stories, and as I introduced readers to patterns across the sample that addressed my research questions. At this point, it became clear that my participants had experienced one of two types of turning points that altered their trajectories: 1) they had either moved into a group home where they experienced stability and more accountable adults and had made the decision to focus on grades and going to college; or 2) they had experienced a critical incident with a violent, biological parent, and not only figuratively decided to walk away from that behavior and thinking, but also literally and physically walked or

ran away. Therefore, I created two chapters for findings: one that discussed participants whose turning points followed their move to a group home, and one for participants whose turning points involved walking/running away from the violence of a biological parent.

Data Analysis: Tier 3

The primary purpose of Tier 3 analysis was to member-check the accuracy of my portrayal of each participant within their grand narrative and to verify the accuracy of the chronology I constructed of their lives, using as many of their own words as possible from Tier 1 and Tier 2 analysis to convey their unique voices and methods of speaking and storytelling. Once my grand narratives were approved by my chair, I sent them to my participants for feedback.

In completing this step, I drew on the work of Solorzano and Yosso (2001) regarding the Chicana/o experience in graduate education, which focused on the concept of cultural intuition; Delgado and Bernal (1998) defined this concept as “one’s personal experience to include collective and community memory,” which also indicated “the importance of participants’ engagement in the analysis of data” (pp. 563-564). Delgado and Bernal (1998) also asserted that cultural intuition is “a complex process that is experiential, intuitive, historical, personal, collective, and dynamic” (p. 568).

To elicit the cultural intuition of my participants and to signal the importance of their engagement with the analysis, I e-mailed them the grand narratives along with my summaries to read and respond to. One goal of doing this was to empower participants’ ownership of their histories, stories, perceptions, and beliefs. I invited them not only to read the stories, but to use track changes and comments or to verbally tell me what I did

and did not accurately capture, along with suggestions to improve the presentation of their narratives and voices. I gave my participants time to read their stories and choose their method for providing feedback, which included three options:

- 1) They could identify a time when I would call and receive their verbal feedback.
- 2) I could send them a Zoom link and we could meet virtually. In this case, I would share my screen and read their stories aloud and make recommended changes directly into the document.
- 3) They could use track changes to make comments and revisions and send the grand narrative back to me.

After I incorporated feedback from the participants into the grand narratives, they had an opportunity to reread the revised documents. In response to this, one participant wanted another round of revisions, which we completed via Zoom. Participants also had the autonomy to veto data they felt was too private or not portrayed correctly. For instance, after reading his story, one participant told me that he did not want to be identified any longer because seeing his story in writing was triggering and traumatic; as a result, he wanted his personal traumas extracted and to be anonymized, which I did.

It was imperative to share narrative control with participants, not only to increase the validity of this study, but to strengthen my relationships with current and future participants. Because I plan to continue this research, study participants will have access to everything I write and publish regarding their stories. As I continue to build access to, and recruit from, underground networks of former foster youth, I want to be known as a safe person with whom former foster youth can share the stories they want to tell.

After the participants and my chair approved the grand narratives, I used my notes from the discussion documents, transcripts, and grand narratives to conduct a cross-case thematic analysis of the narrative content. Riessman (2005) explained that in a thematic analysis “emphasis is on the content of a text, ‘what’ is said more than ‘how’ it is said, the ‘told’ rather than the ‘telling’” (p. 2). Applying Riessman’s concept to my cross-case analysis, I considered not only what participants said, but also what they did not say, and the tensions between these voicings, as well as the consistencies and inconsistencies among all five of them and applied those findings to my research question related to K-12 experiences. I considered how the stories they told me, and the stories they were required to construct about themselves from an all-too-early age, had contributed to shaping their individual identities. I then compared these results to what they had revealed to me about reading and writing and what, from this, they believed connected and contributed to their trajectories.

In this third tier of analysis, I also applied the concepts of CRT and counter-storying. A fundamental component of the CRT framework is to make space for counter-storying (Delgado, 1989; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), which provides marginalized groups with autonomy and agency, factors that are critical for former foster youth to create counter-stories that dispute the dominant narrative. However, researchers using this method should not assume that participants will tell counter-stories. I found that some of my participants did not create a counter-story and instead repeated dominant narratives they had been subjected to over the course of their lives. For example, Dillon believed that children in care already have enough resources to be successful and do not need

more help; in fact, he believed that foster care children should use the “bootstrap” approach—like he did—to improve their lives.

Additionally, Ladson and Billings (2017) have asserted that CRT should also examine “intersectionality (i.e., the nexus of race, gender, class, and so forth)” (p. 193). Because the lives of former foster child as told in these stories are rife with intersectionality, it was important that I captured the intersectional experiences and positionings of this study’s participants. Not only did their experiences and situations include aspects we typically think of when considering intersectionality, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status; they also included reasons for entering foster care, experiences while in foster care, conditions upon exiting care, and transition into adulthood. Cresswell and Poth (2018) have rightly asserted that CRT assumes that “reality is based on power and identity struggles”; that “privilege or oppression is based on race or ethnicity, class, gender, mental abilities, sexual preference”; and that “reality is known through the study of social structures, freedom and oppression, power, and control” (p. 30). Using these salient constructs, I explored how my participants believed they had, or had not, been marginalized in their K-12 experiences, what they felt went well, how they recalled their childhoods, and how they responded to dominant narratives about former and current foster youth (e.g., Reissman, 1993).

Conclusion

My purpose for analyzing participant stories was to explore the perceptions and beliefs of former foster youth college graduates regarding the impact of their K-12 experiences on their academic and life trajectories. I documented and analyzed their

narratives to understand participant experiences, and to identify common themes and trends across the five stories. While there is much we cannot control in foster care systems across and within individual states, because all children in the U.S. attend school, K-12 institutions have opportunities to serve as protective spaces for foster children.

In conclusion, my research was grounded in narrative identity theory, critical race theory, and counter-storying. These frameworks informed my narrative inquiry methodology, including positionality considerations for the researcher, participant selection, types of data collected, analysis methods, and my presentation of findings. All these elements built the case that foster children need and deserve access to the same support and resources other children receive. Former foster children can and do go to college and many go on to live typical or even exceptional adult lives, even without traditional support systems. This study invites the reader, scholars, and agencies affiliated with foster care to assess oppressive beliefs that lead to rationalizing the withholding of additional support and resources from children in foster care, and to thereby envision other realities for this marginalized group. This methodology illuminates the power of narrative, enhances traditional methods of member-checking to increase participant autonomy, while challenging acquiescence to dominant narratives.

Chapter 5: Findings

Narratives of Group Care as Turning Points

Each of the five grand narratives in this chapter and the next presents an educational life history for each participant; each of these stories are best understood as counter-narratives to the dominant narrative of low adult outcomes for former foster youth, including the typical failure to complete a four-year college degree. Four of the five participants in this study requested not to be anonymous because they believed that telling their stories gives them autonomy, power, and agency. Therefore, these participants are not only identified, but they have also chosen to provide links to their work and pictures of themselves to further tell their stories. Participant 3 (Dillon) wished to remain anonymous.

In the findings from the interview process, I discovered that all participants experienced “turning points” in their lives that altered their trajectories and changed their life outcomes by inviting them to focus on their futures and specifically consider attending college.

However, I also discovered that there were two different types of turning points, which I have presented in two different chapters. In the current chapter of findings—Chapter 5—I have presented the stories of three participants who believe their turning point was entry into a group home. In the next chapter—Chapter 6—I have presented the stories of two participants who believe their turning point was a critical incident when, in

an incredible act of bravery, they decided not to engage with the abuse of a biological parent and realized that they had the power to choose a different future.

Chapter 5 participants were also brave and startlingly autonomous, particularly considering they were children, which will be further illuminated in their grand narratives and the discussion section. During the interviews, to help participants remember details about the number of times they moved and changed schools, I organized my interview questions by grade level. I consider early childhood to entail birth through second grade, the elementary years as grades three through five, middle school as grades six through eight, and high school as grades nine through twelve. However, these divisions were not absolute. For instance, for some participants, middle school started before sixth grade. However, I used these terms—early childhood, elementary school, middle school, and high school—as general guidelines during interviews to provide structure and to organize events.

Overview

In this chapter, I present the grand narratives of three participants who moved into a group home in their teens, from which they eventually aged out of foster care. According to these participants, their moves into group care had a significant influence on their ability and motivation to enroll in institutions of higher education. It should be noted, however, that all three participants who experienced a turning point resulting from their move into a group home were teenagers in high school who had a history with behavioral, academic, or legal problems. These stories do not reflect the experiences of all children who have lived in group homes, which have become controversial in recent years.

Daniel's story is presented first; he lived in multiple group homes across multiple school districts while in high school. Overall, Daniel described his experiences in group care as positive, or as having a positive impact on his development and academic trajectory. Joshaline's story is presented next; she lived in one group home during her junior and senior year in high school. While she did not describe her experiences in the group home as positive, she identified moving to this home as the reason she spent extensive time on school grounds; furthermore, residence in this group home allowed her to increase her participation in extracurricular activities, focus on her grades and thus raise her GPA. Dillon's story is the last story in this chapter; he also lived in one group home throughout high school, at the end of which he also aged out of care. Dillon identified experiences in this home to be positive and to be a major influence on his altered trajectory and matriculation into an institution of higher education.

Daniel's Story

"Foster care may be a part of our past, but it does not define our future" (Harris, 2023).

I think I was pretty lucky as a foster kid. No one ever beat me. I was never malnourished. I was never abused, so nothing really bad happened to me. I just witnessed stuff happening around me. I didn't have any of that trauma that I know a lot of kids in foster care are exposed to. I was born in Charleston, South Carolina, and entered foster care at the age of twelve after my dad passed away and my mom went to prison. I lived in nine different homes, including two group homes, and went to a total of nine schools. I'm a really big guy, and I always have been. I am 6'5", 33-years-old, and my wife and I are White (see figure 5.1). We now live in New Orleans, Louisiana, where my wife is from, though we met in Charleston while I was finishing graduate school, and she was

visiting for the summer. We do not currently have any biological children; however, we are helping five teenagers aging out of the system via the nonprofit organization I established (see figure 5.2). We are not very religious.



Figure 5.1 Daniel and wife (Harris, 2023)

We now live in New Orleans, Louisiana, where my wife is from, though we met in Charleston while I was finishing graduate school, and she was visiting for the summer. We do not currently have any biological children; however, we are helping five teenagers aging out of the system via the nonprofit organization I established (see figure 5.2). We are not very religious. I have three older half-sisters from my mom's previous marriage, before my dad, and they are four, five and six years older than me (see figure 5.3).

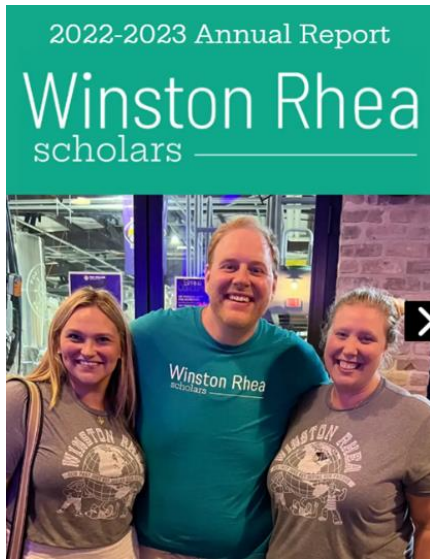


Figure 5.2 Winston Rhea Annual Report (Harris, 2022)

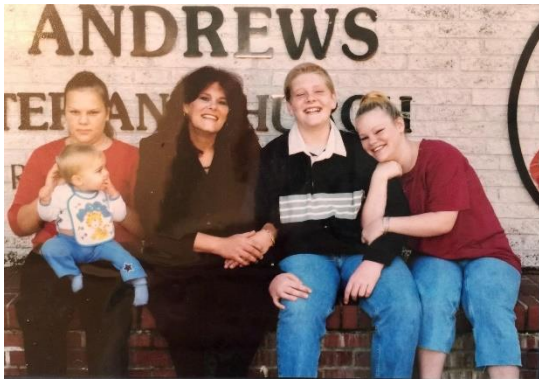


Figure 5.3 Daniel's mother and sisters (Harris, 1999)

We lived in poverty in various trailer parks in Charleston, moving whenever we were evicted due to legal trouble or physical and verbal fighting between my parents. My dad was in legal trouble starting as a kid for minor criminal activity and drugs and became an abusive alcoholic while dating my mom.

It was always the same fight with him and my mom. He would get drunk, and they would fight over the car keys. She would refuse to give them to him, and then they would get into a fistfight, and he would go to jail. We would move to another trailer park

somewhere in Charleston. He'd get out a year later. This cycle continued all through [my] elementary school until his death.

Because my home life was so rough, I looked forward to school when I was a little kid as a way to escape. I had lots of friends, and I loved my teachers, reading, and I made good grades. I was always a big kid, meaning that I was large for my age and continue to be larger than most everyone around me. When I was a little boy, I was large, playful, and I liked cartoons, board games, Super Nintendo, and other kids in my neighborhood. I went to two total schools between kindergarten and fifth grade and have many fond memories of this time in school before foster care, even though my home life was hard.

Ms. Brown, my second-grade teacher, was very pretty and nice. She was the most important and memorable teacher I had in early childhood. She lived in the neighborhood my elementary school was in and lived close to one of my dad's closest friends, so sometimes I would see her outside of school walking her dog or in her front yard. In class, she did the star system. If you were good for a day, you got a star on the chart we had on the white board. If you got enough stars, every Friday she had a shop with prizes—like pencils and erasers—so I always tried to be really good so I could get cool stuff from the shop.

One of my best memories of this time actually happened with a different teacher. There was a male teacher in my elementary school. I didn't have him, which made me sad because everybody wanted to be in his class, but especially me. Anyhow, when I was in the first or second grade, my sisters held me down and shaved my head completely bald. We were not supervised very often and being the youngest put me at their mercy. I came

to school with a bald head, and everyone made fun of me and laughed. I was devastated and terrified of how the other kids at school would treat me. I remember going into the main office area and wearing a hat and begging them to let me wear it, but they made me take it off because of the school policy on hats. All the kids laughed at me, and the male teacher noticed. The next day he came, and he had shaved his head, and I remember being grateful and touched. I felt important because he had done something like that for me. He saw me getting laughed at and picked on, and he decided to shave his head in solidarity because he knew how much the others looked up to him, and that they would not make fun of me if it meant they were also making fun of him. That was one of the most important things a teacher ever did for me, and he wasn't even my teacher.

I don't remember if anyone read to me when I was little. I do recall liking Dr. Seuss books when I was in kindergarten, picture books such as *Ms. Nelson is Missing!* when I was in first grade, and the Magic Treehouse books in second grade. The Harry Potter books came out when I was going through elementary school, and I was absolutely obsessed with them. So, while I don't remember learning to read, somehow, I did, and I loved to read in elementary school. Going to the school library was a treat because we got to check books out and take them home. I also started drawing and became passionate about it and spent a lot in class zoning out and drawing. So much so that I was going through a full pack of paper every two to three days, and my grandmother would fuss at me.

In my later elementary years, I was a very bright student, and I loved all subjects in school. I especially enjoyed reading, drawing, and social studies. One of my best memories during this time was my first sleepover with friends. I guess you could say

friendships and relationships have always been the most important thing to me. I also remember that a weatherman came to visit my school, and I thought about him and his presentation on clouds a lot and dreamed of being a weatherman one day.

Like I said before, school always felt like my escape from personal stuff going on at home. I also always looked forward to the opportunity to visit the school and community libraries, and I was a voracious reader, using reading to escape from my home life when I couldn't be at school.

Around third grade I started to enjoy and excel at writing. In fourth grade, I actually won an important writing contest which was awarded in front of the whole school during an assembly, and which meant I was the first person in school allowed to check out the newest Harry Potter book when it came out. This was important to me, because like I said earlier, I was obsessed with them.

Everyone loved Harry Potter. I have always been amazed at those authors' imagination and how they are able to create these worlds and characters and stuff. I always thought that was really cool. And not just Harry Potter—I remember having this same thought about *A Wrinkle In Time* and the sequels for that. And you know, at the time I was living in a trailer park with three older sisters, and we weren't doing too much. It was kind of like a get-away-from-reality type of deal.

I also liked the book *Holes*, among others. I continued to excel in drawing as well, and even qualified to get into an exclusive local charter middle school for the arts with rigorous admission requirements, including an art portfolio. I loved drawing cartoons and mirroring the world around me.

However, during fourth grade my dad suddenly and tragically passed away. I don't really like to talk about that, so I keep details about his death private, but I did witness it happen. Struggling to cope with this loss, my mom became despondent and even more emotionally and financially unstable. This was when internet dating was just taking off and that quickly turned to prostitution and additional credit card fraud. For the first time, I started to exhibit behavior problems in school, wouldn't listen to my teacher, and was argumentative in general. I was really suffering, and I felt so alone, but I still feel bad for that teacher.

She was a young teacher. She had to be in either her first or second year of teaching. She was in her mid-twenties. She was working at a public school in Charleston and had thirty kids in a classroom. They were doing renovations to the school, so we were in a trailer outside of the building, isolated. We weren't even in a traditional classroom. It had to be tough for her. And then you have this big kid who's your size but fifteen years younger than you that's arguing with you all the time and not making it easy for you. I look back and I wish I had not been so hard on her. I'm sorry for being an asshole kid.

The summer after fourth grade I went to a camp for kids who had lost a parent, but other than that, I did not get immediate emotional support for the loss of my dad. And then my fifth-grade year began in the year 2001, and 9/11 happened shortly after the start of the school year. Everything else kind of took a back seat to 9/11. This major event contributed to community-wide stress and reduced the visibility and urgency of my grief.

We might have been in school for like two or three weeks before 9/11 happened. I remember we had a big TV in the corner where we watched morning announcements.

And I remember the teacher answering the phone on her desk; she's like, "Oh, my God." And then she actually put it on TV. And I remember watching the second plane hit on live TV. I think that was the first time in my life that I realized that bad stuff happens all over the world, not just to me.

By the end of fifth grade, my mom was in jail for financial and other crimes, and I would never live with her again. At this point, I went to live with my 18-year-old sister, her boyfriend, and their baby, and my sister attempted to support all of us as a waitress. Her boyfriend was a loser and wouldn't work, so we were really poor, and I was always hungry. We ate one meal a day. We would go to Wendy's and get two things off the dollar menu and that was our food for the day. So, it was tough. I was never mad at her, though, because I knew she was young and trying her best. I was also lashing out at her because I was dealing with my father's death and my mom wasn't there. So, she had a lot on her plate for an 18-year-old waitress with a baby.

After a few months of being generally unsupervised and with no resources or emotional support to deal with the death of my dad and loss of contact with my mom, I started to get in trouble with friends in our trailer park for stealing video games and other minor crimes. When the authorities got involved, my sister admitted that she could not handle raising me. It wasn't her fault though, and I don't blame her for letting me go.

Therefore, I became a ward of the state before the beginning of my sixth-grade year and started middle school in foster care. I never got to attend the special magnet school for artists, and abruptly stopped drawing. In fact, I don't think I ever drew again after that.

When I entered foster care, I was assigned a guardian ad litem named Catherine who would be the only consistent adult in my life all the way through until aging-out of the system, and whom I would in fact live with at multiple points before college and during the summers between college semesters (see figure 5.4).



Figure 5.4 Daniel and Catherine Rhea
(Harris, 2019)

I am still in contact with her and her family, and I even named my charity organization after her and my high school basketball coach.

