Maximizing educational opportunities for youth aging out of foster care by engaging youth voices in a partnership for social change

Angelique Day a,⁎, Joanne Riebschleger b, Amy Dworsky c, Amy Damashek d, Kieran Fogarty e

a School of Social Work, Wayne State University, 303 Thompson Home, 4756 Cass Ave. Detroit, MI 48202, USA
b School of Social Work, Michigan State University, 254 Baker Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA
c Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 1313 East 60th St. Chicago, IL 60637, USA
d Department of Clinical Psychology, Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, MI 49008, USA
e Interdisciplinary Health Sciences Program, Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, MI 49008, USA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges faced by youth in foster care who are making the transition from high school to college. Forty-three high school and college students from across the state of Michigan who are or were in foster care spoke before panels of policymakers at two public forums. Transcripts from their testimony were analyzed. Eight main barriers to high school completion and college access were identified. The most frequently cited was a lack of supportive relationships with caring adults. This research demonstrates how the voice of youth in foster care can have an impact on the policies that affect their lives.

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1. Introduction

Head (2011) and Zeldin, Camino, and Calvert (2003) provide three rationales for giving young people greater voice across a variety of institutional settings and policy arenas: (1) to ensure social justice; (2) to support civic engagement; and (3) to promote positive youth development. The social justice rationale is based on the idea that, in addition to being nurtured and protected, youth have the right to be treated with respect. This includes being involved and consulted in decisions that affect their health and well-being, where appropriate.

The second rationale, civic engagement, reflects a belief that, all members of the community, including youth, should have legitimate opportunities to influence decision-making (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). By bringing their often different and complementary views, experiences, and competencies together, youth and adults can jointly address collective issues.

The third and final rationale grows out of the positive youth development framework. This framework views socio-emotional development as being equal in importance to cognitive development (Sherrod, 2007). Participation in the formulation of public policy is thought to have developmental benefits both for the youth themselves and for society as a whole.

Being given a greater voice in the policy decisions that affect their lives may be especially important for youth in foster care. First, they are the recipients of many publicly funded services. These include not only child welfare services, but also services in the areas of, health, education, housing and employment. Second, youth in foster care are a primary focus of federal and state policies and a frequent target of interventions, and third, youth in foster care can be psychologically harmed by the very systems created to protect them. This harm can result from further exposure to trauma or from being denied an appropriate education or other services.

That said, youth in foster care have rarely been active participants in policy planning or decision-making, in part, because they often lack connections to the requisite institutional structures (Hill, Davis, Prout, & Tisdall, 2004). More recently, however, youth policy forums have begun to provide youth in foster care with structured opportunities to inform the development of national, state and local policies that directly affect them by sharing their experiences and concerns with adults in a position to act on their behalf (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Hill et al., 2004) Michigan's Children, 2010).

Policy forums for youth in foster care can be viewed as part of a larger trend toward greater youth representation and involvement in public policy deliberations across the U.S. (Pittman, 2000). Over
the past few decades, a growing number of youth policy forums have been sponsored by national advocacy organizations, including the Forum for Youth Investment and Youth M.O.V.E. These forums put youth on a more equal footing with adults to influence public policy (Zeldin et al., 2003). Similar forums have been developed on the state-level. One example in the state of Michigan is Kidspeak®. Under the auspices of Michigan’s Children, a private nonprofit legislative advocacy organization, Kidspeak® brings young people before listening panels of legislators, state school heads, and other community leaders to talk about issues of concern to them. This study is based on testimony given at two such forums held in the summer of 2010. Both focused on barriers to educational success faced by youth in foster care, including challenges associated with the transition from high school to college.

2. Foster care youth and education

Education is a powerful determinant of quality of life and confers economic, social, civic, and personal benefits (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003; Joffut, 2002). Having a college degree is associated with better health, more meaningful employment, and higher socioeconomic status (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). College graduates earn significantly more, on average, than those with just a high school diploma (Aad et al., 2010; Tierney, Bailey, Constantine, Finkelstein, & Hurd, 2009). They also tend to be more civically engaged and active in their communities (Metro United Way, 2011; Tierney et al., 2009).