I already said that I was always large for my age, but I think this really started to have an impact on how I was treated in foster care and middle school, in good ways and bad. It made me seem older—which propelled me into sports like football—which was a good thing, but it also meant I was on teams with kids much older and more experienced

than me. I think it's also possible that my size made me seem threatening in foster homes, and both the adults and other kids I lived with were often intimidated by me, and assumed I liked to and knew how to fight.

I went to three separate middle schools and lived in three foster homes in three years. Moving schools and homes every year was hard on me socially and emotionally. However, this is also when I became active in sports, which I would continue through high school and even into college. I also started to get in a lot of physical fights in school and in my foster homes, and my grades dropped dramatically, particularly in science and math. However, my ELA teachers observed that my reading and writing abilities were higher than my performance. I remember reading *A Wrinkle in Time* as a class assignment which I loved and was required to write an essay. I voluntarily read the remaining books in the series. I do not remember what the essay was for, but two weeks after I wrote it, my teacher pulled me out of class, and I met with somebody in the guidance office who told me I was way above everybody else in my class. However, my grades did not reflect this ability. No adult kept track of or attended to my grade fluctuations or provided me with supplemental academic resources.

In sixth grade, my first home was with a single male teacher who had five other foster boys living in his home. This was a turbulent time, and I was always afraid of the other boys, who were more experienced with living in care and who were often aggressive. I was large for my age, but I did not wish to engage in physical fights. However, I was often forced to defend myself and my reputation.

In seventh grade, I moved to my second foster home with Joey (see figure 5.5) and Amanda Leviner, who were 23–24-year-old church youth leaders, and who I still love

and have contact with. Joey worked at a chemical plant and was a wrestling coach, and Amanda worked at a Christian bookstore. Though I did not go to the middle school where Joey coached wrestling at this time, Joey got me into wrestling and supported me in sports and academics, and they required that me and my foster brother—who was aggressive and scared me—to do homework and read daily. However, they took me on my first vacation and I have good memories of that Christmas with them (see figure 5.6).



Figure 5.5 Daniel and Joey
Leviner (Harris, 2004)



Figure 5.6 Daniel at Christmas in 2004
(Harris, 2004)

In eighth grade, I moved to my third school and foster home after a physical incident with Joey when Amanda—who was the “decision-maker” of the two—was out of town. Joey later apologized for overreacting and admitted that he and Amanda were probably too young to be foster parents. However, the school I attended in eighth grade after moving to this third foster home, was coincidentally the school where Joey coached wrestling, so I maintained contact with Joey by being on his wrestling team. I also continued to attend the church that Amanda and Joey introduced me to. For these reasons and more, I consider them family and still have a relationship with both as an adult.

In high school, I attended three more schools and began my experiences in group care. In ninth grade, I left the Charleston area and moved to Columbia, South Carolina, where I lived in a facility group home that no longer exists [Carolina Children’s Home]. I did really well in this home, which provided wrap-around services and differentiated children in its care by behavioral management level. (I was middle level). This facility, in my opinion, was ideal for children in care because they accounted for all residents’ needs,

rotating staff were available 24 hours a day, and there was a system of accountability for adults, meaning that their job was to transport us to events and to care specifically for our needs. Due to the structure provided in this home, and because I did not want to disappoint the younger kids or my social worker, my grades started to improve for the first time in a long time.

Next, I moved back to the Charleston area and lived in a foster home with an older lady and attended tenth grade. This did not work out long-term, as she only had experience with fostering girls, and she did not know what to do with a 6'5", 300-pound sophomore. My grades again dropped during this time. I moved to another group home in rural Kingstree for grades eleven and twelve.

Kingstree is known for racial segregation, with most White children attending local private schools or charter schools, and Black children attending local public schools. This group home no longer exists, which I believe it is a good thing because the facility was run down, and the staff were not qualified to provide for our needs. They offered an in-residence GED program, which led many residents not to graduate from high school nor pass the GED exam, but because I continued to excel in and enjoy sports, I was the only one allowed to leave the in-residence program to attend public school for my junior and senior years.

During this time, I played football and basketball and met Coach Winston Williams (see figure 5.7), who both taught accounting and coached basketball. Even though I was not an experienced basketball player, I became very close with Coach Williams, who drove me to practices and summer camps and nurtured my athletic ability and emotional health.



Figure 5.7 Daniel and Coach Williams
(Harris, 2021)

I saw him first thing every morning for accounting, which was a great way to start my day. Coach Williams spent the entire spring semester of my junior year training me, helping me lose weight, and teaching me the ins and outs of the game. The picture below (see figure 5.8) is of me playing basketball in my senior year of high school.

Being part of a sports team was important because I was part of something bigger than just myself. Other people were counting on me. I think this taught me how important teamwork is and the power of collaboration.

Coach Williams told me that raw talent-wise, I had enough to be on the team, but I had to learn the game. So, he spent that spring mentoring and training me in basketball, and then that summer the team went to a couple of camps, and they did summer games against other schools. We became really close because Coach would pick me up from the group home and drop me off for practices and games, and the home was out in the middle of the rural county, so it was a half-hour drive from the school. During those long car

rides back and forth we would talk and learn more about each other, and we became really close. We are still really close.



Figure 5.8 Daniel Harris
(Harris, 2008)

It was during these last two years of high school, in a rural group home in Kingtree—where I was one of four White children to graduate from a predominately Black school—that I again started to care about and improve my grades. One reason was because I wanted to be a good role model for the younger boys in the home. I also did not want to disappoint important adults in my life, such as Catherine, my guardian ad litem, and Coach Williams. I would say that the most important teacher or coach during high school and overall was Coach Williams, with foster parent and wrestling coach, Joey, from middle school being second.

The last Harry Potter book was published during high school, and I read that, but otherwise I mostly read non-fiction material about sports. My interest in reading dropped during middle school and declined further in high school because I became more

interested in sports instead, and because, at the middle and high schools I attended, students no longer visited the library at school during the school day like they did in elementary school. Therefore, in general, I did not have a lot of access to books.

Living in group care was a turning point for me. My grades improved both times, at the group home in Columbia in ninth grade, as well as the group home in Kingstree in eleventh and twelfth grade. However, my grades had dropped when I returned to regular foster care in tenth grade. I think this shift came from wanting to model good behavior and priorities for the younger boys at the group home, and because I did not want to disappoint the adults in my life. I had also started to think more about the future and about college and wanted to get a scholarship to play basketball.

I was invited to play basketball as a walk-on at Lander University, which means I was not offered a scholarship, but could play on the university team. I was forced to accumulate significant student loan debt to obtain my degree, as South Carolina does not offer kids aging out of care any sort of financial support to attend college. They don't even teach you about regular financial aid for first generation students or federal aid for kids aging out of care. I was always told that if I graduated from high school and made it to college my tuition would be taken care of, so I was shocked to find out this was not the case from my social worker after I graduated. I was completely unprepared.

I signed myself out of foster care when I was 19 years old and walked out into the world as a legal and free "adult," if you believe that 19-year-olds are really adults. I earned a B.A. in Mass Communications from Lander University, and later a Master of Education from Columbia College, with a specialization in higher education. I faced a lot of hardship in higher education, particularly financial hardships, but I was lucky to

continue to have support from multiple adults from childhood, including Catherine, my guardian ad litem, and Coach Williams.

If you ask me, there are several concrete ways we can help children in foster care with their K-12 experiences and increase positive outcomes as they transition into adulthood. It would have helped me if the middle and high school guidance officers and counselors would have been more involved in my schooling and in preparing me for my future. They never really got involved at all, which is why I was not aware of the financial aid or academic requirements to attend institutions of higher education, or about how to pay for them.

I think that group care is a good option for children who are wards of the state if their facilities are modern, the staff are qualified, and if they offer wrap-around services, such as was the case with CCH (Carolina Children's Home). The structure in group care is particularly effective for teens who might be getting off track academically or with their behavior. It is also positive that the staff who work in group care settings are accountable for their behavior and can be required to provide transportation for children to participate in extracurricular activities, which is something that is not required of foster parents in homes, where the hope is for children to integrate into the family unit.

Also, children in foster care need access to therapy. They all do. Finally, children in care need access to consistent, long-term adult relationships, such as the one I had with my guardian ad litem, Catherine.

Conclusion

First, it is important to note that Daniel's story constitutes a counter-narrative that disrupts the dominant narrative that former foster care children cannot go on the lead

typical and even exceptional adult lives. It is also important to notice a couple of important elements in Daniel's story which contributed to my understanding trends across participants, which are positive relationships with adults, some of whom were teachers, participation in athletics and extracurricular activities, and high levels of childhood literacy.

Also, teachers and coaches played a significant role in Daniel's life, beginning in early childhood when he still lived at home with his biological mother, and through high school. Additionally, most of the coaches and teachers who made a lasting impact on Daniel in high school were men who invested in his success and spent one-on-one time with him. One of these teachers at the elementary level was not his classroom teacher but was the only male teacher at his school; his best memory about a teacher involved this man who voluntarily shaved his head in support of Daniel. As an adult, Daniel continues to have relationships with a number of these men and even partly named his non-profit organization after Coach Williams, his basketball coach from Kingstree. He also lived with Coach Williams the summer before college and during summer breaks.

Second, Daniel had and continues to have strong connections to literacy, both in reading and writing. Beginning in early childhood he used reading to escape difficult conditions at home and was a big fan of Harry Potter, even winning a school-wide writing contest with the reward of being the first person at the school to have access to the newest Harry Potter book. He went on to write for the school newspaper in high school and college. Even though his grades fluctuated, his high literacy level—which multiple teachers noticed—contributed to his ability to improve his grades and thus qualify for university. As an undergraduate, he originally majored in journalism but later

switched majors when he learned more about the hours and pay typical of that profession. Even now, Daniel authors the website for his non-profit organization and is responsible for writing reports both at work, as a higher education specialist, and for his website.

Third, Daniel participated in several extracurricular activities, particularly sports, while in foster care, but also journalism and writing for his school newspaper. Daniel had the opportunity to play football, basketball, and was a wrestler, as well, beginning in middle school when he entered foster care; he continued to participate in athletics in college. It is relatively uncommon for children in foster care to have access to sports and other extracurricular activities because of their high mobility, changing placements, and lack of transportation to and from activities. One reason Daniel was able to participate in sports is because he lived in group homes where the adults were required to provide transportation; another reason was because he lived with or received transportation from coaches and other educators.

Additionally, from the moment he entered foster care, through aging out, and to the present day, Daniel had one consistent adult relationship with his guardian ad litem. Consistent relationships with adults is not necessarily typical for children in foster care, again due to their high rates of mobility and often-changing placements. After signing himself out of foster care, Daniel lived with Coach Winston or his former guardian, Catherine Rhea during school breaks, and he continues to enjoy a relationship with her and her family; in addition, her last name also appears in the name of Daniel's organization (Winston Rhea Scholars).

Daniel was a talented and budding young artist in elementary school and was even accepted to a prestigious magnet school in Charleston for the arts. However, all of

this came to an abrupt halt when he entered foster care. The transition to foster care at the beginning of middle school was incredibly difficult for Daniel—socially, emotionally, and academically. Imagine what other possibilities his future might have held if he had had the opportunity to attend this special school for the arts or if he had at least been encouraged to continue to draw and was given art supplies.

Finally, for several reasons, Daniel's trajectory changed when he moved into group care as a teenager. First, he wanted to be a good example to the younger boys in the home. He also did not want to disappoint the adults in his life, including his guardian, coaches and teachers, and social workers. Additionally, group care provided a structured environment that propelled him to think about his future, higher education, and ultimately, to decide to take control of his life and get serious about academics and grades. Thus, Daniel was able to transcend the otherwise grim outcomes that he witnessed for other young adults who aged out of foster care, including a friend from the group home, who upon turning eighteen, was given \$50 and dropped at a bus station.

However, it should be noted that Daniel reported a positive experience at his first group home, which was in Columbia, South Carolina. He cited this home as a modern facility that provided wrap-around services. Conversely, Daniel stated that the second group home was run down and that the staff were underqualified, and that the home did not provide needed wrap-around services. Further, he reported that this home compelled the children to attend a version of home school, which he believes harmed those boys academically. Because Daniel played sports, he was allowed to attend the local public school, where he met Coach Winston and started playing basketball (in addition to football), which he believes was the reason he graduated and is now successful. Coach

Winston provided Daniel with many of the wrap-around services not provided by this second home in Kingstree, such as transportation and a secure relationship with a safe adult who encouraged him to pursue higher education.

Daniel is a humble young man who attributes his successful trajectory to luck and supportive adults from childhood. He even describes his childhood as “lucky,” despite early tragedies and the trauma inherent to the inconsistency and high mobility of foster care conditions.

Joshaline’s Story

“Truly conquering is a mindset. When we learn to change our perspective, we then change our reality. Conquering is not limited to exceeding the expectations of others. It’s thoroughly becoming connected with who we are as individuals, to reach the level of self-actualization” (Douglas, 2018, p. xx).

When I was a kid, I wanted to be a drill sergeant when I grew up. That should tell you something about my resilience and life-long toughness. Despite going into foster care at age six and aging out of the system, I went on to not only graduate from college, but I also got my PhD in 2022.

I published my first book on fostering resilience (*The Douglas Approach: Conquering by Building Resilience*) in 2018 (see Figure 5.9). In this book I tell the real story of my life to inspire others to choose resilience and success over accepting your born circumstances, which many would consider me an expert in. My book is dedicated to all kids in foster care, and the quote above is from the prologue.



Figure 5.9 Front cover of *The Douglas Approach* (Douglas, 2018)

I am a Black, Christian, 28-year-old woman. For my biological family, the foster care cycle was generational. My mother was also in foster care, and my father was incarcerated, and I didn't start building a relationship with them until I was an adult. My mother did not graduate from high school, and she had the first of her four children when she was 19 years old. When I was very young, she was reported to social services for being unable to care for us, and for mental health issues (likely exacerbated by her own childhood traumas). She agreed with social services that she could not support us and that we should go to live with her biological mother. Therefore, we moved to Charlotte from Durham, North Carolina, to live with her mother—my grandmother—and I stayed with

her until I was six years old and entered foster care. My grandmother was a Christian woman who instilled love for God in me at an early age. I remember her quoting the Bible, reading the Bible, and saying things to me about Jesus and scripture. This gave me a strong religious foundation in early childhood, which would contribute to my resilience throughout my life.

In hindsight, however, I believe [putting me in the care of my grandmother] was a mistake on the part of social services. I now work as a social worker in the county I aged out of, so I am familiar with the good reasons for wanting to place children with family. However, considering that my biological grandmother had lost her own children, including my mother, to foster care, and that she lived in the local “trap house” (a local venue for buying illegal drugs), I now know we should never have been placed with her. During this time, I remember strangers coming in and out of the house, buying drugs, and witnessing other nefarious behavior from “guests.” It was not an ideal situation. So I went into foster care at the age of six and would remain in care until I graduated from high school and aged out of the system. In total, as a child, I moved twenty-nine times. To some, this is a startling number. To me, it is just the reality of my childhood. I found ways to be successful and protect myself throughout my life. All twenty-nine of my placements (100%) were [with] Christians.

I now have a six-year-old son and I am grateful to be able to break the cycle of poverty and foster care. It stops HERE and NOW. And the reason why I work in the same county I aged out of is because I want to give back to these kids and this community to enhance their ability to also stop the cycle of poverty and generational

foster care. Being a breaker of cycles is hard work, but it is some of the most important work one can do. It literally changes culture, power, and the world.

I received my bachelor's in social work from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical University, a master's in social work from North Carolina Central University, and a PhD from Capella University. None of these universities offered a CSP (college support program for youth from foster care). The road to higher education was hard and lonely, but I did it, and I did it all by myself. It is amazing the things we can accomplish once we unlock our own potential.

I always liked school, and I was always good at it. No one that I know of read to me when I was a little girl. I taught myself to read while living with my grandmother before entry into foster care in first grade. I would look at pictures in books and sound out the words and eventually I was reading fluently. I also taught myself how to write and I loved learning cursive in school.

My first-grade teacher, Ms. Lozener, was very important to me and was the person to make the report to social services. In private, she would kindly ask me questions about my circumstances. For example, she would gently ask me questions if I had been wearing the same clothes for a few days in a row. One of my favorite memories was that she always gave me snacks like cheese puffs, because she knew I was hungry. I always felt safe and loved with her. And coincidentally, this kindergarten teacher moved to teaching second grade, so I got to be in her class twice! This stability in school was probably important because in second grade I was in foster care, but at least the teachers at school knew me and gave me extra attention, because they knew what I was going through. I will never forget their kindness.

I was always a bright child, and I would describe myself as expressive, creative, and loud! In total, I went to three elementary schools, and it was in my later elementary years that I became truly devoted to academics. I found that school was a place where I could always be successful, and it provided ways to escape from my circumstances in all my foster homes.

I was also a creative kid. Without any prompting, I expressed my creativity through my outfits, hair, makeup, and dancing (see Figure 5.10). In my later elementary years, English became my favorite subject in school, and I loved to write and actively kept a journal. I also loved to read, and the Junie B. Jones book series was my favorite.



Figure 5.10 Joshaline Douglas in elementary school (Douglas, 2003)

Around fifth grade I started to stand up for myself—not only to the kids around me—but also to authority. I was still the same bright child, but I started to have a little more sass, and this continued into middle school, which was a time of great transition for me.

I went to a total of eight middle schools in three short years. At this point, I would begin to describe myself as challenging, and I started to have an attitude. However, this came from a place of strength and from wanting to protect myself, because nobody else could or would. I also began to assume a lot of initiative to have some sort of control over my circumstances and outcomes. I never showed fear.

In sixth grade I learned to write in paragraph form from a favorite teacher, who broke down writing in a good way that made it easy to learn. This skill would prove to be invaluable to my life trajectory. I went on to continue to write stories through the rest of my K-12 experience, into college, and of course as an adult, publishing my own first book.

In middle school I also attended alternative schools, and these experiences were rough. Many of the other kids I was around and would continue to be around throughout my foster experience, were not concerned with excelling in school and were in and out of the juvenile justice system. I picked up a lot of bad behavior from them. That's how it happens! If you put all the "bad" kids together, what do you think would happen? By the next year, I, too, would begin interacting with the Department of Juvenile Justice.

However, Ms. Statin, who was my science teacher at one of the alternative schools, went out of her way to talk to me and form a relationship with me. Maybe she saw something in me. I felt like I could tell her anything, like about what was going on in my foster home, or about trouble I was getting in, and I could trust her not to tell anyone else. Sometimes, she gave me money to eat because I stayed hungry due to restrictions on food in my homes, and at some point, she got in trouble for doing so. I still feel bad that she got in trouble for helping me. She meant so much to me during this terrible time.

After yet another move, in eighth grade, I was humiliated by being put in a special education class at a traditional middle school. Every day I was embarrassed to be in the slow class when I knew I was, if anything, advanced. However, because of my behavior, my social worker saw me as a danger to myself and others. This was right after I began to get in trouble with the law, including my first charge, which was grand larceny. I think there were a lot of reasons that I stole property, including a lack of access to resources, feeling cornered, and similar behavior modeled by the teenagers around me who did the same things. Therefore, instead of getting me into therapy or finding resources to provide me with emotional support, my social worker had me placed in a self-contained, special education classroom. “Bored” does not begin to describe my experiences due to the lack of academic rigor during this time.

I would say that I was always athletic and loved to play sports; but except for a brief period in fifth grade when a foster parent put me in cheerleading, no adults put me in sports in my early childhood or elementary years until cheerleading in eighth grade. This was one of the only foster home placements I had who let me play a sport and would pick me up after practice (this is not required of foster parents).

I had always danced and so cheerleading came naturally to me in eighth grade. However, this was a wealthier school, and I was the only Black girl on the team, and all the coaches knew that I was in foster care, so I feel that I stood out in a lot of bad ways in their minds. For instance, they considered me “more urban,” and I always felt like an oddball. The truth was that I had more rhythm than anyone else on the team and should have been their star. But I didn’t trust the other girls or coaches enough to be a “flyer,” which is when you are the person who is lifted in the air during a stunt. I didn’t trust them

to catch me, so instead I was part of the “base,” which references the people directly under the flyer responsible for stabilizing her during the stunt.

In high school I moved often, and my grades fluctuated a lot. In ninth grade I did pretty well, but in tenth grade I started skipping school and my grades started to decline. This was also the year I got into a confrontation with my high school principal. I was about to get in a physical fight with a boy in the hallway, but she intervened and told me to get my tail to class. When I told her she wasn’t my momma and couldn’t tell me what to do, she sent me to her office.

Once we were in her office, she looked at my GPA, which was still pretty high compared to the average student at this high school. She said that my grades didn’t align with my behavior. I told her some of my story, and she asked for my social worker’s number because she wanted me to come live with her, which I did! I stayed with her for a few months in tenth grade. My favorite memory of this time was Christmas, when she got me a pair of red Converse shoes as a gift. I still remember those shoes. I treasured them and my time with her. She was a strong and healthy role model, and she looked like me too. I would say she was the most important adult that I connected with from high school.

However, this placement did not last, and I moved a few more times before landing in a group home. My last foster home placement, also in tenth grade, ended poorly, with my foster mother calling me “psychotic,” telling me that I would never amount to anything, and that the “only way you’ll ever amount to anything will be by lying on your back.” I will never forget that. Those hurtful words still ring in my ears sometimes when I think about giving up or doubting myself.

At that point, my social worker refused to put me in any more traditional foster homes because of my track record of being removed, running away, or getting kicked out. Therefore, I went to live in a group home in the beginning of summer after my tenth-grade year, where I would stay for the remainder of high school, grades eleven and twelve. I see this as a turning point in my life because this is when I again got serious about school and started to think about and plan to go to college. I mean, I always knew, in the back of my mind, that I should go to college, and all my teachers confirmed this.

However, I had gotten distracted with all the transitions and trauma. So, the stability of my two-year group home placement, in conjunction with wanting to prove wrong the horrible words from my last foster mother, resulted in me getting my life back on track, and refocusing on school and grades. I was tired of being seen as the “bad kid.” I just decided to change my behavior and focus on the future so that I could control my own life and get away from the endless string of adults making terrible decisions for me.

This children’s home was “cottage style,” meaning that groups of children lived in small houses on a campus and staff would rotate weekly to care for us. I did really well in this environment. We had planned outings and activities, and we were provided with wrap-around services such as mental health support and tutoring. They even had a school on campus with sports teams. However, I was allowed to attend the local public high school, even though they had a school on campus, because my GPA was relatively high, and I wanted to participate in sports not offered on campus. Therefore, I lived at this children’s home in eleventh and twelfth grade, and I spent as much time at school as possible, which was the best possible thing I could have done. I immersed myself in sports and academics. I played sports year-round, including varsity track and soccer, due

to my natural athleticism. I excelled in sports just like I excelled academically. I viewed school and sports as escapes from my group home. I participated in sports as much as possible, and also in robotics. Looking back, I guess it is a big accomplishment that I was able to participate in so many sports without much preparation.

As far as reading and writing in high school, at this point I only really wrote what was required for my classes, which was quite a bit due to the rigorous level. I was able to take a creative writing class at one point. But I was writing so much for classes and spent so much time after school in sports that I had little time to write independently. I also did not have a lot of time to read for pleasure, but I do remember enjoying *Urban Tales* and *The Coldest Winter Ever*, which I could relate to because it was about a boy in a group home. I took a few online classes to further raise my GPA so I could qualify to get in a good college. English continued to be my favorite subject; I took challenging in-person classes and graduated a semester early, in December of my senior year.

At the group home, we were not allowed to stay and live on campus without going to school, so I did one spring semester at the local community college due to graduating early. This one semester of community college in the spring was a good transition for me, from high school to higher education. Then in the fall, I moved on campus as a freshman and lived at North Carolina A & T in a dorm. I loved the college experience because I was finally free. But I wanted a family that I could go spend holidays with, which the group home did not provide.

As I said above, I went on to attain multiple degrees, but the road was hard and lonely, and I was forced to accumulate a massive amount of student loan debt. There was no way for me to afford the cost of college and living without financial support, so I had

to take on student loans and credit card debt throughout my journey through higher education that I continue to pay off today.

Based on my experiences in foster care, I think that we could improve the lives of kids in care by providing them with more emotional support. We must think about their well-being first and academic performance second. They won't be able to thrive unless the trauma is acknowledged, evaluated, and treated. Every child in care needs access to consistent, professional mental health care. Additionally, foster parents need to be trained about the impact of trauma and learn not to take the behavior of children in care personally (which can be hard). This should be monitored, and foster parents should be held accountable for their actions toward children in care.

We also need to make policies for children in foster care to have access to wrap-around services, such as a mentorship program and therapy for behavior, and to be able to enroll in extracurricular activities, like sports and art. Kids in care need these recreational activities because they are a good way to let off steam and are another opportunity to excel. I had most access to these activities when I lived at the group home.

Last, kids aging out of the system need help transitioning to higher education and paying for it. They need targeted help in high school to plan for college and to understand entrance requirements and financial aid. Their lives are already so hard, and few make it to college. Why make those young adults assume debt at their young ages when they are barely able to understand what it will take to pay it off? College and the cost of living should be free for all children from exiting foster care through graduate school. When we talk about the importance of being breakers of cycles, imagine how much easier it would

be to do so, and to be a catalyst for generational change, if the road was not paved in loneliness and debt.

Conclusion

There are several important aspects of Joshaline's story: some are unique to Joshaline, and some reflect wider trends across participants. First, Joshaline felt successful in school and found academics to be enjoyable. At all levels of schooling, English was always her favorite subject. At an early age she taught herself how to read and write, and she kept a personal journal. She continues to be a writer as an adult, having already published one book, *The Douglass Approach: Conquering Adversity with Resilience* (Douglas, 2018), and she is working on another.

Second, Joshaline had many close relationships with teachers, including her first-grade teacher, who made the report to the Department of Social Services on her behalf, and gave her food when she was hungry. She also formed a close relationship with a science teacher at her alternative middle school, with whom she confided; this teacher eventually got in trouble for giving Joshaline money for food. In high school, before being placed in a group home, she also developed a strong relationship with the principal after an incident with another student in the hallway, and she went on to live with the principal. Joshaline has fond memories about holidays with this principal. Overall, Joshaline reported that her teachers and administrators were kind, looked out for her, and supported her through her many moves and years in state care.

Like other participants, Joshaline had opportunities to participate in multiple sports, including cheerleading, track, and soccer. There were times when she moved suddenly, and with no concrete experience in a certain sport she still made the high

school team. That she placed on school teams is exceptional given that she did not have formal training in sports; she persisted with sports despite her high mobility.

Beginning in early childhood, Joshaline was an expressive child and despite few resources she was creative with her outfits, makeup, and hair. She remembered being “sassy” and that her “attitude” increased as she got older. After being placed in alternative schools as a teenager, she got in some legal trouble, which she attributed to things she learned from her new peers. It is likely that Joshaline was a gifted and talented student, but she was not treated as such. She not only attended alternative schools but at one point was placed in a self-contained, special education classroom—a true tragedy for such a talented and motivated little girl.

At her last foster home, Joshaline was traumatized and verbally assaulted by her foster mother who told her that she would only find success by using her body for sex. This adult, who had been given the most precious responsibility of caring for a vulnerable child, betrayed this trust, insulted a child, and then kicked her out. As a result, Joshaline’s social worker placed her in a group home, where she would remain until she aged out of care.

Joshaline moved into a group home before her junior year of high school, which she cited as a turning point that kept her away from further interactions with the juvenile justice system. In this home, she was provided with resources to concentrate on her classes and participate in extracurricular activities such as sports and robotics. She took control of her life, asserted new agency, and decided to focus on the future. This decision meant that she spent as much time on campus as possible and was successful in raising her GPA. It should be noted that Joshaline’s group home was cottage-style, which meant

that the children lived in small groups with a consistent set of adults. Additionally, her group home was well-funded from local, private businesses, which ensured the home's ability to provide ample wrap-around services, supplies, transportation, and activities. Her success was a stunning act of bravery, maturity, and patience not commonly found in teenagers. Joshaline attributed her successful trajectory to personal resilience, persistence, and her faith in God.

Dillon's Story

"Children in foster care need to have the opportunity to try out different things like chess club, sports, and other activities. They face so many limits and barriers in how they can express their creativity. Let them see the possibilities. If they want to be a doctor, astronaut, firefighter, or anything else, they should be supported to pursue their dreams and think big" (Interview 2, 2023).

I am a young Black man in my twenties from the poorest neighborhood in a major city in the northeast. I spent my early childhood with biological family in unstable and often homeless conditions. As you can imagine, this was particularly difficult in the harsh, northeastern winters. My parents were abusive, neglectful, violent, addicted to drugs, and probably had significant, undiagnosed mental health issues. I was taken by the state and entered foster care when I was still in elementary school, and I would stay in the system until I aged out at eighteen. I moved many times after I entered the system, including my final move into a group home.

I believe I went to daycare or preschool, but I don't remember much about it. I also went to two or three elementary schools due to moving around and instability before foster care. As a little boy, I would say I was curious and aggressive. I got in a lot of

physical fights at home and in school, because that is what I saw happening around me. That is how my parents treated each other and treated us, and so that is how we treated each other. I thought it was normal. It was the only method I was aware of to obtain social capital.

Academically, I was a quiet student in elementary school, and I would say that I did not like school much. Maybe it was because my home life was so rough that I could not understand the point of school. Maybe I was too hungry, scared, or traumatized to care about reading and math. Maybe I couldn't make friends easily because I never saw healthy relationships develop or be maintained. Either way, I didn't feel like an insider at school, and I didn't feel safe anywhere. That's probably why I got in so much trouble for fighting.

However, I always loved drawing, coloring, and writing, and despite not buying-in to education, I got decent grades in early elementary school. I used to pretend to write stories when I was a little boy before I even knew how to write, scribbling on the page from left to right, certain I was communicating a story. Little did I know I would go on to be a writer in high school, college, and as an adult. I believe that my scribbles were the first signs of my budding, emerging literacy. I do remember my older sibling reading to me when I was a little boy, and my favorite books were by Dr. Suess. Sometimes, my dad also read the Bible to us, and these were perhaps the times when I felt safest.

Ever since I can remember, I was a natural athlete, participating in sports across childhood and my many living situations. Looking back, I can see now that it was a big accomplishment to maintain a connection to sports, although my life was so unstable.

Perhaps it came more naturally to me than school did at the time. That is why my P.E. classes are my favorite memories in early childhood from school.

When I entered foster care, I experienced an initial period of stability that I had not been exposed to previously. During that time, my grades improved, and I stopped fighting. I also had my first Black, male teacher, and he made a big impact on me. He was always laid back and chill. It was the first time I witnessed a man with patience. He never got upset! And guess what? That school year was the first time I ever liked school. It was the first time I felt like an insider and felt like I could be successful academically—because I saw myself reflected in him.

This was also the first time I got to buy books at the Scholastic Book Fair, which was my favorite time of all. I don't know where I got the money, but back then, you could buy books at those fairs for cheap. Maybe I just found change around the house or something, but I bought the Goosebumps books and went from being a reluctant reader to loving to read. This is also when I started to read the Bible on my own, the kid's version, and I would even bring it to school to read sometimes. So, around this time, stories from the Bible began to be a big influence on me.

This is also when I began writing my own comic books. I was a huge football fan, like the NFL (National Football League) and stuff like that. I used to draw different players and write scenarios for games and rivalries and all of that. I created these complex storylines and made little packets of stories. I read as many comic books as I could get my hands on, and I studied their structure. I practiced creating my own versions with sport-themed storylines, complete with illustrations. That was a lot of fun.

In middle school, I moved multiple times, but still I got more into sports, especially football, which was a good outlet to let out frustration. My football coaches in middle school were the most influential adults in my life at the time, and I started to make friends with the other boys on my team. So, I would say that football was good for me for several reasons. I had positive male role models to look up to, I had camaraderie with the other boys, and the activity itself improved my mental health. My grades in school got even better, and life was finally looking up.

However, later in middle school something traumatic happened that would have a negative influence on me for years. I was physically assaulted by a peer and this critical incident was very traumatizing. I became self-conscious and depressed, which had a terrible impact on my social life. My mental health plummeted, along with my grades. I became withdrawn, isolated, and despondent. I had never had access to therapy before and I didn't then either, which would have been helpful during this time. I did, however, have access to God. So, I started reading the Bible more, and Bible-based books, and my interest in Christianity increased. Sometimes, I felt like the only reason I wasn't completely alone in the world was because I always had God with me.

I went to multiple high schools and became curious about girls, even though they did not seem to be very interested in me, and I did not have anyone to talk to about these social dilemmas. My grades were still poor. To make matters worse, I broke my leg, which impacted my ability to play sports, one of the only outlets I had to let out frustration and where I could feel successful, connected with peers, and have healthy relationships with adults. This was one of the lowest points of my life, a truly dark time. So, I continued to read the Bible more and only found solace in its wisdom. There was

another book that had a big impact on me: *Who Stole My Cheese?* This book influenced me a lot because, in conjunction with Christian books, it caused me to see that changing your perspective can have an immediate impact on your life and therefore change your situation.

The last time I moved was to a group home, where I would remain through high school graduation. This was a major turning point in my life. The group home was Christian and some of the staff were Black, who turned out to be healthy and inspiring role models. I thrived in this environment. They also connected me with Black male mentors who encouraged me to bring my grades up and go to college. Living in this home provided me with resources and opportunities that I did not have access to before, and I had the mental space to explore other possible interests. I became interested in history and started having conversations with people about politics; I gravitated toward my Black, male teachers. I loved the extracurricular classes and activities offered by my high school, such as the arts and media classes. Near the end of high school, I started to really grow as a writer, joined the school newspaper, and began pondering the idea of going to college to be a writer. My media teacher was important to me, and his classes increased my confidence with public speaking and in myself generally. I also took a creative writing class with this teacher and sometimes ate lunch in his classroom—we were that close. As an adult, I have already published a few books, so this teacher had a big impact on me.

With the support of the group home staff, my mentors, and my teachers, I graduated from high school and went to a large in-state university that had a college support program. This program provided me and other young adults aging out of foster

care with financial support, housing during university breaks and summers, supplies for my dorm room and school, and group and individual therapy. They made a home for us to come together to have a community. Therefore, I did not accumulate student loan debt, and I even got to participate in expensive extracurricular activities and travel.

I think it would help kids in foster care if they took more advantage of what was already available to them. For instance, everyone has lots of opportunities in school if you are motivated. I also think that they should go to college like I did or find some other path that gives them an upward trajectory, rather than repeating unhealthy generational cycles. Last, I believe that kids from foster care should be whatever they want to be. Too often, the ones who make it go on to be social workers. What about other dreams might they have? Why not be doctors, firefighters, or actors? I think they are pigeon-holed into working for the department of social services because it is all they have ever known, and I hope one day we will start to encourage them to think bigger.

Conclusion

Dillon wanted his narrative to be anonymous. In support of that decision, I altered many details and aspects of his story. However, the timeline, major incidents, and his beliefs and perceptions were retained. It is important to pay attention to several elements of Dillon's story in which he describes his specific experience, because they also describe patterns across participants.

First, Dillon's academic experience was a roller coaster. In early childhood, when he lived with his biological parents, he observed how they engaged in physical and verbal violence, often while the family was homeless. Dillon got into a lot of trouble in early childhood at school for fighting, and as a result, was considered a problem student, which

overshadowed his academic potential. In elementary school he was taken from his parents by social services and entered state foster care, where experienced stability for the first time in his life. His fighting decreased and his grades improved.

However, in middle school, Dillon was assaulted by a peer. This event had a severe, negative impact on his social relationships, emotional development, and mental health, and his grades again declined. It was not until high school, when he was placed in a group home, that his grades once again improved. Essentially, Dillon's academic performance reflected the consistent inconsistency of his life outside of school.

Regardless of these inconsistencies, Dillon has always had, and continues to have, a strong connection to literacy. English was his favorite school subject, and creative writing was his favorite class and activity. Some of his best memories as a child involve the Scholastic Book Fair at school, where Dillon had opportunities to buy and read his favorite Goosebumps books. He also created comic books in his free time, complete with storylines and illustrations. Later, in high school, he wrote for the school newspaper and participated in other extracurricular activities, including media, radio, and journalism. He was a creative and expressive child.

Like Daniel and Joshaline, Dillon was also an athlete across levels and played football through high school, except for the time when he broke his leg. He also formed close relationships with coaches and caring teachers, particularly his Black, male teachers. Dillon's ability to consistently play sports across schools and placements is notable as it is generally difficult to be selected for high school varsity teams without a history of athletic performance at a single school. It is also remarkable that he developed relationships with teachers, despite changing schools and struggling with low self-esteem.

Dillon identified his move to the group home as a turning point in his life, where he was connected with Black, male mentors who encouraged him to focus on school and turn his life around. Upon reflection, he cited the structure provided in group care as a significant contributing factor to his matriculation into higher education and transition into adulthood. This kind of targeted and relevant support considering Dillon's race, gender, and specific needs is not necessarily typical of most group home settings. His CSP (college support program) was also a major contributing factor to his successful transition into adulthood, including his not needing to acquire student loan debt. He also identified the importance of spiritual support and continues to attribute his successful life trajectory to God and his faith.

Group Care as a Turning Point

All three of these participants lived in at least one group home during their high school years, and all three of them aged out of state foster care while living in group care. They identified their placement in a group home as a critical turning point in their lives when—for different reasons—they claimed agency over their futures and worked to alter their trajectories. For instance, after seeing grim outcomes for other boys aging out of care in his group home, Daniel decided that these grim outcomes would not happen to him; thus, he focused on high school sports, his academics, and raising his GPA so that he could control his future by asserting agency. He also did not want to disappoint the important adults in his life, and he wanted to be a good role model for the younger boys in the home. In college, Daniel assumed massive student debt because his state (South Carolina) did not, and still does not, offer any sort of tuition waiver or college support

program. He identified the Carolina Children's Home as a successful model for group care.

After a traumatic incident with her foster mother, Joshaline was moved into group care where she had the resources and space to embrace high school sports and academics. She saw higher education as a means to escape the dismal path of some of her peers, and she wanted to prove to people, including her former foster mother, that they were wrong in their assumptions about her. Joshaline's group home was a "cottage style" home, meaning that small groups of children lived in little houses with house parents who rotated weekly on a residential campus. Living in the group home provided Joshaline with resources and structures that enabled her to focus on sports and academics. In addition, there was more accountability for adults at the group home than there had been in her foster homes, with staff being required to transport the children to planned group outings and to their individual extracurriculars. In higher education, she was forced to accumulate a significant amount of student loan debt because her state (North Carolina) did not offer a tuition waiver or college support programs.