Educational attainment is no less important for youth in foster care. However, research suggests not only that foster care youth are less likely to graduate from high school than their peers, but also, that they are less likely to attend and graduate from college even if they do complete high school than youth in the general population (Blome, 1997; Craft et al., 2005, 2007; Tierney et al., 2009; Kessler, 2004; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Pecora et al., 2005; Scannapieco, Schagrin, & Scannapieco, 1995).

2.1. Barriers to high school completion

Youth in foster care are less likely to complete high school than their non-foster peers. For example, Burley and Halpern (2001) found that only 55% of 11th grade foster youth in the state of Washington graduated from high school on time compared to 86% of 11th graders who were not in foster care. Other studies suggest that high school graduation rates among foster youth range from a low of about one-third (e.g., McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Scannapieco et al., 1995) to a high of roughly two-thirds (Blome, 1997; Craft et al., 2005, 2007; Tierney et al., 2009).

Several factors probably contribute to the low high school graduation rate among this population (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002). These include experiences both prior to (i.e. neglect and abuse, poverty, learning disabilities, and behavioral and emotional problems) and during foster care placement (i.e., placement disruption and school changes) (Smithgall, Gladden, Yang, & Goerge, 2005). According to the most recent Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data, children in foster care on Sept. 30, 2010 had experienced an average of 3.1 placement changes since entry (Casey Family Programs, 2011). These placement changes can disrupt education because they often result in a change of schools (Julianelle, 2008). Because it takes time to recover academically after each school change, many children in foster care lose ground (Yu, Day, & Williams, 2002). Poor coordination between child welfare and school personnel as well as difficulties transferring school records and course credits can result in enrollment delays as well as the course repetition and grade retention (Kerbow, 1996; Leone & Weinberg, 2010). Changes in school not only negatively affect academic progress, but can also disrupt connections to peers and school professionals who might otherwise be a source of social support (Ersing, Stuphen, & Loeffer, 2009). This link between changing placements and changing schools may explain the negative relationship Pecora et al. (2005) found between placement instability and high school completion.

Frequent school changes are only one of several barriers that can make it difficult for foster youth to graduate from high school. Compared to their peers in the general population, youth in foster care are less likely to perform at grade level, twice as likely to repeat a grade (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Craft et al., 2002). Foster youth are also far more likely to be suspended or expelled than their non-foster care peers (Conger & Rebeck, 2001; Finkelstein et al., 2002). Foster youth are also far more likely to be suspended or expelled than their non-foster counterparts (Tierney et al., 2004).

2.2. Barriers to college access

The majority of foster youth have college aspirations (Craft et al., 2004; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003). In one study, over 70% (N = 262) of 15 to 19 year old youth in foster care expressed a desire to go to college, including 19% who expressed a desire to attend graduate school (McMillen et al., 2003). In this respect, they are not unlike their non-foster peers (Tierney et al., 2004).

Moreover, policies at both the federal and state level aim to increase access to college among youth in foster care. Most notably, in 2001, Congress created the Education and Training Voucher program as an amendment to the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCP) of 1999. Through this program, states can provide current and former foster youth with up to $5,000 per year for post-secondary training and education (Promoting Safe & Stable Families Amendments of 2001). Youth participating in the program on their 21st birthday remain eligible until age 23 as long as they are making satisfactory progress toward completion of a post-secondary education credential (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009). Some states also have tuition waiver programs that allow foster youth to attend public institutions at no charge or at a significantly reduced rate or special scholarships and grants (Day, 2011; Ellerton, 2002; Spiegel, 2004).

Their educational aspirations and these policies notwithstanding, foster care youth are under-represented among college-going populations (Craft et al., 2009). For example, one study found that only 24% (N = 575) of 19 year old current and former foster youth were pursuing a two- or four-year college degree compared to nearly 57%
of their peers in a nationally representative sample of 19-year-olds (Courtney et al., 2005). Contributing to their low rate of college enrollment are the many barriers to college access that foster youth must overcome.

For example, young people who age out of foster care tend to be concentrated in high-poverty, under-funded, and low-performing high schools (Smithgall et al., 2004) where they are not adequately prepared for college-level work. In addition, the child welfare system has traditionally done a poor job of encouraging foster youth to pursue post-secondary education (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005) or providing them with information to help them navigate the complex college application process, including the process of applying for the different sources of financial aid for which they are eligible (Dworsky & Peréz, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Consequently, many foster youth are on their own when it comes to applying to college and patching together the resources to pay for their education. Assuming they cannot afford college, some may not apply.