Dillon views his experience in group care, also his final placement, as positive. He was supported spiritually, which extended the faith he had been developing throughout his childhood, beginning with his biological father reading to him from the Bible. Additionally, he was mentored by adults, including Black men, who inspired him and gave concrete advice about grades and his GPA that enabled him to attend an institution of higher education. Additionally, Dillon was able to participate in a college support program at a prestigious state university and was not required to accumulate student debt to pay for his education.

Moving into group care served as particularly salient protective factor for these participants by providing them with structures and resources necessary to focus on high school sports and athletics, raise their GPAs, and matriculate into institutions of higher education. Each participant was affected differently by group care because their contexts and resources varied widely. A common outcome is that they all moved into group care, and then made a positive personal and agential decision. Realizing this decision changed the trajectory of their lives, and they started to focus on their grades and think about college and the future. Additionally, their intrinsic motivation increased as they asserted a new sense of agency that had been missing before they moved into group care.

However, their experiences do not reflect the experiences of all children who are or who have lived in group homes. For instance, their experiences differ from those of young children, children with disabilities, children who speak languages other than English, and group homes that are not modern, do not have qualified staff, and do not offer wrap-around services. It is also important to note that all three participants lived in small homes or cottage-style group homes. None of them lived in a large-scale orphanage. Additionally, participants' group homes were likely well-funded. Group homes which offer all of the services mentioned above would cost more than individual foster homes, and should not be thought of as a way to reduce cost for children in foster care.

Chapter 6: Findings

Choosing Agency as a Turning Point

The grand narratives of the two other study participants discussed in this chapter also constitute counter-narratives, which disrupt the dominant narrative of pre-ordained failure of former foster children in their adult lives.

Like the participants in Chapter 5, these participants, Chris Rice and Robert, also experienced a turning point in their lives during high school; however, instead of changing their lives because of residence in a group home, these participants discovered and enacted new agency prompted by critical incidents with a violent, biological parent, from whom they both figuratively and literally walked away. When enacting these actions of bravery, both participants realized that they had the power to choose not only different behaviors in the moment, but a different life trajectory toward a future of hope. They made the choice to break from the dominant narrative of repeated cycles of generational dysfunction, abuse and hopelessness by growing up instead. From that point on, each of them developed a new focus on themselves and futures of possibilities.

Chris is a 70-year-old biracial (Cherokee and White) woman who, before she entered foster care, spent her childhood moving back and forth across states in the backseat of her mother's car with nine half-siblings. When she was sixteen-years-old, Chris turned herself into state care to escape the abuse of her biological mother and a hopeless future. She graduated from high school in 1970 and is a brilliant storyteller and artist.

Robert is 44-years-old and is also bi-racial (Seminole and White); he was raised in Hawaii and Utah. When he was young, Robert ping-ponged between foster homes and living with his abusive biological father after the death of his mother. He is also an accomplished and published writer and a creative and empathetic man with five children of his own.

Chris Rice's Story

“Some days, it still seems as if the past were [sic] ever present. All those years in the lethal quiet of the car, ready to run, and afraid to leave. Bowels too long held threatened to let loose. Calf muscles cramped from too long confinement. Back bent with sorrow. And anger. Trauma burned into the wiring, glom[med] onto the mitochondria, becomes a ball, a knot, unable to untangle. Like matted hair, no matter how carefully you drag a comb through the mess, tug gently at the locks, there's no way to undo the damage. No matter the years of therapy, the EMDR [eye movement desensitization and reprocessing] treatments, acupuncture and herbs, healers in the desert, meditation, and yoga, twelve step meetings, and loving kindness in my life, there was no escaping the aftereffects of the harm done. Healing is an ugly process; scabs, scars, fissures, breaks are slow to slough off, fade, and heal. Deep wounds cannot be written over.” (Rice, Substack 2023)

You don't just “age out” of foster care. I am 70-years-old, and I have been aging out since I was an 18-year-old girl. I have always had an awareness as a writer and as an artist that this stuff takes a lifetime. The older I get, the more cognizant I become of the impact of growing up with an unstable, abusive mother who was always on the move with her ever-increasing band of babies and toddlers, traveling between boyfriends and husbands and states with her kids in the back of her car.

This picture (see figure 6.1) shows me standing in front of my mother's car before I entered foster care, and also me recently, reflecting on time continuity and the impact of aging out.



Figure 6.1 Chris as a teenager and as an adult
(Rice, July 4, 2023)

As the eldest of my mother's children, I would care for my six half-siblings from my mother (two were born after I left, and I have two more from my father) until I walked away from my mother and her violence and her malevolence in a startling act of bravery for a 16-year-old, to turn myself in to be cared for by social services. I did not know what the future held when I made that choice, but I was sure it was my only hope for a narrative other than the one being imposed upon me.

In the picture below (see figure 6.2), I am the oldest on the left and I am holding my little sister; my mother is in the center, and four of my other siblings are present. Two future siblings were not yet born, and one was living with his biological father. Both the girl in the back right and front right of the photo later died from drug overdoses.



Figure 6.2 Chris and biological family
(Rice, September 12, 2023)

Later in adulthood, I went on to have all sorts of physical problems that we don't consider when we think about child abuse. Living in a car with no access to healthy food as a child has led to a lifetime of gastrointestinal issues. I also recently had surgery to correct strabismus, a misalignment in vision commonly found in boxers and wives who have been abused, where the eyes have been knocked out of alignment by a blow to the head. I acquired this neat affliction when my mother grabbed me by the hair at five- and six-years-old and knocked my head against the wall. And these kinds of physical consequences don't begin to touch the impact of the emotional aftermath. I'm more conscious of the connection between the abuse during my developmental years and subsequent physical and emotional consequences now than when I was 20, 30 and even 50.

My mother is long gone now, and my eleven total half-siblings, nine of whom are still alive, and whom I have infrequent contact with, are scattered across the country. My maternal grandmother was Native American (Cherokee), so I have relatives and siblings

who live in the Cherokee Nation. I no longer live in Oklahoma, but I recently took a trip to Oklahoma to find the grave of my grandmother and connect more deeply with my Cherokee roots. Many of my ancestors walked the Trail of Tears, but I have been disconnected from this part of my culture for most of my life. When I went into foster care in the 1960s, no efforts were made to connect Native American children with Native American homes. Therefore, outside of the time I spent in direct contact with my grandmother, I was not exposed to Cherokee cultures and beliefs. That's why I'm so grateful for the time I did have with her.

In hindsight, I believe my mother was probably schizophrenic. At one point, I was told she was diagnosed as bipolar, but when I describe her disassociations from reality, and how she would see and hear things that we did not, her unexplainable terror and erraticism, mental health professionals suggested that it is more likely that she had undiagnosed schizophrenia, concurrent with a plethora of other disorders.

I went to seventeen different schools from kindergarten through high school, and honestly, it is hard to accurately count all the times we moved. Where does homelessness and living in a car land when counting the number of moves? Is living in a car moving, or is it where we moved to? In early childhood, me and three half-siblings, only one of which was the natural child of my stepfather, lived in a track house in San Diego across the street from Grover Cleveland Elementary School. We did not know at the time that he wasn't our biological father, or that we all had different fathers. We lived here from when I was about four years old, and I attended the school across the street for kindergarten through third grade. This somewhat idyllic period in my life was isolated. I would never experience stability like that again.

I did not attend any kind of preschool. I remember my stepfather getting us books and I would pretend to read them, pouring over the pictures and pages as if I were an esteemed scholar, and not a tiny girl. This is also when my pre-writing skills emerged, and I would sit at this little desk with a notepad, like a stenographer's notepad, and scribble in the shape of writing across page after page like I was in the middle of producing a novel. I called this "making writing." I don't remember my mother ever reading a book, but by the time I was in kindergarten I was reading.

When I was a very little girl, I would describe myself as athletic and curious. I loved to run and play on the playground and engage in whatever physical activity kids around me were playing. I was always making up stories, and even decided I was going to write a book when I was five. My earliest dream was to become a writer. I loved to go exploring, getting out of the house, and thinking imaginatively. I remember finding guppies in the creek nearby, putting them in a cup, and wondering about them. I was largely unsupervised.

The other side of the coin for this curious little girl is that I also learned to flinch reflexively to protect my head and my body whenever my mother walked by to protect myself from her scratching and hitting. I remember feeling like I could never do anything right in her eyes. She would throw me against walls, scream nonsensically, and berate me. So, I adapted like all children do and flinched and hid and tried to keep others from seeing my bruises and scratches, which I thought was normal behavior.

I was also a little trickster. Once, on picture day, I traded outfits with another girl because I did not like my own. At school, I looked to my teachers for guidance, and I loved them while at Grover Cleveland. However, I did not understand why they did not

protect me from my mother, whom I was scared of. You see, I believed, in the same way many children do, that adults were omniscient and knew what I was going through. Once, I stayed home for days in a row because I had bruises and scratches from my mother's physical abuse. When she finally sent me back to school, she gave me a note that told my teacher I had stayed home because of my hair. I remember them laughing at the note. I did not understand why they were laughing. Could they not see through the obvious lie my mother wrote? I had bruises all over me. Why did they not ask about this? Why didn't they help and protect me?

I got good grades in elementary school, but I got in some trouble too, starting to show some defiance. For instance, in second grade I was class president, and my best friend Sharon was the crosswalk monitor, and we got in a tussle with another little girl. As a result, our teacher said that I could no longer be class president and Sharon would also lose her position monitoring the school crosswalk. I stood up in class and told her, "Well, Sharon has an appointment, but I was elected. You have to have an election and the class has to decide." Now I would call this emerging agency.

After third grade, my life became and stayed chaotic. My mother split from my stepfather, and thus we began our life on the road. I was very influenced by my Native American grandmother, who was from Eastern Oklahoma (Cherokee Nation) and at the time lived in Texas. My grandmother's house was where my mother would land with us most often, wherever this was, either in Texas, Missouri, or Oklahoma. So, we'd be in the spare bedroom for a while, and then we would leave so my mother could pursue love with yet another man in another town or state. My grandmother was unable to save us from that situation because she didn't have a lot of agency in her own life, and I

remember thinking that her husband was very mean. But I learned a lot from her, like her knowledge about nature and connectedness that I still feel to this day.

I started fourth grade in Texas, and then we moved to Joplin, Missouri for fifth and sixth grade. I remember that I loved the *Wrinkle in Time* books and *David Copperfield* and I know now that I was learning more from books than I ever learned from my mother. I acquired cultural and social capital from what I was reading, while I learned fear and distrust from my mom. Then when I was ten, she had twins, so now I was the oldest of five children and expected to care for them. She would disappear and leave me in charge of everybody. It was hard for a little girl. I could never do homework and certainly couldn't make friends. I didn't want anyone to come over and witness the abuse and squalor. In fact, from that point forward I never made friends through high school.

I don't remember any favorite teachers in my later elementary years with all the moving, and because my mom kept me home a lot to hide the bruises and scratches she inflicted. I recall feeling resentful that none of my teachers recognized my desperate need for help as accepted my mother's ridiculous excuses for my absences. I also started to feel like an oddball, always being the new kid. In San Diego, I had attended only one school, and I had been learning Spanish and Japanese from my friends, but now all the children were White and spoke English only. So, it was a huge cultural shift, and I had a hard time adjusting socially. However, I was still athletic, and I loved recess and any opportunity to play dodgeball and other sports, even if I wasn't popular and didn't get picked until the end.

Middle school continued to be chaotic, and I used reading to transport me away from my miserable home life. I read all the time. At some point in middle school my biological dad returned from the military, and he gave me a set of those books of condensed classic literature. I also read *The Deer Hunter*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *Treasure Island*, the Little House on the Prairie books, and I read Nancy Drew like crazy. It was an escape method.

After my mom had the twins, she had my sister who now lives in Cherokee Nation, and then my brother. It is hard to keep track of how many middle schools I attended. We were back and forth between California, Texas, and Missouri, with most of our time spent in the backseat of my mother's car.

I did have this great English teacher in eighth grade, who also ended up being a caseworker later when I turned myself in to the state. He saw that I was a good reader and writer, and that is when I recognized that I was more advanced than my peers in this area. He took an interest in me and would give me lists of books to get from the library at school, and I would do so and read them. I will never forget that when we read *Great Expectations* as a class, he had us write a different ending as an assignment. I wrote two or three endings and gave them to the popular girls in my class to gain their friendship. However, he knew that they did not write these endings, so the plan backfired. Socially, I didn't belong. Somehow, my status was lower than the other kids, and I wasn't even in foster care yet.

I was still athletic when I could be, but remember, I graduated high school in 1970, two years before Title IX [of the Education Amendments of 1972, which banned discrimination based on sex, in any educational program or activity receiving federal

assistance, including sports] was passed. There weren't a lot of opportunities for girls' sports at that time. I did some tumbling, baton, and cheerleading in middle school, but when I transitioned to high school there weren't many sport options for girls.

I went to at least four high schools, and that is when I got into more nerdy stuff, like art classes, speech, debate, and acting. I went to live with my biological dad in tenth grade after a blow-up with my mother, and I tricked her into sending me to my dad by begging her not to. I understood how to use reverse psychology to influence outcomes with her. My dad, who I hardly knew, was married to a woman who didn't prefer to have me around, so there was a lot of tension in the house. They had two children of their own, and she clearly did not want me to live there. She imposed ridiculous rules on me to increase the difficulty of my experience. I'm not sure if this was out of some sort of jealousy, or if she was building her case to have me removed. To this day, I will never understand her motivation for treating me so poorly.

Then one morning in eleventh grade, in homeroom, my teacher pulls me aside and tells me that she doesn't know what to say, but that my stepmother called and asked them to start checking me out of school. Her brother came to pick me up and took me back to my father's house, and she had already packed everything I owned into eight boxes. She never said one word to me. I don't know where my father was, but he wasn't there that day to explain or say goodbye, and only I saw him again when my son was a baby when I took him to visit my grandmother. He never acknowledged the traumatic and sudden rejection in high school.

My stepmother's brother drove me back to my grandmother's house, now in Missouri, and dropped me and my eight boxes on her doorstep. I was never given any

explanation for why this happened to me. But in essence, delivering me to grandmother was delivering me to my mother, so I was back in my mother's life, and she was on the way to pick me up. One could make the mistake of believing that her coming to pick me up was evidence that she cared about me, loved me even, or missed me. But I knew better from all my years of experience living in her personal Hell. She wanted to control me, abuse me, and get her babysitter back. She wanted to punish me for my absence. She wanted her punching bag back.

I was sitting all alone in my grandmother's spare room, terrified and desperate, and I started to pray and asked God to get me out of this. I promised that if he did, I would never turn my back on anybody else. I had on a black and navy-blue sweatshirt, black jeans, and navy-blue tennis shoes, which are still my favorite clothes. My hair was short, like it is now. And I realized that I would have to save myself. No one was going to do it for me. No one was going to be able to protect me from her. I walked out of the spare room and through the front door of that house, just like that, with nothing but the clothing I was wearing. I didn't have a purse. I didn't have any money. I didn't even have a plan.

I would say that this was a turning point in my life. I walked out the front door as my mother pulled in the driveway, screaming, and I ran. I ran away from her even as she followed me in her car, screaming insults and obscenities at me. I ran away from the life she forced on us. I ran away from violence, abuse, and addiction. As I ran away, I also started to run toward a life I couldn't even imagine yet. I made the decision to pursue a change, and I chose myself and my future.

I went to a friend's house for a few days, and when her parents decided my time there was up, I asked them to take me to the department of social services and surrender me. As I was walking into the building, my eighth grade English teacher, who was now a social worker, was walking out. And I became a ward of the state at 16-years-old, of my own volition.

My former English teacher stashed me at his girlfriend's house until he could find me a proper foster home, and I landed with a young Christian couple who were only ten years older than me. They were very religious, and intellectual. My foster father had a degree in botany from Brown University and was an art teacher, and my foster mother was an elementary school teacher.

Therefore, within a five-day span, I had left my father's house in Springfield, Missouri; been dropped at my grandmother's house in Joplin, Missouri; ran away from my belligerent and abusive mother; stayed with the family of a friend; surrendered myself to the state; reunited with my eighth-grade English teacher and then stayed with his girlfriend; and finally ended up in a foster home. It was a lot of transition. And when my case worker went to my grandmother's house to retrieve the eight boxes filled with my belongings, they found that everything had been sliced up with scissors. It was my mother's last punishment for me. I literally had no possessions in the world, and I had to get clothing from the closet of a charity to resume school.

I have complicated feelings about that foster home now. I still have a relationship with my former foster mom, but it isn't a mother-daughter relationship. They engaged with me intellectually, giving me books to read and encouraging me to draw, write, and paint. However, there was also a transactional nature to our relationship. They always

made it clear that I should be grateful to be there, and that I cost them money. I started to wonder, how much does it cost them when I take a shower? How much does it cost to eat breakfast? They were also very religious and were motivated by wanting to “save” me, which we see all too often in foster care. I did not and do not have time for their religion, and I don’t think religion should be imposed on vulnerable children in foster care who don’t have the power to make choices.

Regardless, they had high expectations of me, which was a good thing. My foster mother had my IQ tested and presented me with the results to encourage me to live up to my potential. I wanted to please them. And luckily, they wanted me to be involved in extra-curriculars at school, which I gladly did. I got into all the arts, creative writing, and read voraciously. And I had already made the decision to finish school when I walked away from a life with my mother. I knew that if I stayed with her, I was unlikely to have the opportunity to finish, which contributed to my life-changing decision to leave. My foster parents encouraged me to go to college. Of course, it was a religious school. They were members of the Church of Christ. Their youth director helped me get into Oklahoma Christian College, which I got kicked out of after five semesters for directing a play they didn’t feel was Christian enough. Ironically, I also won the Best Director Award for this play.

Then I had nowhere to be, and no adults who were invested in me. I ended up marrying an older man, having a baby, and it took me eight years to finish my four-year degree. I went on to go to graduate school in my 30s and got a master’s degree in art, a master’s in library science in my 50s. I accumulated student debt in higher education.

I've been through a lot in seventy years. I've learned a lot, and I am continuing to learn and grow and connect with my past, while also healing from all the trauma, if one can ever heal from such things. You can find some of my written work in multiple magazines, including *Joyland Magazine* (<https://joylandmagazine.com/nonfiction/she-elegies/>); *Citron Magazine* (<https://citronreview.com/2015/12/01/the-way/>); and *Catapult Magazine* (<https://catapult.co/stories/decades-after-foster-care-i-found-my-long-lost-brother-generations>). I just completed my memoir (*Driven: A True Fiction of a Family History and a Memoir of Aging Out*), which I plan to publish. I also write in a variety of digital formats to share my experiences, including [on] social media and *Substack* (<https://chrisjrice.substack.com/>). I am a visual artist and have spent my life expressing myself creatively through all the ways artists can express themselves, including acting, painting, poetry, and more. I have always felt, and continue to feel, propelled to express myself creatively to the world. The artwork below (figure 6.3) is a self-portrait I painted six years after I aged out of foster care.



Figure 6.3 Self-portrait
(Rice, July 11, 2023)

The following (figure 6.4) is *One Foot Forward*, a mixed-media piece I made in 1993.



Figure 6.4 *One Foot Forward*
(Rice, July 18, 2023)

We should help kids in foster care by reunifying them with their biological families *less*. How many children have died after reunification, I wonder. Children who are taken from their families for abuse should never return to those families. Once, my friend and I started the process of applying to be guardians ad litem for children in foster care until we found out that the primary goal of foster care is reunification. Instead, I believe that solutions for vulnerable children exist that no one has even thought of yet. Foster care doesn't have to be traumatizing. It could be a beautiful institution of healing and joy for children, instead of the bare minimum, or being religiously motivated.

We also need to stop mythologizing motherhood. Being a biological mother does not inherently mean that you care about your children or want what is best for them. Men and women are no different in this way: some want to be parents, and others do not. Maybe once we stop revering mothers as saints, we can reevaluate the treatment of children and stop assuming that healthy parenting is intuitive, because it's not. It is

learned. Misguided beliefs about and behaviors toward children are often passed from one generation to the next just like eye color.

Conclusion

There are many significant aspects of Chris's grand narrative as a counter-narrative that are important to note. Like many other children who would end up in foster care, she had a tumultuous and unhappy childhood that lacked stability along with a chaotic history of schooling; nonetheless, there were a few bright spots that she would draw on that would contribute to her later pursuit of a degree from an institution of higher learning and to her leading an exceptional adult life.

In early childhood she did not attend preschool. Until she was eight-years-old, she only remembered living with her biological mother and stepfather. Her stepfather was a kind adult, but he did not or could not protect her from her mother, who was violent and abusive. However, Chris's stepfather read to her, taught her how to read, and brought her books. For her, reading was an act of love, and her love of reading can likely be traced to the special and safe time she spent with this trusted adult. More specifically, she acknowledged this experience as critical to developing her "pre-writing skills." Because she lived in an abusive environment, she was not able to develop socially or emotionally at the same rate as her peers and may have been behind in these areas, and therefore was rebuffed socially.

Educational institutions were a place of tension for Chris—a place where adults failed to protect her—but also places that allowed her to learn. So, although she initially liked school, Chris feared her mother and did not understand why her teachers did not intervene on her behalf to keep her safe when she bore the bruises of abuse; this

experience seeded her distrust of teachers and more broadly, of other adults. Not surprisingly, she became defiant and antisocial at school. However, school gave her a ground to stand on, and it became the place where she was not scared to stand up for herself.

When Chris was eight years old, her mother split from her stepfather in a violent confrontation. Chris went on live a life of high mobility and homelessness with her mother, who moved back and forth across states. As her mother continued to have more children, Chris's responsibilities as a caretaker increased, and she could not do her homework or have friends over. In the midst of this family violence and instability, Chris began to draw on her love of reading—rather than on adults—to escape her situation. As she reported, her reading level was exceptionally high, and she described reading *Great Expectations* and *Valley of the Dolls* when she was in middle school. During this time, she checked out so many books that her peers nominated her as “most likely to become a librarian.” She believed that she learned more about life and gained more social capital from reading than she did from any adult. That she went on to earn a master's degree in library science (as well as a master's in art) in her 50s supports her insight that her high level of literacy contributed to her success as a writer and visual artist as an adult—a fact that disrupts the dominant narrative of academic and adult life failure.

Like other former foster children, such as Daniel, Joshaline and Dillon (Chapter 5), extracurricular activities, like athletics, offered Chris a focused outlet in her life. While for Chris, athletics was some somewhat limited, she was an athletic child in elementary who enjoyed sports and running and playing on the playground at recess; as a tween, she said she was a tomboy. Because Chris graduated two years before the passage

of Title IX in 1972, her participation in sports, however, was limited to cheerleading and tumbling, and did not offer the same benefits as reported by the participants in Chapter 5.

As typical with many former foster care children, frayed and destructive family relationships had a negative impact on Chris's life, but they finally led to Chris's decision to take agency over her life—figuratively and literally—to save her own life, thus creating her own story, counter to the dominant narrative. This is where Chris's story departed from the dominant narrative of failure and low outcomes.

At sixteen, Chris was living with her biological father, his wife (who did not want Chris in their home) and their kids. Kicked out of their home, she was taken to her grandmother's, only to be turned over to her abusive mother. Chris chose to run and be a ward of the state. By running “away from violence, abuse, and addiction” without knowing what would follow, she chose life, “change,” and the “future.”

In foster care, despite some problems, Chris finally experienced some stability and was able to explore and participate in various arts, including painting, drawing, poetry, and acting. Clearly, these activities helped her develop academically and artistically; she not only became prosocial in her behaviors, but also matriculated into an institution of higher education. It took Chris eight years to complete her bachelor's degree and she eventually graduated from a different institution. Despite these challenges, Chris has a throng of academic degrees and is still a writer, an artist, and an inspiration.

Robert's Story

“The ability to overcome is needed in the world today. You are needed to be an example—an example to your classmates, to your co-workers, and to others in your community. By choosing to be successful, you can live a life full of meaning, love, and

belonging. And when you choose to be successful, even with all you have been through, others will realize they can choose to be successful too” (Mooney, 2020, p. 2).

I started kindergarten in Hawaii when I was only three-years-old. My older sister used to “play school” with me when I was a toddler and would have me sit at a desk and read and do other “assignments” while she taught me. I’ve always been lucky when it comes to natural intelligence, which comes from genetics and early childhood experiences such as school with my sister. What else could explain how early I could read and write, or how well I did in school while in foster care despite the overwhelming odds? I spent the last twelve years of my childhood in foster care and moved a total of twenty times.

However, it takes more than intelligence to accomplish your goals. It also takes belief in yourself and persistence. I have been confident and motivated ever since I was a little boy. I do not remember a time that I did *not* believe I could accomplish anything. For instance, when I was six-years-old, I literally ran a 26-mile marathon in Hawaii with my father and two siblings (see figure 6.5) before I moved to Utah and into foster care. No one thought I could do it, but I never had any doubt. I was the youngest person ever to finish that race.



Figure 6.5 Robert at six years old
(Mooney, 2020, p. 12)

I have five children of my own today, and I am proud to be the breaker of generational cycles of abuse and neglect for my family. I am also a motivational speaker, author, and I used to be a lawyer. I earned a bachelor's degree from BYU, a JD from Northwestern Law School, and a business certificate from LLM in Madrid. I am a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon), and I am half White and half-Native American, though I do not have strong connection with my Native American roots.

In 2020, I published my first book, *A Foster Kid's Road to Success* (see figure 6.6), which is a guide for children in foster care. [It] provides pathways to success and inspiration, using stories from my life, providing real, practical resources for teens in care. It is my hope that kids in care will read my book and believe in outcomes for

themselves that are greater than society projects, because the reality is that anything is possible. If I did it, they can too! I am also currently finishing a fictional novel.

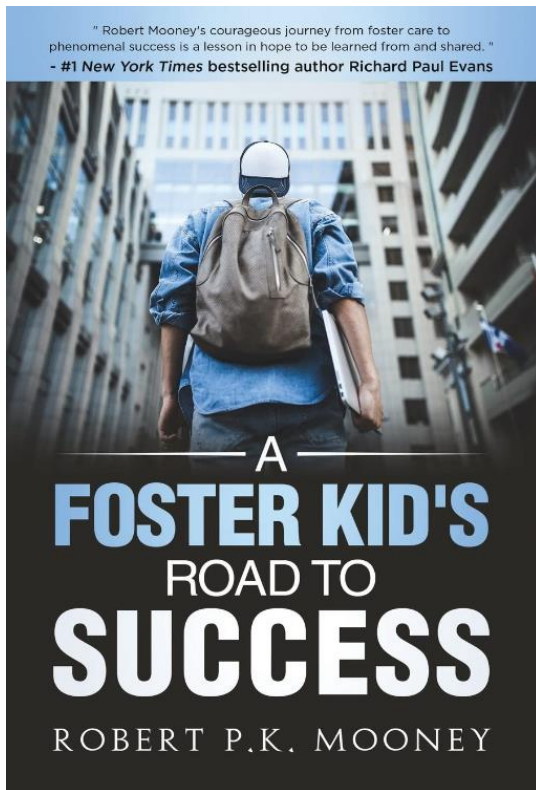


Figure 6.6 Front cover of Robert's book
(WildEagle, 2020, Front Cover)

All people are flawed—some more than others. For instance, my father did some good things, like supporting me to finish the marathon, but overall, I remember him as unstable, selfish, neglectful as a parent, and abusive to my mother and us. He was also an addict, and many of my siblings would become addicts too. Just a few short months after we finished the marathon, someone called social services to report violence in our home, and the police took me and my siblings to a battered women's shelter, where my mother joined us. While there, social workers discovered that she was severely ill—mentally as well as physically—and placed me and my siblings in foster care, and she died soon after due to sickness.

I don't remember much about my early childhood. I did not go to preschool, since I started kindergarten at three-years-old. I do not remember liking specific books, nor do I have many memories about teachers or school before second or third grade. I recall that I loved reading and writing but can't remember what. It is interesting that I can't remember anything about school in early childhood since otherwise my memory about that time is clear. Perhaps I can't remember much about early school because it was always so easy for me that I was bored, and I was more focused on our difficult home life, or other things that interested me more. I would describe myself as high-energy and easily distracted as a little boy. I wanted to be a firefighter or a fighter pilot when I grew up because I have good eyesight and reflexes. Later I would also consider the military for these same reasons.

In second grade, I was transferred to Utah foster care. It was a complex situation, but because of various historical events there are many Mormons in both Utah and Hawaii, so I had family in both places. Most of my biological family was in Utah. However, I would not live with them except for with my father for a short period when I was in fourth grade. He forced me to repeat fourth grade because I was so young. In my opinion, being placed with my father was a big mistake because he was the principal abuser. How could they let my siblings and I return to the man who was physically and emotionally abusive without being sure that he no longer was?

From second to sixth grade, I moved homes seven times and went to five schools. One of these schools was a middle school that started in fourth grade. So I went from elementary school to middle school, then back to elementary school, then back to middle school. Academics continued to be easy for me, and I remained bored. However, I started

to have some behavioral issues, had a hard time paying attention, and was generally disruptive. In fourth grade, I got into sports including baseball, basketball, and football. In fifth grade, I also started wrestling. I found that I had natural athletic propensities and would continue playing sports for the rest of my time in school.

In fourth grade, we returned to my biological father, who continued to abuse and neglect us. My behavioral problems increased in school. After he made me repeat fourth grade, I went back into foster care after two months of my second time in fourth grade. It was a waste of my time and talent.

My new foster mother was a wonderful person, and I have kept in touch with her. She was an elementary school teacher at a different school, so she knew a lot about my age group and genuinely cared about me. She would drop me off at school early if I got my schoolwork done, and I spent those mornings with Mr. Ore, who was my most important teacher during this time. He was the computer lab teacher and would let me hang out in his classroom before school started or during free times. I got to know him well and admired and respected him. This was back when they came out with the very first Apple Macintosh computers. I played a lot of *Oregon Trail* and *Number Munchers*. If I was in the lab and other classes came in, he would let me keep my spot and continue. He made me feel special. Those are some of my favorite memories from school. He passed away a few years ago but I will never forget his kindness. He was a really good dude.

I continued to be an excellent and consistent reader in my later elementary years, even though my performance suffered some due to behavior, and the Hardy Boys and Encyclopedia Brown were my favorite series. I liked any story about adventure, mystery,

and fantasy. By this time, I was using reading to escape my life in with my father or in foster care. I got lost in my books and would be transported to the settings in the stories. I had three primary coping mechanisms while I was in foster care: sports, reading, and music. With reading, I was able to go into my mind, into fantasy, and escape. That was a big deal for me.

I went to two middle schools and lived in my longest placement during this time, but I continued to find school easy and had regular access to sports. As a tween, I would describe myself as active, physically gifted, and talented athletically. In fact, I was an all-star baseball player. I liked all subjects, and I got the General Scholar Award in fifth grade, and in sixth grade I got the Math Scholar Award and entered the gifted and talented program. My favorite books were the Dragonland series. Many teachers who had a big impact on me during this time, include[ed] Mr. Hart, my math teacher, and Ms. Ostler in history. Mrs. Goodwin, in health, was my favorite. She was always positive, and her lessons were engaging and memorable. For instance, once she started to describe a complex assignment and the list of requirements kept growing and growing, and then she asked us what we felt, which was stressed. The assignment was not real, but a way to begin a lesson on the impact of stress on the body. I had so many good teachers who really cared about what they were doing, and a good mix of men and women. I think having access to male teachers was really, really helpful.

In seventh grade ELA, I also had my worst teacher ever, which in hindsight is especially disappointing because English was my favorite subject. She seemed to have something against the boys in her class, maybe because she had recently gone through a divorce. I did not respond well to her unfair treatment and harsh rules. She required us to

write about our feelings in our journals, and she promised not to read any of the pages that we dog-eared. However, she did not keep her word and she read mine anyhow and discovered that I had written some brutal things about her. When she returned our journals she said, in front of the whole class, “Robert, I did not appreciate what you wrote about me in your journal.” I responded that she had promised not to read any of the folded pages, and she replied that I had folded too many, and that she had to read them to make sure I had completed the assignment. Therefore, I said, “Well, you wanted us to be honest, and I honestly think you’re a bitch!” Years later, I heard from others that she began the first day of school with her horror stories about me, the worst student she had ever had. I am a little proud of this, honestly, because I think it is an example of my fire and independence as a child.

It should also be noted that in middle school I became hypersexual, spending a lot of my time thinking about girls and sex. I would even go so far as to say my sexual thinking was dominant and pervasive. In my book, I discuss the dangers of addiction to pornography, which is more likely for people with a history of sexual trauma.

At the beginning of high school, in ninth grade, I was briefly returned to my biological father, whom I had had no contact with for years. We lived in a borrowed trailer in the middle of nowhere Utah (see figure 6.7), and we didn’t have food or anything else kids need to live.



Figure 6.7 Borrowed trailer (Mooney, 2020, p. 27)

It wasn't a good situation. Again, I believe this was a mistake of social services considering my father's history. He had not changed. He was still a violent substance abuser. In fact, once, he tried to taunt me into physically fighting him, man to man, after I told him that I did not think it was a good idea to try to get my siblings back because of our deplorable living conditions. He tried to get into a fistfight with me. I would say this was a turning point in my life. I realized that I didn't have to do what my body and emotions were telling me to do. I could make independent, healthy, rational choices that were good for me. I realized that I deserved and wanted a good life. I didn't have to do what my dad was telling me to. Instead, I turned around and walked away. I walked away from him and his abuse and his bad choices. I walked away from substance abuse, which more than one of my siblings ultimately died from (see figure 6.8). I walked away from

the behavior he modeled and tried to engage me in, and toward a different life I could not imagine or articulate, but had faith existed.

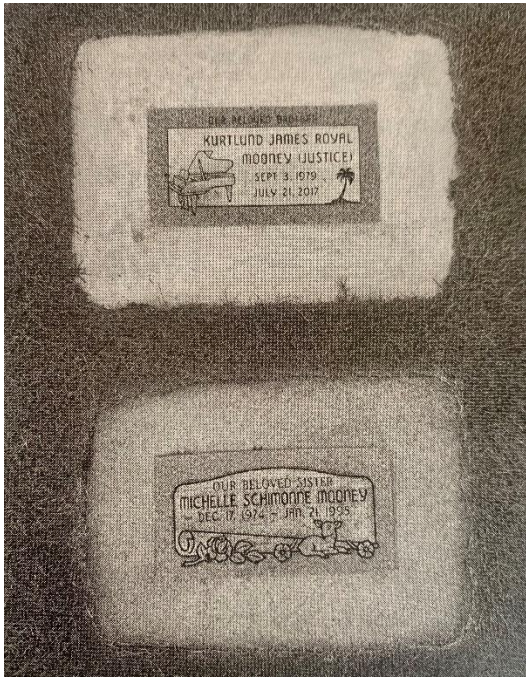


Figure 6.8 Graves of Robert's siblings
(Mooney, 2020, p. 51)

I went to four high schools and moved to a number of times, and while I did not necessarily feel like an “insider” at school, probably due to the constant moving and always being the new kid, I was very successful academically and athletically and continued to excel in all areas. I joined the debate team and my partner and I regularly destroyed everybody in local competitions. We were really good. We even went to the Stanford Invitational, a huge honor for high school-level debate students, and my partner and I won! One of my foster parents told me that I would set the world on fire.

I also participated in the arts, including drama, joining an a capella singing group, and band, taking up playing the drums. I started drawing, mostly with colored pencils. I was always very creative and artistic.

I also continued to play basketball, baseball, and football (year-round sports) and I continued to read and write. I became the editor of my high school newspaper and went on to major in journalism in college. I liked reading the Bourne Series, *Lord of the Rings*, and Mary Higgins Clark's books.

I had a lot of important and influential teachers and coaches in high school with my history teacher, Mr. Hill, being most important. He was a total stud. He was the first person to pique my interest in economics and business. My AP Bio teacher was also fantastic, and the best thing about his class was that he did not assign any grades. It was a grade-free class. The only goal was to learn as much as possible to get a high score on the AP exam. That had a big impact on me because I thought it was special to learn for the sake of learning, rather than to earn a number. I also got along with my drama teacher in tenth grade, Nathan. Really, I was lucky to have so many fantastic teachers. Because my father held me back in fourth grade, I was now only one year younger than my peers, and I graduated on time, with excellent grades, having taken AP classes, participated in sports and the arts, and made good relationships with most of my teachers. I was ready for college, and I stayed local and attended school at Brigham Young University for journalism.

The number one factor that made life bearable for me while experiencing foster care was all of my wonderful teachers. Another was access to all the extra-curricular activities I was able to participate in. To help kids in foster care, I think we should give them access to a wide variety of extra-curricular activities across homes and schools, such as sports and the arts. I also think they should have long-term, stable relationships with adults, like a mentor or big brother kind of thing. Someone who is a great role

model, who has no ulterior motive, and who is not too overwhelmed to be present and available. Also, it would be really helpful to have adults help kids in care transition to higher education. Just knowing that there was a grown-up out there to support and care about you would have been helpful to me.

Conclusion

Robert's story was a powerful and unique counter-story that contributed to trends across participants. In early childhood, Robert experienced many moves and a lot of chaos, but he always enjoyed school and was successful in it. Like Chris (above), he did not attend preschool. He was prepared for reading and school from an early age, however, by his big sister who played school with him and taught him to read and write in Hawaii, before his mother passed away. He was also athletic and played multiple sports across levels. He had good relationships with many teachers and coaches, particularly in high school, and attributed much of his success as an adult to these role models.

He moved from Hawaii to Utah when he was seven years old. While Utah was a very different culture than Hawaii, his Mormon family in both places, made the transition work. He bounced between foster homes, schools, and living with his biological father. His love of reading, writing, and art allowed him to escape his difficult home life. ELA was always his best and favorite subject until high school, when his interests started to branch out.

Similar to other successful former foster care youth, teachers had a big impact on Robert throughout his K-12 years, and he reported that his relationships with teachers, especially male teachers, were the primary reason for his success.

Robert, like the other participants, was athletic and played sports year-round when he could, including baseball, basketball, and football. In high school, he became interested in music and joined an a capella group and played the drums. He also had the opportunity and motivation to participate in journalism, art, acting, and debate, even winning a prestigious award at the Stanford Debate Invitational.

Like Chris, Robert never lived in group care. He recalled good experiences with his foster mother, who was also a teacher, and has maintained a relationship with her as an adult. It was his relationship with his abusive biological father that would trigger a turning point in Robert's life. In high school, when he temporarily moved back with his dad, Robert had an epiphany when his dad attempted to engage him in a physical fight. Robert realized that he did not have to do what his feelings told him to do, or what his body wanted him to do. He could choose other behaviors and control his responses in ways that benefitted him and his future. This insight changed his life and Robert started to, and continues to, make healthy decisions regarding self-control, a quality his biological father never modeled.