3. Present study

Although previous studies have documented the low high school completion and college enrollment rates among foster care youth, the voices of young people experiencing or on the cusp of experiencing the transition from high school to college have been conspicuously absent from this research. This exploratory study seeks to address this gap by examining the barriers to completing high school and enrolling in college as perceived by youth in foster care and foster care alumni. A better understanding of these barriers from the perspective of current and former foster youth will assist policymakers as well as child welfare and education professionals who are working to increase their high school completion and college enrollment rates.

4. Methods

4.1. Sample

In the summer of 2010, Michigan’s Children convened two Kidspeak® forums in partnership Western Michigan University (WMU) and Michigan State University (MSU), respectively. The purpose of both events was to give high school students who were currently in foster care and college students who had been in foster care an opportunity to inform policymakers about the barriers to completing high school and accessing college that they faced and to share their ideas about what could be done to help young people like themselves overcome those challenges.

The forums were held in conjunction with 2-week-long, pre-college programs that bring high school-aged youth in foster care to campuses to learn about college life. High school students from 13 Michigan counties (i.e., Bay, Barry, Ingham, Jackson, Kalamazoo, Luce, Macomb, Midland, Muskegon, Oakland, Ottawa, Washtenaw, and Wayne) with postsecondary educational aspirations were recruited by their child welfare caseworkers. Students were registered on a first come, first serve basis until capacity was reached capacity: 20 students in the case of WMU and 30 students in the case of MSU. College students who had been in foster care were recruited through the foster care retention program at WMU and MSU. They were paid to serve as peer mentors and camp counselors to the high school students.

The first Kidspeak® event, which lasted two hours, was hosted by Western Michigan University’s Seita Scholars program on July 29, 2010. Participants included 18 high school students, six WMU undergraduates and 18 policymakers from the southwest region of the state (see Table 1). Among the policymakers present were state legislators, elected officials from Kalamazoo, K-12 and university administrators, workforce development administrators, and foundation representatives.

On August 6, 2010, 32 high school students, 12 MSU undergraduates, and 35 policymakers participated in the second event. This event lasted three hours and was hosted by Michigan State University’s Foster Youth Alumni Services Program and its College of Law. Because it was held near Michigan’s capital in East Lansing, the event drew legislators from across the state as well as representatives from the fields of workforce development, higher education, corrections, public health, mental health, business, the courts, human services, K-12 education, and other special interest groups.

The young people at both events ranged in age from 15 to 23 years old. Consistent with the racial composition of Michigan’s foster care population, the majority were African American. Less clear is why young women outnumbered young men, although it could reflect the gender of students at the two universities who had been in foster care.

Due to time constraints, only 43 of the 68 students in attendance were able to testify. These students had been randomly selected by the master of ceremonies. Another seven randomly selected students chose not to participate. Students who were not selected but wanted to speak were invited to submit written testimony to Michigan’s Children, which agreed to share the information they provided with the policymakers.

4.2. Procedures

Institutional review boards at Michigan State University and Western Michigan University approved the study. Informed consent/assent to participate in Kidspeak® was obtained during camp registration. Students over the age of 18 signed on their own behalf. Minors co-signed consent forms with their caseworkers.

Prior to the forums, youth participated in advocacy and media training offered by Michigan’s Children. The college students assisted with the training which included instruction on developing written and giving oral testimony as well as preparation for media interviews should they be approached by journalists. Youth were also given opportunities to role play testifying in front of a mock listening panel.

On the day of the event, students were asked to address two questions that the policy makers had chosen: (1) What do you believe are barriers foster youth face in high school completion and college access? (2) What suggestions do you have for policymakers to eliminate these barriers? Students were instructed to limit their remarks to no more than five minutes, to introduce themselves by giving their first name, age, school affiliation, and county of residence, and to conclude by thanking the policymakers for attending. Most students did not need the full 5 minutes, but a few exceeded the allotted time or veered off-topic. Their testimony was audio-recorded and transcribed by professional court reporters.

Students who participated in the MSU event had an opportunity to debrief about their Kidspeak® experience. They appreciated the opportunity “to tell their story,” “to hear about other people’s stories,” and to know that they were “not alone in having problems with the system.” They also felt genuinely “listened to.” Students who participated in the WMU event were not given a similar opportunity.