The state of Utah did not offer foster children financial assistance to attend institutions of higher education, so Robert had to take on student debt. Like Chris, he thinks that children should not automatically be returned to biological parents. Instead, he believes that children in care should have long-term relationships with at least one healthy adult, and that they should have the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities. He also wishes children aging out of care had an adult to support them as they transition to adulthood and hopefully higher education.

Choosing Agency as a Turning Point

Chapter 6 has presented the narratives of two participants who experienced a turning point in their lives when they were violently confronted by a biological parent, which resulted in a life-changing epiphany. Neither of these two participants ever lived in group care. However, because of who they were in themselves—in addition to insights or epiphanies they had as high schoolers—they realized that they had the power to make controlled decisions and enact agency over their lives.

After a childhood rife with abuse and instability while living with her mother, and then briefly her father, Chris walked out of the front door of her grandmother's house with no belongings and no plan other than to start a new life—free from her mother and the future being imposed upon her. With nothing but the clothing she wore, Chris left the house and ran from her mother. This was when Chris realized that she was not going to acquiesce to her negative life circumstances. She would not live another moment with this destructive “care” because it was worse than any other imaginable option. Without a plan for what the future might hold, she walked away from her mother and turned herself into foster care—an incredible act of bravery.

Like Chris, Robert's experience of life with a biological parent was also destructive. Robert's father got temporary custody of Robert, who adamantly believed that his dad should not have custody for him or his siblings. Robert recalled the squalor and addiction of his father's life and knew that his father's living conditions and instability were not acceptable for children. When Robert expressed these views, his father tried to engage him in a fistfight. Robert had a temper, so he initially considered engaging physically with his father. However, he had an epiphany in which he realized he

could take another path where he could control his emotions and make rational choices. And in that instant, he did so. Instead of fighting his father, he walked away from him and that cycle of abuse, addiction, and instability. He also did not know what the future held, but he knew it would be different from what his father offered and modeled.

Although neither Chris nor Robert lived in group care, they were placed in religious foster homes; that kind of placement was a match for Robert but not for Chris. As teenagers, both Chris and Robert asserted their agency when a biological parent tried to violently engage with them. In contrast to Robert, Chris did what her body told her to do—which was to walk away from the situation, while for the first time Robert did *not* do what his body told him to do—he resisted fighting and walked away. The result for both was similar outcomes that led them to pursue degrees at institutions of higher education and to go on to lead exceptional, adult lives.

It should also be noted that both Chris and Robert are bi-racial, with Chris being half Cherokee, and Robert being half-Seminole. However, no effort was ever made to keep them connected to their Native American culture when they went into foster care. Even before foster care, they were disconnected from their Native American roots. As a result, both are adamant that they do not appear to be claiming Native American culture, which they feel could be conceived as cultural appropriation due to their disconnection.

Chapter 7: Discussion

The following chapter provides an analysis of the data collected from the screening survey, participant interviews, and the follow-up member-checking conversations conducted after the initial grand narratives were written and distributed to participants for feedback. To analyze the data, I looked for unique aspects within, and trends across, the stories participants shared with me to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent and in what ways do former foster youth college graduates believe K-12 schooling served as a protective factor in their childhood experience and academic trajectories? Are there any common themes or experiences?
2. What other factors do former foster youth college graduates attribute to having a positive impact on their academic trajectories? Are there any shared themes or experiences?
3. How do the experiences of former foster youth college graduates impact their beliefs about how to improve the lives of children in care? What do they believe would improve the experiences of children currently in care?

To explore participants' data to identify and interpret trends, I used the theoretical frame works of narrative identity, critical race theory, and counter-storying. I organized the following chapter according to three major trends and their sub-trends, which give comprehensive insight to all three research questions. Trend 1 revealed that K-12

experiences had a major impact on the academic and life trajectories of participants. The most notable and consistent sub-trends included relationships with teachers and coaches, opportunities for reading and writing, and access to extracurricular activities, particularly sports and the arts. Trend 2 highlighted a turning point that all participants experienced in high school, when their lives changed direction and they began to focus on their grades and their individual futures. These turning points were propelled either by moving into high-quality group homes or because of an epiphany during a conflict. The last, Trend 3, involved participants' recommendations (which I grouped into sub-trends) for how to improve foster care based on their own experiences and beliefs. These sub-trends included making various resources and support available to foster care youth: extracurricular activity funding; access to long-term and consistent therapy; funding for higher education as foster care youth transition to adulthood; and long-term support from adults, as in relationships with adults, school guidance counselors, and other mentors.

Trend 1: K-12 Experiences

Because this study focused on the impact of K-12 experiences on former foster youth who graduated from college, it is no surprise that the most predominant finding was the impact of K-12 experiences on their academic trajectories. Across interviews, participants revealed the positive impact of personal relationships of many of their K-12 experiences on their academic and personal trajectories.

Trend 1a: Teachers and Coaches

The most common and overarching trend across participants and within individual narratives was the positive impact of teachers and coaches on the lives of participants. K-12 educators starred in participants' stories across levels. From a narrative identity

perspective, in their own double roles as narrator and protagonist (Wortham 2001), participants told more stories about teachers and coaches than about anyone else; furthermore, these characters were often the heroes of their stories. Participants described close relationships with educators, eating lunch in teachers' classrooms, getting rides to sports practice, and the conversations this space propelled. Sfard and Prusack (2005) would contend that in these conversations, teacher and coach discourse produced a new and/or extended reality for their students. According to participants, the way these educators talked to them, and their encouragement and high expectations, changed how they saw themselves and the possibilities for their futures.

Solorzano and Yosso (2001) asserted that counter-stories “challenge the perceived wisdom” of dominant groups and “destroy harmful and incorrect assumptions” (p. 475) about marginalized people. In many ways, the shifts in identity that resulted from participant relationships with teachers and coaches, provided participants with foundations for imagining and enacting counter-stories contrary to the dominant narrative. Teacher and coach discourse “shattered [participant] complacency and challenged the status quo” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2414) about outcomes for children in foster care, opening “new windows” and “showing the possibilities beyond the ones” (p. 2414) participants were living and could imagine.

In their narratives, participants not only reported positive relationships with educators; they also cited these relationships as protective factors during their school experiences that also contributed to their matriculation into higher education. All five participants reported significant relationships with teachers and administrators, with four out of five living with an educator during their foster care experience, and three out of

five living with their own teacher, coach, or administrator at some point. Teachers played a big part in the successful trajectories of participants. In Joshaline's case, one of her teachers was also the person who reported neglect to social services.

Educators protected and/or inspired participants across levels as demonstrated by the narratives of all five participants told. Daniel, Robert, and Joshaline told stories about elementary school that highlighted the kindness of their classroom teachers and how these educators protected them. Daniel's favorite memory in elementary school was of a classroom teacher (that was not his) shaving his head in solidarity with Daniel. Educators continued to impact participants in middle school, with all five reporting significant and strong relationships with teachers and coaches. All three boys (Daniel, Robert, and Justin) had the opportunity to play sports in middle school (and beyond) and formed bonds with their respective coaches. The female participants also were involved in athletic activities. Joshaline, who was Black, participated in cheerleading in middle school, but she was on an all-White team with all-White coaches, who made her feel excluded and with whom she did not bond. Chris, when she could, participated in the limited number of sports offered to girls at the time, but she could recall bonding with any of her coaches.

Across their schooling narratives, all five participants remembered that during middle school they formed bonds with their educators, particularly with ELA and arts teachers. Joshaline often recalled through multiple interviews how many classroom teachers gave her food when she was hungry. Participants also reported spending extra time outside of class with their middle school teachers. Robert, for example, would hang out in the computer lab with his teacher, and Joshaline confided in her science teacher at

one of her alternative schools, feeling safe enough to share details about her personal life and seek comfort and advice. These educators not only provided participants with emotional support; they also supplemented their basic needs by giving them food or a safe place to sit.

Teachers became more important than ever once participants entered high school. Dillon reports that he ate lunch in his media teacher's classroom, and that this teacher inspired him to go to college to earn a degree in journalism. Robert had many influential teachers in high school; he held his economics teacher in special regard, describing him as a "total stud." Joshaline lived with her high school principal at one point, and remembered an incredible Christmas when the principal gave her a pair of shoes she had wanted. Daniel had multiple coaches and teachers with whom he bonded; he would even go on to live with his basketball coach and later name his non-profit organization after him. Chris also lived with educators; once she entered foster care in high school and gained some stability, she was nurtured intellectually and artistically by her arts teachers.

Interestingly, all five participants reported, particularly when they were in high school, that the most important educators in their lives were male teachers and/or coaches. All participants, whether male or female, were drawn to their male teachers, particularly those of the same race. They were also drawn to female teachers of the same race. All three boys cited the importance in elementary school of a single male teacher. In Daniel's case, this most important male teacher in elementary school was not even his own classroom teacher, though he wished he was in his class. This finding helps build the case that male teachers are particularly important to children in foster care. It could also point to the ways in which male teachers are able to show up professionally when

compared to their female counterparts. Last, it is possible that because male teachers in K-12 schooling are rarer, they were noticed and remembered more.

Relationships with K-12 teachers and coaches impacted the identity narrative of participants because “identity is recognized by others” (Luke and Moje, 2009, p. 419), and they are “not only represented but also constructed in and through stories people tell about themselves and their experiences” (Luke and Moje, 2009, p. 427). This means that a “person is called into an identity by the recognitions or assignments of others” (Luke and Moje, 2009, p. 419), including and especially educators. Participants reported that their teachers and coaches encouraged them to focus on their grades, go to college, and noted that they had close, individual relationships with teachers and coaches across levels. These educators contributed to the developing identity narratives of the study’s participants by projecting beliefs about the participants’ abilities and potential futures that contrasted the dominant narrative.

These identity narratives contradict the dominant narrative in several ways. The dominant narrative claims that educators are dispensable; it questions the motivations and decisions of educators; and it ridicules and vilifies teachers in culture and politics (Miltimore, 2023; Natanson, 2020). Clearly, teachers made an incredible difference in the lives of these vulnerable children who went on to earn degrees in the institution on higher education. To these children, their teachers, coaches, and administrators were everything. They gave them food, provided them with emotional shelter, encouraged them to engage in academics and sports, and inspired them to succeed. Robert and Daniel even offered that their teachers and coaches were the biggest contributing factor propelling their success. Educators helped participants imagine other possibilities and

futures for themselves other than those offered by social services and the dominant narrative about young adults who age out of care. They encouraged them to talk back to power and stand up for themselves. These teachers also helped thwart the oppression of low expectations by offering the participants resources from within their K-12 settings (such as knowledge, pathways to higher education, time, and supplies) and even from their personal lives (food, money, transportation, and housing).

Trend 1b: The Role of Literacy

All participants shared counter-stories (Solorzano and Yosso, 2002) regarding their childhood engagement with literacy and as adults. All participants reported that ELA was their favorite subject across levels, and that creative writing was also important, with many reporting that they kept journals, made comic books and little booklets, or wrote poetry in their free time. Friere and Macedo (1987) have said that “the act of reading and writing” is “basically inseparable” (p. 33). All participants remembered “making writing” and demonstrating other emerging literacy behaviors before they learned to write in school, with Joshaline, Chris, and Robert saying they learned how to read and/or write before formal schooling. Joshaline taught herself to read and write; Chris learned how to read from her stepfather; and Robert learned from “playing school” with his sister when he was three-years-old. Additionally, all participants are published autobiographical authors.

Reading Is Love

It is widely accepted that reading is a valuable skill, but it is also inside access to other cultures, futures, and ways of being. Friere and Macedo (1987) asserted that the act of decoding is separate from the act of reading the world and the word. By this they mean

that “reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world” (p. 29). Beginning in early childhood, all participants reported loving to read (or being read to), and all except for Daniel recalled specific adults or siblings who spent time reading to them. (Daniel may have been read to but cannot recall).

Reading to a child is an intimate act of love because spending time reading to a child involves spending time with and paying attention to a child. It communicates to a child that they are valued, and to these participants, it also signaled a time, however brief, they could feel safe. Reading also typically includes dialogue between the adult and child concerning the meaning of the content in books and its relationship to life. Dillon remembered his father reading the Bible to him and his siblings in early childhood, which was one of the only times he ever felt safe with his dad. Joshaline remembered her grandma reading the Bible to her, even though they lived in a trap house. And Robert recalled his big sister reading to him and playing school with him; these events became a time of deep bonding between the siblings. Chris recalled her stepfather bringing books home and reading to her during early childhood, before her life was rocked with chaos and instability. Her stepfather—whom she mistakenly assumed was her biological father— was an adult she also felt safe with.

In the telling of their stories, participants also recalled times when they read in school, including books they read as a class, and books and series they loved and read in their free time. All five participants have high literacy levels, which is unusual according to national, deidentified data about adults with a foster care background (The Federal Register, 2023b). Robert remembered living in a foster home w in high school where the

foster dad read the book *Jurassic Park* to all of the kids in the home, across ages, every night. This had a profound impact on him and was one of his best and “coolest” memories about being in foster care. What these reading memories show is that no matter the age, reading to children—including kids in foster care—is an opportunity to communicate love and value.

Participants, however, did not always have access to books, and when they did not, their engagement with reading declined. Multiple participants noted that they had the most access to books and reading in elementary school, when entire classrooms visited the school library regularly and children were allowed to check out and return books. At the secondary level, some participants’ reading engagement declined or was dependent on the availability of books in their foster or group homes, because they no longer visited the library during the school day; and because they often depended on school transportation to be taken to and from their homes, they were not able to visit the library during after-school hours.

All participants also reported using reading as an “escape method” during turbulent times. For instance, Robert said that reading “transported” him, and Chris said she “got lost” in her books. Daniel also reported that he read to “get away from” tough conditions at home. The participants’ interests in genres ranged widely, from fantasy to non-fiction, but they all pointed out that at some point they read and were impacted by a story about a child in foster care or suffering from other similar forms of instability.

Critical race theory has asserted that stories serve many powerful purposes. Delgado (1989) argued that “stories, parables, and narratives [are] powerful means for destroying mindset” (p. 2413), which include inaccurate or unhealthy assumptions and

beliefs about ourselves as well as other groups. Participants reported that they learned more about the world, and gained more social capital, from reading than they ever did from adults in their lives. Access to stories about other people doing different things in different places not only transported the participants out of the difficulties of their lives, but also widened their perspectives and increased their understanding of other realities and ways of being, which contributed to their ability to develop counter-stories. That the participants created counter-stories linked to their reading confirms Friere and Macedo's (1987) assertions regarding the interconnectedness between reading and knowledge of the world as a recursive act and process.

Writing the World

While I did not purposely recruit writers and for this study, all five participants reported writing as children and, as adults, are published authors. Additionally, all five have published autobiographical narratives that range from short articles to long, detailed books. Sfard and Prusack's (2005) identity-as-narrative model "equate identities with stories about persons" (p. 14); in addition, McCarthy and Moje (2002) have described narratives as the "gel" (page #) that links experiences together. The result is that as persons, because of this narrative glue, we can interpret our own individual identity. There may be no other group of participants the identity-as-narrative model applies to more, than these five participants, who literally wrote their own autobiographical counter-narratives as adults. Additionally, all five identified their target audience as children in foster care; they also wrote because they wanted to explicitly correct misperceptions in the dominant culture about traumatized children.

Regarding the connection between reading, writing, and understanding the world (and thus, reality), Friere and Macedo (1987) asserted that “reading the world always preceded reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world” (p. 35). Furthermore, they extended the act of writing and revision to the agency of participating in and producing the meaning of the world, stating that “reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of *writing* it or *rewriting* it, that is of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work” (Friere & Macedo, 1987, p. 35). By this, they meant that consuming the word and understanding the world inherently involves producing new, individual meaning through rewriting what is read and understood. Therefore, reading and writing are inextricably connected, as evidenced by the engagement of the participants with reading and writing.

All participants liked writing at the early childhood and elementary levels; they went on to write in high school and through their years in higher education, engaging with creative writing, the school newspaper, other forms of journalism, and more. This engagement with active literacy should be no surprise, given that children in foster care are tasked with constructing their narrative identities starting at a young age, being asked to tell their origin stories every time they change homes and schools. Potentially, this experience with narrative construction could be channeled to give them the opportunity to express themselves via writing or in multi-modal formats. It also builds the case that we should recognize the unique potential literary superpowers of kids in care and provide them with the resources, support, and opportunities to express them in healthy and powerful ways, such as reading and writing.

This consistent connection across participants with reading, writing, ELA, and ELA teachers also supports the proposal that children in care should be given unlimited access to reading and writing resources; in addition, attention should be paid to reading and writing immediately upon a child's entry into foster care and through the remainder of their K-12 schooling experience. Previous research has shown that after children stop learning to read, they start reading to learn. This study has shown the truth of that research: because the participants were so successful with their reading and writing, they were able to succeed in other classes as their education progressed. That the participants of this study were so engaged with reading and writing is itself a counter-story contradicting the dominant narrative of stories and statistics that supposedly *prove* that children in care are behind academically and that their reading and writing levels are especially low.

Trend 1c: Extra-Curricular Activities

Counter-stories (Solorzano and Yosso 2001, 2002) were also evident when participants reported participating in sports and other extracurricular activities, including journalism and the arts. It is intuitive to understand that children in care have a hard time participating in sports and extracurricular activities considering their high mobility, lack of stability, and low academic scores, which tend to narrow the focus of free time to address academic gaps and improve student abilities. Additionally, lack of access to transportation further reduces the ability of foster care youth to participate in extracurricular activities. However, counter to this expectation, all five participants had the opportunity to participate in sports and other extracurricular activities despite various barriers.

Participation in extracurricular activities benefitted participants in multiple ways. First, it contributed to the intersectionality of their identity social status. Specifically, the opportunity to participate in sports and other extracurriculars gave these participants as children in foster care additional identities beyond being a “foster child,” and provided access to social groups, including the football team, yearbook, or marching band. When participants narrated their life histories, they aligned their identity narratives with former and current extracurricular activities. For instance, they described themselves as “athletic,” “expressive,” “artistic,” “creative,” and “physically gifted,” and all identified themselves as being a “writer.” This finding is especially powerful because it contributes to our knowledge and understanding about significant factors that impact identity development for foster youth.

Sports

Research has shown that participation in sports has many social and emotional benefits, including increased self-esteem, improved body-image, and greater school satisfaction and connectedness (Brown and Evans, 2002; Libby, 2004). While research on the impact of sports participation on academic performance is mixed, some studies shows that sports participation has a positive impact on academic performance when compared to peers with lower or no participation in physical activity (Dwyer, 2001; Field et al., 2001; Nelson and Gordon, 2006). To this end, all five participants reported being athletic and playing sports across levels. It is remarkable that participants were able to consistently engage in sports, and they report that sports were very important to them. Daniel stated that being a part of a team was being a part of something bigger than himself; in fact, in many ways the team was like a family of its own. Despite moving

twenty-nine times, Joshaline participated in sports whenever she was able to—including cheerleading when she was the only Black girl on the team, and making varsity sports teams, such as soccer and track, without any formal background or experience in these sports. Similarly, Robert picked up sports whenever he moved and participated in as many as he could, playing baseball, football, basketball, and wrestling at different points during his childhood. He recalled these physical activities as being a good outlet for frustration and a way to make friends and form healthy relationships with adults.

Chris graduated from high school in 1970, which was two years before Title IX—the legislation that required schools to offer sports for girls—became law. Consequently, there were not very many sports activities available to Chris. However, she remembered always playing sports on the playground at the elementary level and participating in tumbling and being a majorette at the secondary level. Dillon also participated in sports across levels, and even considered going to a college where he would be allowed to play football. He cited team sports as an outlet for his energy and anger, and to connect with peers and adults in order to be part of something collaborative.