5 Both Kidspeak® events were supported, in part, by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. The WMU event was also supported by the James A & Faith Knight Foundation. The MSU event received additional support from the Comcast Foundation, the Volunteer Center of Michigan, and the Park West Foundation.

6 The Seita Scholar Initiative provides college access and retention services to students who age out of foster care system and are interested in pursuing postsecondary education at WMU.

7 The demographic data were collected from camp registration materials that had been completed prior to the events, and it was not possible to distinguish between the 43 students who testified and the 25 who did not.
Eight major themes emerged from the testimony the 43 Kidspeak® participants gave about barriers that have impeded their educational success. Table 2 lists these themes as well as the number of young people who touched on each in no particular order. Seven of the eight themes could be heard in testimony given at both events. The theme of unsafe schools, which dominated the discussion at the WMU event, was not discussed at the event held at MSU. Although some of these themes have been discussed in the literature, others have received little, if any attention. Each theme is briefly discussed and illustrative quotations from the testimony are provided below.

5.1. Theme 1

Youth in foster care desire stable relationships with caring adults outside of school who know how to support their educational successes. These adults would include, but are not limited to, caseworkers, judges, foster parents, relative caregivers, and mentors. Participants who had adults like these in their lives described how they contributed to their educational success in high school and inspired them to pursue post-secondary education.

The one person who actually helped me was the judge I had when I was 13. If you say you want to quit, he won’t let you quit. I am going to graduate from Cass Tech [high school] this year, and I am going to go to Wayne State [University] for my bachelor’s degree.

I am in a foster home right now; they are strict, but they care about me. All I really wanted throughout my whole life is love and I finally have it. Before coming here [current foster home] I told myself I wasn’t going to add up to much…now I’m going to have the chance to go to college and become what I have always wanted to become.

I have been in foster care for a year and a half. My grandmother has custody of me and my brother. Through her help and support, I was able to maintain my school grades. I did my homework every night, and I attend classes every day. I have a 3.8 GPA now.

By contrast, participants whose lives lacked caring adults didn’t feel cared about and weren’t motivated to succeed academically.

There was no one there to make sure I went to school or did my homework. Nobody cared, so I eventually started skipping. I didn’t do my homework.

I have experienced over ten caseworkers. I can’t even tell you their names. I actually looked over my case files, and said, oh, this

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Youth Attendees at each Kidspeak® event (N=68).</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WMU</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>Females</td>
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<td>Males</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Other includes five biracial and one Asian American student.

4.3. Data analysis

Transcripts from the two Kidspeak® events were uploaded into NVIVO (International, 2008) and content analyzed for themes using constant comparison methods to look for commonalities, differences, and main ideas (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000). Because In Vivo coding uses the direct language of the participants as codes rather than researcher-generated words and phrases (Saldana, 2009), the analysis is grounded in the voices of the young people who provided testimony.

Two researchers trained in qualitative methods coded the transcripts independently. Their codings were compared and thematic definitions for main themes. The results were reviewed by four of the college students who participated in the forums as a check on the validity and interpretation of the data (Saldana, 2009).

The analysis focused on the two primary research questions: (1) What are the perceived barriers to completing high school and enrolling in college? (2) What do young people think can be done to eliminate these barriers? Responses that did not address these questions will not be discussed here.

5. Findings

Eight major themes emerged from the testimony the 43 Kidspeak® participants gave about barriers that have impeded their educational success. Table 2 lists these themes as well as the number of young people who touched on each in no particular order. Seven of the eight

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Need for permanent relationships with caring adults outside of school</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>“There is no one there I can depend on”</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Need for connections with teachers and other adults at school who understand the unique challenges faced by youth in foster care</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Teachers need to take note of what’s going on with their kids.”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Need for teachers to be sensitive to individual student learning needs.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Kids learn slower than others which causes them to fall behind”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Lack of resources to address basic school-related needs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I want to get ready for school, but, we don’t have any money to pay for anything”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“I want to learn, but I don’t have a way to get to school”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Lack of access to extracurricular activities</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I have never been allowed to participate in [after] school activities”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Unsafe schools</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“If a school is not safe, why go to school”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Untreated mental health issues</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We are dealing with depression, loneliness”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Lack of preparation and support for independent living</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Where am I going to go [after high school] until college starts?”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
person was my caseworker? How do they even know about when I am at school because I don’t remember seeing them.