Arts and Journalism

Like participation in sports, much research has shown the positive impact of participating in the arts on child and adolescent social and emotional outcomes, whereas research on academic performance has mixed findings. For instance, some studies show increased social competence (Rickard et al. 2013) and self-esteem (Coulton et al., 2015; Franklin, 1992; Gold et al., 2004) when children participated in the arts. Jenkins (2009) found that children participating in the arts experienced mental health benefits such as “increased energy level, increased self-esteem, more joy in life, less panic attacks,

increased motivation, a better understanding of their own needs, and an increased level of self-care” (p. 131).

All participants reported engaging in the visual, performing, and/or media arts in addition to creative writing. Participation in these various arts contributed to participants’ intersectional identity narratives (Sfard and Prsuk, 2005) and counter-stories (Slozano and Yosso, 2001, 2002) when they were adolescents, as well as to their opportunities and trajectories as adults. Robert was able to play drums in his high school band, won prestigious awards on the debate team, and participated in drama classes. He also wrote for his high school newspaper. Robert continues to be a writer, has already published one book, is a public speaker, and is working on his second book. Dillon wrote for his school newspaper as well and participated in other media arts; he has also published multiple books and is a public speaker.

Chris was able to participate in many of the arts classes her high school offered, including drama, creative writing, and the visual arts, such as drawing and painting. She continues to be a visual artist and writer in adulthood and publishes her writing and art in magazines, online platforms, and is in the process of publishing her memoir. She also participated in speech and debate in high school and wrote poetry in her personal journal. Daniel was a talented artist in elementary school and was even accepted to a prestigious charter middle school for the arts. However, he entered foster care at the same time he was supposed to attend the middle school for the arts, and he did not have access to drawing resources nor emotional support for the transition into foster care. As a result, he would never draw again. However, he did participate in high school debate and became involved in college journalism. Joshaline stayed busy taking high-level classes and was

focused on perfecting her required assignments, while also participating in theater and the robotics club. Joshaline also published one book about her experiences in care and is in the process of writing another.

Trend 2: Turning Points

According to the data from participants' interviews, counter-stories have turning points similar to those in dominant stories. For instance, participants reported that their lives had one trajectory up until a certain point in high school, when a move to a new home or a critical incident occurred that changed the direction of their trajectories. I refer to these turns as turning points, which participants have described as one of two kinds: entrance into a high-quality group home or a critical encounter with an adult resulting in an epiphany.

All participants reported that they had experienced getting in trouble for behavior at school and/or interacting with the juvenile justice system at some point during childhood. Joshaline and Dillon both got in trouble for fighting and violence in and out of school, and Chris, Joshaline, and Robert got in trouble for defiant behavior. All five participants also got in trouble for missing or skipping school as well. However, they each experienced a turning point in childhood that resulted in them changing their behavior and focusing on their futures. Daniel, Joshaline, and Dillon were placed in group homes in high school and this experience led them to focus on school, their grades, and college. Chris and Robert were never placed in group homes, but they did have a confrontation with a biological parent in high school, which led to an epiphany and altered their trajectories. These turning points are important aspects of the counter-stories (Solorzano and Yosso, 2001) of the participants, because these stories confirm that high

school is not too late for children to alter their behavior and that they can also serve as possibilities for propelling turning points for other kids in care.

Trend 2a: The Impact of Group Homes

Group care differs from traditional foster home care in that rather than placing children with a family in the hope of integrating them into it, the children live in a house or facility with staff. While group care is controversial in the United States, it is typical in some other countries. This controversy stems from some of the historically problematic implementations of group care in various parts of the world. For instance, in *Voices from Silent Cradles: Life Histories of Romania's Looked-After Children*, Neagu (2021) reported that the execution of the Romanian dictator and his wife was soon followed by “black and white images of malnourished children in institutions” (p. 9) operated by the Communist government.

Research went on to follow these Romanian children, who typically were not nurtured as infants or attended to as children; they were found to have lower mental health and performance outcomes than their peers. Chugani et al. (2001) provided further evidence of the “cognitive and behavioral deficits” (p. 1290) of children from Romanian orphanages, and these findings were possibly what propelled American, and even global hysteria regarding the impact of group care on child health and performance. Nonetheless, it is important to note that there is a vast difference between group care in the United States and the mass institutions which housed “orphans” through the 1990’s in Romania.

Fathalla and Sullivan (2021) authored a study for the organization *This Is Us*, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, in which dozens of former foster youth who

had lived in group care reported having had negative experiences. Even though “when initially asked their opinions about eliminating institutions, some participants—but not most—wanted an unequivocal end to institutions and believed them to be beyond repair” . . . “the majority of others initially did not” (p. 107) until researchers proceeded to teach them about the fallibility and harm group homes may cause.

Abuse scandals, risks of developmental delays, and other adverse outcomes provided fodder for “global deinstitutionalization efforts, aimed at reducing the use of residential care while spurring on the development of family-based care options” (James et al., 2022, para. 7). These efforts have been largely successful but have also “produced unintended effects. They have inadvertently raised the clinical severity of youth placed in residential care,” “increased the risk of relocation away from the communities of the youth,” and lowered “standards for family foster care” to “overcome gaps in available placements,” which occurred “because of residential care program closures” (James et al., 2022, para. 8).

Perhaps there is a need to reimagine parameters for small, high-quality group homes with attention being paid to all aspects and phases of child development. James et al. (2022) conducted a study of residential care across five countries (Finland, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Spain) and found vast evidence that “provides a more nuanced understanding of how residential care continues to be viewed and utilized in some countries, challenging the ‘residential-care-as-a-last-resort-only’ rhetoric that is currently dominating the discourse on residential care” (para. 3). Across countries, these researchers found many benefits for children living in residential care facilities, including the existence of resources, wrap-around services, and accountability.

The experiences of Daniel, Joshaline, and Dillon do not reflect the experiences of all children in group homes. Historically, group homes, previously termed “orphanages,” were large-scale facilities which housed children of all ages, including infants, and were often offered as a cost-saving measure when compared to the cost of in-home foster care. The group homes that these three participants lived in were not this kind of facility, but instead were small, well-funded, modern facilities, and had qualified and consistent staff. Their group homes would not reduce the cost of foster care, but instead would likely cost more. Group homes should not be thought of as a way to save money, because high-quality group care is expensive.

Dillon lived in a regular house where eight boys shared one of four bedrooms; he attended public school and had staff members who were married couples and whose job it was to nurture the children and transport them to activities and school events. Dillon liked this placement more than any other and attributes his academic success and matriculation into higher education to the resources and support provided by this group home.

Daniel lived in multiple homes and found that living with younger boys inspired him to be a good role model and “big brother” to these vulnerable children. His first group home was a modern facility that provided emotional support, transportation to extracurricular activities, and other wrap-around services. He recommended this type of group home for children in foster care. However, he reported that his second group home was run down and was operated by staff who were not qualified and who potentially harmed the other residents academically, who did not attend public school. His experience reflects the importance of facility quality.

Joshaline also lived in a smaller home that was organized in “cottage style” with a rotating staff. “Cottage style” means that small groups of children lived in little houses with rotating staff on a campus that provided wrap-around services, such as therapy, sports, and tutoring. Staff members were consistent, in that the children would see the same person from 3 p.m. to 11 p.m., and then a different person would staff the overnight shift from 11 p.m. to 8 a.m., when the children would then go off to school. There was always a reliable adult in the house who was awake and available to the children.

Research has shown that high-quality group care has many advantages (James et al., 2022). First, there is adult accountability. There are processes for children to submit complaints if they believe they have been mistreated by an adult—this process reduces the likelihood of mistreatment. In a foster care setting, children depend completely on communicating with their case workers, who may or may not address complaints and mistreatment. Also, group care staff are trained and paid to attend to the needs of the children in their care. It is their job to do so. In a foster care setting, foster parents often work or are not required or able to provide anything more than food and shelter to the children in their care. In many cases, foster parents go above and beyond for children in their care, but with little accountability, the treatment of foster children in family settings is inconsistent. Considering how difficult it is to hold foster parents accountable and to enforce regulations in foster homes—specifically considering how overwhelming the need for foster homes currently is due to the closure of group homes across the nation and world—we should imagine different possibilities for group care based on the experiences of, and recommendations from, a wide range of participants with lived positive experiences of group care as opposed to experiences of negative care in family settings.

This is not to say that group care is superior to in-home foster care. An alternative to high-quality group care would be to increase support to foster parents, including providing children with transportation to and from extracurricular activities, other wrap-around services, and additional funding.

In high-quality group care, there are often more resources for children (James et al., 2022) than there are in family care. For instance, children or youth in group care usually have a schedule with group activities and outings, along with adults with vehicles to transport the children to and from extracurricular activities. Additionally, learning life skills is often a part of the group home care services, and because the children are all in one place, it is easier to provide all of them with mental and physical health services, and other opportunities. Foster parents often do not have the ability, access to, or time and resources to transport children to and from extracurricular activities, which according to participants in this study, can greatly and positively impact life outcomes. This builds the case that foster parents need additional funding and support.

When Daniel, Joshaline, and Dillon were placed in high-quality group homes, they were given the space and resources to focus on themselves and their futures. Group care is about the children, not about family integration. Therefore, all three participants were given opportunities to focus on possibilities and their futures. They were provided with resources to participate in extracurricular activities and time to focus on their grades and individual goals.

Epiphanies Leading to Agency

The remaining two participants exerted radical change in their own lives when they were children by enacting agency in a moment of epiphany when they realized that

their “reality [was] based on power and identity struggles” (Cresswell and Poth, 2018, p. 30) imposed upon them by their biological parent. Each parent was attempting to control the behavior of their child by attempting to force them to recreate the parent’s own beliefs and behavior. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) noted that a major difference between CRT and other frameworks is that “unlike some academic disciplines, critical race theory contains an activist dimension. It not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it” and “transform it for the better” (p. 3). Chris and Robert had no idea what the reality of a different future held for them because they had only ever been exposed to their individual experiences. However, they knew they did not want to repeat the behavior of their parents. Therefore, each of them transformed their lives for the better in a swift and unilateral act of agency.

Both Chris and Robert reported a critical incident with a violent biological parent in high school. In less than a week’s time, Chris was kicked out of her father’s house, then dropped at her grandmother’s house and chased by her biological mother. She next stayed with a friend for a few days, then with a former teacher’s girlfriend, and finally ended up in a foster home. These changes constituted a significant number of transitions and trauma in a short period. After she was dropped at her grandmother’s house, her abusive mother came after her, and it was in this moment that Chris had an epiphany.

She realized that she did not have to acquiesce to this adult, or really any other. She realized that she could choose not to go with her mother and submit to an on-going life of abuse, addiction, and mental health problems. She decided she could not and would not endure it. Therefore, without any idea of what she would do or what the future held, she ran away from this woman who was screaming insults and obscenities at her.

She ran away and turned herself in to social services to be cared for by the state. She had no possessions, and she realized that no adult was going to save her. She had to save herself.

Similarly, Robert was reunited with his biological father in high school, a confounding decision made by social services, who already knew about his father's addiction problems, violent tendencies, and his impossibility of passing a home study. Regardless, Robert was placed with his father who taunted him and tried to engage him in a physical fight. Though he was enraged, at that moment, Robert experienced an epiphany. He realized that he did not want to do what his father did. He did not want to be like his father. He realized that he could make different choices, and that he did not have to do what his feelings or his body were telling him to do. Therefore, he did not. In a moment of startling agency, he figuratively and literally walked away from this abusive and violent man and changed the course of his own life, so that he would focus on his future from that moment forward.

It is interesting that Chris described walking and running away from her mother and the future she would have had, as finally doing what her body wanted her to do, while Robert described it is finally *not* doing what his body wanted him to do. For Chris, her choice was an act of release, and for Robert, it was an act of constraint. Perhaps this sort of shift, from release to constraint, or constraint to release, is part of the new agency each of them activated in their decision to be different.

Walking away from their parents took an incredible amount of courage for these children, especially since at that point they could not foresee a path for their future. For them, everything from that moment on was unknown. They had no idea what would

happen to them, but they had to trust that there was something better than the life and behavior modeled by their biological parents. This epiphany led to their asserting new agency over their lives and futures.

Trend 3: Recommendations From Children in Care

The participants in this study provided feedback about what they believe children in care need based on their own experiences. Notably, all three participants who were placed in group homes reported that they received most of these resources and support they needed while in their high-quality group homes.

All participant recommendations were either based on their personal experiences before or during foster care, or from their professional experiences as social workers (such as Joshaline, and Daniel in the past) and/or mentors (such as Robert, and Daniel now) to young adults aging out of care. These thoughts include what could be considered advice—as opposed to recommendations—as well as considerations about resources and support that would increase outcomes for children in foster care, which they were or were not offered when they were in care.

Part of the former foster youth college graduate experience is matriculating into a more dominant, mainstream culture. As these former foster care youth go on to achieve typical milestones in mainstream culture, they interact less with peers who have a similar background and begin to assimilate dominant cultural values. They are often told by their new peers that they must be exceptional to have overcome their treacherous backgrounds. They are told they must have been smarter than average. They are also told they must be strong to be able to be normal. These are pleasant things to believe, and this thinking confirms dominant assumptions.

Therefore, it makes sense that during the interviews, many of the recommendations made by the study's participants are centered within their own personal or professional experience, and that they were not able to think out of the box or imagine vastly different experiences and outcomes for children in care. For instance, participants did not recommend that we change society and look at addressing poverty and income inequality to reduce family separation and the need for foster care. They did not recommend that former foster youth create communities among themselves, or that blanket funding for children in foster care should be increased. Instead, they focused on small goals which would be easier to achieve. Now that they at least partially identify with dominant, mainstream culture, they could be critiqued for critically examining "the perpetuity of systems and institutions which are inherently oppressive (Delgado, 1989, p. 2413). They now belong to a dominant culture that believes "that any inequality...is due either to cultural lag, or inadequate enforcement of currently existing beneficial laws—both of which are easily correctable," rather than the problem being "the prevailing mindset by means of which members of the dominant group justify the world as it is" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2413). Therefore, many of their recommendations suggested incremental change within the currently oppressive system as it exists. This perspective does not mean that they do not agree that we should change social conditions to reduce the need for foster care, or increase blanket funding, because I am sure most of them would; only that they did not suggest it during the interview process, perhaps because they were restrained by dominant cultural norms.

Trend 3a: Resources

All participants (100%) reported that access to extracurriculars such as sports and the arts were important factors which contributed to their own success. They recommended that children in care be offered transportation, supplies, and funding to participate in a wide variety of extracurricular activities across homes and schools.

Additionally, participants reported that children in care who have experienced trauma need access to therapy and other forms of emotional support. They believed that children should receive long-term therapy to address various traumas: that prior to entry to foster care; that from separation from their biological families; that from constant moving; and other traumas inherent to foster care systems. Joshaline stated that, from her personal and professional viewpoint as a social worker, the well-being of children in care needed to be more important than their academic performance, because they cannot thrive academically or socially unless trauma has been addressed.

Last, four out of five participants (except Dillon) reported that children in care need help paying for higher education, including tuition, cost of living, and dorm supplies, as well as funding for transitioning to adulthood in general (even if they do not go to college). Most of them were forced to accumulate significant student loan debt to complete their degrees and are still paying this debt off. Daniel did not understand that the state of South Carolina does not waive or even reduce in-state tuition at state colleges for children aging out of foster care until he was on the brink of graduating high school, which was a major blow. Joshaline suggested that since foster care children already have experienced hardships and trauma, that perhaps public institutions should waive tuition and cost of living. The only participant who did not recommend assistance with the cost

of higher education was Dillon, who had access to a CSP (college support program) in college, which paid for his tuition, cost of living, supplies, and trips out of the country.

Trend 3b: Support

During the interview process, all participants reported that they benefitted from close relationships with K-12 administrators, coaches, and teachers, with Robert even saying that these relationships were the only thing that made his experience during foster care “bearable.” They also all reported that they had particularly strong and memorable relationships with their male teachers. However, only Daniel and Robert identified relationships with administrators, teachers, and coaches, as something they would recommend for children currently in care, perhaps because it is difficult to imagine facilitating or requiring such relationships between children and K-12 educators.

Daniel and Robert recommend long-term relationships with an adult—such as the he had upon entering foster care with his guardian ad litem or his basketball coach, from high school to the present. Robert and Chris also maintain relationships with adults from childhood, such as teachers and foster parents, which is exceptional considering one of them is 45 years of age and the other is 70-years old.

Daniel mentioned that it would have been very helpful if school guidance counselors had been more involved and supportive of him in high school. He stated that he was always told that when he aged out of foster care, his tuition would be paid for by his state (South Carolina). However, after he graduated from high school, he learned from his social worker that this was not the case. He was not prepared to be resourceful and seek out sources of financial aid other than student loans, nor did he have financial literacy regarding the cost of higher education; as a result, he identified school guidance

counselors as possible sources for this information and support. Based on data from interviews, other participants could likewise have benefitted from this support. These recommendations include making sure children are on track for college, regardless of their behavior or intent.

Based on her personal and professional experiences, Joshaline also mentioned that mentors could provide useful support to children in care. She said that when she was in foster care, funding for mentor programs in her state (North Carolina) were discontinued. She believes that access to healthy, positive role models would be beneficial to children in care and contribute to changing their trajectories.

Last, Robert recommended that children aging out of care have access to an adult who would support them and be there to talk to them while they attend college or university. He said that it would be helpful if they knew that there was someone in the world who cared about them and kept up with them through emerging adulthood. It is interesting that none of the participants suggested that support from other former foster youth, or that having community with young adults aging out of foster care, would be helpful. Perhaps this is because they do not see themselves, for the most part, as a community or demographic group.

Group Care

While participants' experiences do not reflect the experiences of all children in group homes, nonetheless all three participants who were placed in high-quality group care reported that they received most of the resources and support mentioned above during their stay at these facilities. These included access to funding, supplies, and transportation for extracurricular activities, wrap-around services such as therapy, and

relationships with adults and mentors. This is not necessarily typical of resources and support offered in group home settings, which historically have been used to reduce the cost of foster care. High-quality group care would cost more, not less, than traditional foster home placements.

Group homes were not able to control how long-term the relationships these children had with adults were, or how much support K-12 guidance counselors offered; nor could group homes pay for higher education. However, Dillon was lucky to live in a state that offers CSPs (college support programs), which can pay for tuition, living expenses, and more.

Other Thoughts From Former Foster Youth

At 70-years-old, Chris is the oldest participant by far among those in this study. She offered other unique recommendations, based on her personal experiences. First, she believes that children should be returned to their biological families less often. To extend this thought, she also reported that part of the cultural problem which perpetuates the ability of adults to abuse children is that mothers are often regarded as saints. She said we need to stop mythologizing motherhood and be open to accepting that biological connection is not necessarily related to healthy and positive beliefs and behaviors regarding the treatment of children.

At 26-years-old, Dillon was the youngest study participant, and he also had unique recommendations. He grew up in a more modern foster system, and state, with resources not available to kids in other states in the U.S., or who were in care longer ago. Dillon had access to quite a few resources in his group home, and his state offers college support programs, which covered his cost of tuition and living expenses, and provided

him with community with other emerging adults on campus aging out of foster care. These factors might have contributed to his recommendation that kids in care should take more advantage of resources that already exist, and thus follow a path like his. It is likely he is unaware of the disparity between states for resources for children in foster care. For instance, in South Carolina, not only do CSPs not exist, but the state does also not waive public higher education tuition or even provide a discount for children aging out of care. These limitations are vastly different from what the state where Dillon lives offers.