5.2. Theme 2

Youth in foster care want caring and competent teachers who are aware of their personal challenges and available during the school day. Some participants described how attention from teachers had helped them overcome the educational challenges they faced and allowed them to succeed in school.

I have had two teachers, and they really helped me to realize that I could go to college. I never really planned on going to college until this last year. My GPA went from like a 1.0 to a 3.1. My teachers really helped me out and changed my attitude. I want to go to college so that I will be able to support a family, because I will have money. I will be able to give my kids everything I didn’t have.

Other participants felt that not having caring and competent teachers had compromised their chances of academic success.

The teachers [need] to be able to take note of what’s going on with their kids. I didn’t find out that I was dyslexic and had testing anxiety until my junior year in college. I’m having severe problems in college because you have to know how to write. I barely know how to comprehend. That’s a problem. Nobody tested me for dyslexia, ADHD, for nothing. I don’t mind being diagnosed, but I want the treatment that goes with it. I was told by my teachers all the time I have to rewrite this...it tears down your confidence. It tears you down because you actually tried, and it took a lot just to get what you got on that paper written...

5.3. Theme 3

Youth in foster care youth need teachers who are flexible, creative and sensitive to individual learning needs. Participants want teachers to accommodate students with learning disabilities (i.e., “slow learners”) and give students who fall behind a chance to recover missing or credits. They also want teachers to adopt “multisensory” classroom, techniques, provide more opportunities for hands-on learning, and maximize retention by scheduling breaks during the school day.

Some kids learn slower than others which causes them to fall behind. I believe you can resolve this, to have more programs for students, you know, so people can learn, and they won’t be left behind. So enforce the ‘No Child Left Behind’ concept.

I feel a lot of teachers don’t teach to the students. Students of today need more movement in their classes. They need hands-on experiences. I must move and see things. I can not just hear something to learn it. Educators need to use multisensory techniques.

A lot of classrooms are so structured and you are sitting there listening for hours and students need breaks so they can move, stretch, to get their brains back in focus.

5.4. Theme 4

Youth in foster care youth cannot succeed academically if they have basic unmet school-related needs. Participants explained how not having clothing, books and transportation for school limits school engagement and academic achievement. They attributed these unmet needs to school and human service agency budgetary constraints, the closure of neighborhood schools, and other systemic factors.

I am living with my foster parents now, who are really nice people, but I am wearing clothes that are three years old, and I have holes in my shoes, and kids make fun of me because we don’t have any money to pay for anything. School begins in a month and I want to get ready for school, but I can’t.

Schools should try to link up with libraries. At my school, they closed the library, so we are no longer able to read books, or check out books or to even research things.

Yeah I want to learn, but I don’t have a way to get to school. Detroit has closed over fifteen schools. There should be transportation to get the kids to school. Without transportation, students miss a lot of days of school. The school district will only allow 20 days to miss school or you will automatically fail. How do we promote them [foster youth] to graduate if we don’t give them the resources they need to get here [to school] and get the education [they need] to succeed?

5.5. Theme 5

Youth in foster care are often denied opportunities to be involved in afterschool and extra-curricular activities. Several participants described how placement instability has prevented them from engaging “normal” school activities like sports.

I’m currently attending my 17th high school. I have never been allowed to participate in school activities, go to dances...I have never played a high school sport. I have moved around a lot-like over 20 times.

When I was in [residential home] I played sports to keep me busy. I played football, linebacker, in 10th grade. My caseworker took me away from sports. It’s like she didn’t want me to do good.

By contrast, participants who had engaged in afterschool and extra-curricular activities perceived themselves as being more attached to school and viewed their involvement in these activities as a buffer against negative experiences at home.

So school is a refuge to a lot of kids. It was my refuge. I stayed in after school activities: basketball, boxing, volleyball, track and field. I did it all—anything to keep away from home as late as I could. School was home for me. In school and in education we need to create a home-like environment, meaning the support.

5.6. Theme 6

Concerns about personal safety, both in and out of school, have an adverse impact on the academic performance of youth in foster care. Some participants described threats to their personal safety at school including school violence, and bullying on school grounds and called for more “safety officers” and “hall monitors.” Others explained how abuse they were experiencing at home had been ignored or had forced them to make decisions that were detrimental to their education.

If we don’t have good grades, we have a reason. If my mom is beating me everyday, I would not want to go to school and do
any work...because I can’t keep up straight because my back hurts [as a result of physical abuse experienced in the home].

I got put in foster care because my parents physically beat me. When I started to tell people, CPS, no one listened, so I ran away four different times. I was gone for a good month, and I missed a lot of school...

If a school is not safe, why go to school? School is supposed to be a safe environment. Instead teachers are afraid of students. Having a public safety officer in the school is important.

I want to talk about bullying. I used to get picked on almost everyday. Students who experience bullying have bad reactions to this abuse. We need more hall monitors. I want the bullying to stop.

5.7. Theme 7

Youth in foster care want access to appropriate mental health services. A number of participants who had been diagnosed with serious emotional disturbances had been prescribed anti-psychotic or other psychotropic medications when what they really needed was help from professionals who understood the trauma they experienced both before and during out-of-home care placement. They also explained how untreated mental health problems may cause students to disengage from and eventually drop out of school.

Students drop out of school because of depression, low self-esteem, bullying or other people talking about them. Students stop caring because of family problems, which also tags along with low self-esteem. Distractions are a problem at school, trying to fit in. Some kids have learning problems; I have ADHD and teachers don’t point that out.

When I was placed in foster care, people put me down. They told me ‘no’ a lot. They put me on medication because I was sad; I was depressed. I never ate or slept. I was voiceless and I didn’t like it. I am glad I have a voice today. [Youth in foster care] are all dealing with something...depression, loneliness. What we are seeing running across our mind is all the problems that are going on in our lives. That’s all we see. We need someone to tell us, ‘we’ll try’. That’s all I wanted to hear, at least...have someone say, ‘I’ll try’.

Being in the system has given me all this stress and it’s hard to focus on what’s important. Stress messes up how to learn and how others learn. I face frustrations with not being able to pay attention in class because of all the obstacles I have had to overcome in my life. My grades have suffered and I am still working to overcome. Teachers could pay more attention to students when you are seeing their grades dropping and you can ask, ‘what is really going on?’

5.8. Theme 8

Young people aging out of foster care need more support and independent living skills training to help them transition from high school to college. Participants expressed concern about their lack of preparation for independent living. Even those who had succeeded in high school spoke about the struggles they continued to face.

Where am I going to go until college starts? What am I going to do when I turn 18 in January and graduate in May? College doesn’t start until September. What am I going to do all summer long? I don’t like sleeping in cardboard boxes. It doesn’t sound fun to me. Who is going to show me how to own a house or pay my taxes, how to fill out my bills and my paperwork? I don’t know any of that stuff. Where am I going to go for that help? Who am I going to turn to when I graduate to help me out? When I turn 18 the court says, ‘goodbye, see you later, have fun, you’re an adult, figure it out yourself.’ What it should say is, ‘you need help? Come talk to us’.

Coming to college has made life a lot better. I’m thankful for the [Foster Youth Alumni services Program] and this camp. This is something I wish I had when I was graduating, when I was leaving high school and going to college...when I turned 18 the lady [my foster parent] was like, your money is stopping, I don’t have anywhere for you to go. I didn’t have anyone to say, yeah, let’s go shopping for your dorm or bring you up to college. We need to establish programs, hands on programs, to help these young people learn these different things. Not only learn how to go to college, but also how to take care of themselves.

I came to college alone. I came here, close to dropping out my freshman year because I didn’t have any support. Now there are wonderful people [at MSU] who have come into my life. I can’t really say there was a lot of structure within the foster care system that helped me to get to that point where I am today. I don’t see enough programs that are specifically directed at foster youth so that they can go to college or so they can find a good job.

5.9. Discussion and implications for policy and practice

The themes that emerged from the testimony given by the Kidspeak® participants highlighted the challenges faced by high school and college students who are or were in foster care. Some of these challenges are familiar (i.e., the need for placement and school stability, the importance of connections to caring adults); others are less well known (i.e., participation in extra-curricular activities). The themes also point to several policy and practice recommendations aimed at breaking down barriers to educational attainment among this population.