Conclusion

Many interesting trends emerged from participant data. Most notable of all was that all five participants are authors—something I did not purposely seek out. Literacy is one of the sub-trends under K-12 experiences, which included strong relationships with teachers and coaches, reading and writing opportunities, and access to extracurricular activities. It was also significant that all five participants were athletes, which is not common for kids in foster care due to high mobility and lack of transportation. They also had access to the arts.

Additionally, all participants reported a turning point in high school where their trajectory shifted from low academic performance and trouble in school and at home, to focusing on improving their grades and thinking about college and the future. For three participants, this shift occurred after they moved into high-quality group homes, which provided them with resources, transportation, and space to focus on their individual goals. For the other two, this shift occurred when an adult tried to engage with them violently, and in a moment of epiphany, they realized that they had the agency to make their own choices and control their own futures.

Last, all participants offered their opinions regarding what should be done to improve the foster care system. Interestingly, they only suggested resources or support that they did or did not get. None of them offered out-of-the-box ideas, such as increased funding or wider social changes. Overall, they recommended that children in care should receive more resources (extracurricular activity funding and access, long-term and consistent therapy access, and funding for higher education and transitioning to adulthood) they were or were not given, or support (from long-term relationships with adults, school guidance counselors, mentors, and an adult to provide support specifically during emerging adult years while in higher education) they were or were not offered, when they were in foster care.

All participants began Interview 1 by telling me their life story, without being prompted to do so. It was clear that they were used to providing this narrative, which makes sense considering their backgrounds. It was an honor to learn from them and discover trends that we all had in common.

Chapter 8: Limitations, Future Research, and Implications

In this study I used narrative analysis to explore the beliefs of former foster youth who graduated from college about what K-12 and other experiences in foster care affected their academic and life trajectories. To gather data, I used a survey and multiple interviews to explore their perceptions and then asked them to talk about their histories and identities. This study, like most, had limitations common to research, and some of these limitations suggest future possibilities for research about former foster youth. Additionally, this study has implications about what resources schools, social workers, and foster parents can offer foster care youth to improve trajectories. Considerations for group homes are also provided.

The Limitations of This Study

A serious limitation that hinders the collection of data from this population is privacy laws which, ironically, protect the identities of foster care youth from the institutions that should be helping them. The societal myth is that we conceal the identities of this group from teachers, schools, and the public because we are protecting them from being treated differently than their peers, or because predators might target them if they knew their foster care backgrounds. However, a foster child without emotional or academic support is already a target for predators.

Because the states protect themselves by refusing to share information about foster care children, we never know how they are currently doing or what they are feeling. We do not know if they are being neglected, abused, or “othered.” In my own

state of South Carolina, for example, the department of social services will not even tell me the number of high school seniors currently in foster care. My question is hardly nefarious: I want legislators to be able to calculate the cost of free tuition for these children. However, the Department of Social Services has refused to share this information, and I suspect the real reason for withholding it is that they want to protect themselves from accountability.

The result of “protecting” the identities of foster children is that researchers cannot contact them for studies that seek to improve their general life *and* academic outcomes. For instance, I wanted to talk to current foster children for this study but found this impossible due to privacy laws. This lack of access to children currently in care forced me to search for and recruit adult participants with foster care backgrounds who had been removed from their K-12 experiences for years and who, as a result, were unreliable narrators of events, perhaps embedded in faulty memories, that occurred years before.

Another limitation of this qualitative study was its small sample size of only five participants with vastly different backgrounds and experiences. However, five participants are not enough to provide a comprehensive overview of the experiences of all children in foster care. Study participants were either Black, mixed race (Native American and White), or White. No participants were from Spanish-speaking cultures; the absence of this group from my study was problematic, given the recent influx of refugees from Central and South America and the increasing number of Americans who are bilingual or speak Spanish (or another language). Additionally, no participants

identified as LGBTQ or non-binary. All participants reported being heterosexual men or women.

Another limitation of this study is its narrow scope. This study primarily explored the impact of K-12 experiences on the academic trajectory of the participants. However, there are potentially many other factors that improve the life trajectory and the experiences of children in care other than what they are offered in school.

Future Research

Future research should further explore what other factors contribute to positive trajectories for adults with a foster care background. In doing so, attention should be paid to what went well for adults who achieved traditional milestones of success, not limited to college graduation. For instance, other milestones could include career stability, health in adulthood, parental involvement in schooling, and other milestones achieved by the children of former foster youth.

Also, it would be helpful to obtain a larger sample size in the future. Similar studies could be conducted within every state. This approach would be important because there is a wide disparity among states regarding resources and support offered to children in foster care and those aging out of the system. As long as there is no national approach to the administration of foster care, the most useful kind of data would be that summarized by state.

Additionally, an effort needs to be made to connect with children currently in foster care to better understand their experiences first-hand, in the moment. That one of my participants was 70-years-old afforded her the wisdom that comes from life experiences and hindsight. However, she was far removed from the emotions experienced

by foster care children in the moment. It is therefore imperative that researchers have access to children currently in foster care. Because it is entirely possible to protect their individual identities while doing so—just as the identities of other vulnerable populations are protected—there is no justification for denial of access.

Last, it would be interesting to specifically explore the impact of books and book series on the experiences of children in foster care, as well as to further examine the impact of the quality of group homes on the experiences of children in group care, as well as the demographics of children who have the most positive experiences.

Implications

This study offers several implications for the adults and institutions that serve children in foster care. Schools, social workers, foster parents, and group home staff could consider multiple promising strategies for improving outcomes for children in state care.

Schools

Teachers and coaches played an important role in the lives of these successful former foster youth. All participants reported close bonds with educators across their school trajectories. Therefore, when a child in foster care is brought to a school, attention should be paid to the classrooms in which they are placed as well as the personalities of the teachers and how teachers invest in these students. Schools could train teachers to form healthy bonds with children in foster care. Also, because all participants reported close bonds with ELA teachers and arts teachers, these teachers should also be trained in how to best connect with children in foster care.

Other factors, including male teachers and extracurricular activities in schools, as well as basic resources, had a positive influence on participant outcomes. Because male teachers were also very important to all participants, including the women, foster children should be placed, if possible, in the classrooms of any available male teachers, particularly at the elementary level. Schools should also offer incoming students in foster care a wide range of extracurricular activities and possibly offer transportation for these children to and from these activities. Finally, schools must attend to the basic needs of children in foster care, providing food, clothing and shoes, and school supplies, while making sure to protect their privacy and dignity.

Social Workers, Foster Parents, and Group Home Staff

Social workers, foster parents, and group home staff need to work together to ensure as much continuity across placements as possible for children in foster care. In foster care, there is much that cannot be controlled. However, participants identified several factors that improved their success that could be controlled by social workers, foster parents, and group home staff.

For example, because children in foster care need access to extracurricular activities, including sports and the arts, an effort should be made to offer continuity of extracurriculars across placements. Perhaps if Daniel had been offered this continuity, for example, he would not have given up on art—which is particularly sad considering how talented he was. Access to extracurriculars would include transportation, supplies, funding for uniforms and trips, and more.

Additionally, social workers should make sure that foster and group homes are literacy sanctuaries. This recommendation means that children in foster care should have

access in the home to books that are age- and level-appropriate; they should also be given supplies to write and draw with and be provided with regular trips to the community library for access to even more books. Each child should have their own bookshelf where they can keep books, journals, and other supplies. Efforts should also be made to enroll these children in writing workshops and to give them other opportunities to engage in creative writing. Adults should also take the time to read to children daily, something all participants reported as having a significant impact on their development.

It should also be noted that, according to participants, it is never too late for children in foster care to change their life and academic trajectories. Participants reported a trajectory shift late in their high school years, long past when many in our society give up hope on attitude and behavioral change for children in foster care. Instead, these last years of high school were demonstrated to be a critical time for providing children with mentors and giving them information regarding higher education. The high school years are also ideal for group homes to teach independent living skills to their young residents.

Social workers, foster parents and group home staff should also assume that all the foster care children in their charge will attend college, and that they should all have access to college tracks in their high school educations. If upon graduation from high school, these children decide they want to pursue a different path than pursuing a higher education, that is fine, but at least they should be given that opportunity. The worst thing those in charge of foster care children can decide is that these young people will not go to college and to thus they will not be prepared for such academic futures.

To keep the door open for a four-year college degree, all children in foster care need to prepare for and take the SAT or ACT, and they need to take it multiple times.

They also need to tour college campuses and be provided with college counseling, including information about financial aid and the college application process. If social workers and foster parents work together to offer these resources and support to children in foster care, perhaps their life trajectories could be improved.

Group Homes

As explained in multiple chapters, there has been a national, and even global shift away from group care for children, and for good reason. Historically, group care has been used inappropriately to reduce the cost of serving children in foster care. However, all three participants reported that group care had a positive impact on their lives and that living in group homes contributed to their matriculation into and graduating from institutions of higher education, which is likely due, at least in part, to the high quality of the homes they were placed in.

Participants reported living in different types of group homes, ranging from cottage-style homes on a campus, a large house run by married couples, and small institutions run by religious or state organizations. About these, most participants reported positive experiences except for Daniel, who reported a negative experience in his second group home. Daniel described this home as being run-down, with no wrap-around services, administered by an unqualified staff. He added that the staff offered the boys a GED program that was taught by unqualified teachers; this was a limitation that negatively impacted their trajectories, because academic support was not in place to help these children succeed. Daniel was able to escape this home because he played sports, and so was allowed to attend the local public school, where he met and was supported by

multiple teachers and coaches. This support supplemented how few resources were offered by his group home. This home has since been shut down.

An important take-away from this study is that group homes can be a positive and life-changing experience for children in care, but to be so, facilities must be modern, and staff must be qualified. Systems of staff accountability should be in place so that children in care can report complaints and request specific help when needed. Additionally, wrap-around services, such as mental health care, academic support, mentorship, access to funding, and transportation to and from extracurricular activities, and other group and individual outings, must be offered to all children. Last, there seems to be a common theme across participants that small group homes, or small cottages within larger group home campuses, offer the best support for youth in care.

Conclusion

Children in foster and adults with a foster care background need spaces to feel safe and platforms to tell their stories so that we, as a society, can better understand their experiences. While national, de-identified data is good for research, it does not provide enough access to and understanding of the experiences of children in foster care and the impact of their experiences on their life trajectories. Consequently, this study has demonstrated the need for this demographic group to talk to each other as a community within safe spaces, and for them to share their experiences with those on the outside on various platforms.

This study is one small example of how we can explore the beliefs, narratives, and experiences of adults with foster care backgrounds. Through surveys and interviews, participants revealed that there are many factors, some of which potentially can be

controlled, that can be offered to children in foster care to improve their experiences and trajectories. They reported that K-12 experiences, including strong relationships with teachers and coaches, reading and writing opportunities, and access to extracurricular activities, had a positive impact on their academic trajectories. They also described turning points in their late high school years.

From these counter-stories, we can begin to piece together how we can provide opportunities for children in foster care and make changes in the foster systems that serve them to improve their childhood experiences and adult trajectories. The results of doing this make a positive impact on the economy, given that a large percentage of incarcerated and homeless populations have a foster care background. Such changes and alterations would also have an impact on racial disparities because so many Black, Indigenous, and other families of color are targeted and separated for care when compared to their white counterparts. Because foster care is so concentrated in low-income populations, with poverty being generationally cyclical, revised practices would also help improve incomes and life trajectories, breaking the poverty cycle in the process. Finally, and most importantly, these changes would impact the children in foster care, who did not ask to be positioned as such and who are vulnerable in every way. We must do what is right for these children and youth—because doing what is right *is* possible—and because all children deserve access to the resources and support necessary that allow them to successfully participate in whatever cultural systems and institutions they choose to be a part of, and achieve at least typical milestones.

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Appendix A: Screening Survey

Overview and Confidentiality

The purpose of the following survey is to gather some factual data about you and your experiences. All responses are confidential unless you wish to share your identity for this research. Any information disclosed will be with your permission. While there may be publications and presentations as a result of this study, your name will not be used unless you choose to reveal your identity in the questions below. If you participate in this study, we will quote directly without using names unless you request to be identified. Names of people and places will be changed in transcripts and other data by the research team as the data is collected. All information will be kept on a secure university server.

Upon completing this survey, you may be selected to participate in 2 interviews for a total of \$100, paid upon completion of both interviews.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free ***not*** to participate, or to ***stop*** participating at any time, for any reason, without negative consequences. In the event that you do withdraw from this study, the information you have already provided will be kept in a confidential manner. If you wish to withdraw from the study, please contact Amanda Moon.

If I have any more questions about your participation in this study, you can contact Amanda Moon by phone (843-240-9211) or email (ahmoon@mailbox.sc.edu).

Consent and Demographic Information

1. Do you agree to participate in this survey?
☐ Yes
☐ No
2. Do you agree to participate in two interviews?
☐ Yes
☐ No
3. Do you wish for your identity to remain anonymous?
☐ Yes
☐ No
4. At any point in your life did you live in foster care, group care, or kinship care?
☐ Yes
☐ No
5. What is your full name?
6. What is your date of birth?
7. What is your gender?
☐ Female
☐ Male
☐ Non-binary
☐ Prefer not to answer
☐ Other (please specify)
8. In what state do you currently live?
9. What is your race or ethnicity?
☐ Asian
☐ Black or African American
☐ Hispanic or Latino
☐ Middle Eastern or North African
☐ Multiracial or Multiethnic
☐ Native American or Alaska Native
☐ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
☐ White
☐ Another race or ethnicity, please describe below:

10. If you are Native American, what tribe are you from?

11. What is your current religion, if any?

- ☐ Christian/Protestant/Methodist/Lutheran/Baptist
- ☐ Catholic
- ☐ Mormon
- ☐ Greek or Russian Orthodox
- ☐ Jewish
- ☐ Muslim
- ☐ Buddhist
- ☐ Hindu
- ☐ Atheist or agnostic
- ☐ Nothing in particular
- ☐ Other (please specify)

12. Which of the following best describes your current relationship status?

- ☐ Widowed
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Married
- ☐ Separated
- ☐ Cohabiting with a significant other or in a domestic partnership
- ☐ Single, never married
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

13. How many children do you have?

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5 or more
- ☐ Other (please specify)

14. What is the best phone number to reach you at?
15. What is your email address?
16. To what physical address can we send a thank you card?

Higher Education Experiences

17. Did you graduate from an institution of higher education?
☐ Yes
☐ No
18. Please list the colleges you attended and degrees received.
19. Did one or more of your colleges have a program to support young adults with exposure to foster care and/or who aged out of foster care?
☐ Yes
☐ No
20. If so, please tell the name of the program and the institution which implemented this program.
21. How many years did it take you to graduate with a bachelor's degree?
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5
☐ 6
☐ Other (please specify)
22. Did you understand financial aid?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Other (please specify)
23. Please list sources of financial aid you obtained while in higher education.

Foster Care Experiences

24. At what age did you **first** enter foster care?

- ☐ Infant
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ ...
- ☐ 18
- ☐ Other (please specify)

25. To the best of your knowledge, what were the conditions/reasons for your entering foster care?

26. To the best of your knowledge, how many times did you move while in foster care?

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6
- ☐ 7
- ☐ 8
- ☐ 9
- ☐ 10 or more
- ☐ Other (please specify)

27. Did you ever live in group care, such as in a group home?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other (please specify)

28. Under what conditions did you exit foster care?

- ☐ Returned to biological family
- ☐ Adoption
- ☐ Aged out
- ☐ Runaway
- ☐ Other (please specify)

29. Did you have any close relationships with adults other than your biological family when you were in foster care?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Other (please specify)

30. If so, please explain.

Open Ended Questions

31. Is there anything you want me to know before the interview? If so, please describe.

32. Is there anything specific you want to talk about during the interview? If so, please describe.

Appendix B: Interview 1 Protocol

1. Can you give me an overview of your life currently? Do you have any stories you can share that describe your current life situation well?
2. Describe your experience as a student in elementary, middle, and high school.
What was it like? How would you describe yourself as a student? Can you tell me a story which illustrates your typical student experience?
3. At any point did you feel like an “insider”? At any point did you feel like an “outsider”? Tell me a story(s) about this experience.
4. What activities did you feel passionate about as a child? What did you love? What did you want to be?
5. How do you feel about reading? Do you see yourself or did you see yourself as a reader? Can you tell me one or more stories about yourself as a reader?
6. What was your experience with literacy? Do you recall if anyone read to you, or did you ever read to yourself? Was reading primarily for academic purposes, for pleasure, or both? Do you remember any favorite stories, books, or series?
7. How do you feel about writing? Did you enjoy writing as a child? Can you tell me any stories about yourself as a writer, including required writing in school and/or writing you may have engaged in during your free time? Do you see yourself as a writer now?

8. How do you think your experiences as a K-12 student impacted your going to college? Can you describe a situation that shows how your school experiences influenced your ability to enroll in and graduate from college?
9. How do you think your literacy identity impacted your going to college? Can you tell a story that shows how literacy was related to your transition to college? Can you tell a story that shows how literacy was related to your experiences in college?
10. What would have made school better for you? What would have made reading more important to you? What could we do to help children in foster care in school? What could we do to help children in foster care with their reading?
11. Is there anything else you want to tell me? Is there anything else I should know?

Appendix C: Interview 2 Protocol

Early childhood (birth-grade 2)

1. Number of schools
2. Describe yourself as a very young child.
3. Describe yourself as a student.
4. Tell me about some of your important teachers.
5. Did you have any teachers that looked like you?
6. Best memories about this teacher
7. Best memory from school
8. What did you read in school? Did anyone read to you? Do you remember any picture books?
9. What did you like writing in school? Do you remember making any little stories, booklets, etc?
10. Anything else important from early childhood?

Elementary Years (grades 2/3-5/6)

11. Number of schools
12. Describe yourself as a very young child.
13. Describe yourself as a student.
14. Tell me about some of your important teachers.

15. Did you have any teachers that looked like you?
16. Best memories about this teacher
17. Best memory from school
18. What did you read in school? Did you have access to books? Favorite books or series that made an impact?
19. What did you like writing in school? Do you remember making any little stories, booklets, etc? Any writing in your free time?
20. Anything else important from elementary school?

Middle School (grades 6-8)

21. Number of schools
22. Describe yourself as a tween.
23. Describe yourself as a tween student.
24. Tell me about some of your important teachers.
25. Did you have any teachers that looked like you?
26. Best memories about this teacher
27. Best memory from school
28. What did you read in school? Favorite series, etc. Did you read in your free time?
Any books that made a big impact? Did you have access to books?
29. What did you like writing in school? Do you remember writing in your free time
or taking any writing classes? Journal, etc.
30. Anything else important from middle school?

High School

31. Number of schools
32. Describe yourself as a teenager.
33. Describe yourself as a teenage student.
34. Tell me about some of your important teachers.
35. Did you have any teachers that looked like you?
36. Best memories about this teacher
37. Best memory from school
38. What did you read in school? Did you read in your free time? Did you have access to books? Any books that made a big impact?
39. What did you like writing in school? Did you take any creative writing classes? Did you do any writing in your free time, like keep a journal, write poetry, etc? School newspaper, journalism, etc?
40. Anything else important from high school?

Turning Point

41. Can you describe a turning point in your life? Maybe an event or person, or both, where your path changed? Maybe someone inspired you, or you moved into a great foster home, etc. What age? Details, story.