The most frequently cited challenge was not having relationships with caring adults both in and out of school. Young people viewed the emotional support these relationships could provide as critical to their academic success. Equally important is the educational advocacy these adults could provide. This would help ensure that the educational needs of youth in foster care are being met.

Kidspeak® participants recommended that the Department of Human Services (DHS) promote the development of these relationships by matching youth in foster care with adult mentors who would provide guidance and support. Ideally, this support and guidance would continue beyond closure of the child welfare case. They also suggested that the Department promote lasting connections with family by placing youth with siblings or other relatives.

Placement instability was another challenge described by Kidspeak® participants. Not only did they draw a direct connection between changing placements and changing schools, but in addition, they explained how school mobility had limited their involvement in extra-curricular or afterschool activities. The Michigan Department of Education has

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taken steps to address this problem. Since February 2009, school districts have been required to provide youth in foster care with the same transportation and other services homeless youth are eligible for under the federal McKinney Vento Act during their first 6 months in a placement (Day, 2010). Students remain eligible for services if their placement changes again until the subsequent placement remains stable for a period of 6 months.

Several Kidspeak® participants testified about the adverse impact of mental health problems on school performance. However, they also expressed concern about the (over)use of psychotropic medications. What they wanted instead was for mental health services to be trauma-informed.

School-based health centers might be one way to increase access to those services. They have also been linked to other benefits including higher standardized test scores, fewer attendance and behavior problems, and reductions in school violence (Conway & Brinson, 2003). Although school-based health centers are not present in every Michigan county, their number is growing. Also relevant is Michigan’s Foster Care Nurse Home Visitation Pilot, which has been monitoring the use of psychotropic medication among youth in foster care since January 2011 (Alavi, Day, Fogarty, McCafferty, & Embaye, 2011).

Although most of the Kidspeak® participants spoke about barriers to high school completion, college may present an even greater challenge for some. Housing, in particular, seemed to be a big concern. This suggests that more attention should be paid not only to helping youth in foster care access postsecondary education but also to preparing them for the transition to college from high school.

In addition, college-access programs, such as the federal TRIO and GEAR UP programs, should make a more concerted effort to serve this population and take their unique circumstances into account. Among other things, these programs can help youth in foster care with postsecondary aspirations navigate the process of applying to college and for financial aid.

Although it is impossible to prove a causal link between the two, circumstantial evidence suggests that the testimony given by the young people at the twoKidspeak® events led to a number of actions by policy makers and other stakeholders. First, school supplies were purchased and delivered to several of the pre-college camp program attendees. Second, the State Court Administrator’s Office facilitated placement changes for a number of youth who had voiced concerns about the safety of their current placement. Third, Michigan’s Children partnered with the State Court Administrative Office to present Educational Issues in Child Welfare, a cross-training for judges, attorneys, and child welfare caseworkers on the educational disparities between youth in foster care and their peers was held. Fourth, the Michigan Supreme Court agreed to update the Education Benchbook10 for juvenile court judges.

Fifth, the Child Welfare Services (CWS) division of the State Court Administrative Office established a workgroup that included judges, lawyers, child welfare professionals, and foster care alumni focused on building a strong collaborative partnership with the Detroit Public Schools (DPS). The workgroup has since evolved into Project C.A.R.E. (Communication, Action/Accountability, Results and Evaluation). Finally, in July of 2011, the state’s consent decree was revised to prioritize the educational needs of children in foster care. Resources were appropriated in the state budget to provide incentives for up to six Michigan colleges and universities to adopt college access and retention programs.

A major limitation of this study is its small and purposive sample. Only young people who were pursuing or known by their case-workers as having an interest in pursuing postsecondary education were included. Their experiences and opinions may not represent those of the larger population of foster care youth and alumni with college aspirations. The sample was also predominantly African American and white. Future research should include students who identify as American Indian, Asian American, or Latino.

5.10. Conclusion

A comprehensive understanding of the factors that affect high school completion and college access among youth in foster care requires the perspectives of all stakeholders, including youth themselves. “Nothing about us without us,” a saying coined by advocates in the disability rights movement (Charlton, 1998), best captures this notion that youth should be engaged in policy discussions about how to help them overcome the many challenges to educational attainment that they face.

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References


10 TRIO programs target low-income students, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities. GEAR UP targets students in low-income elementary and secondary schools. The goal of both U.S. Department of Education administered programs is to increase high school completion and college enrollment by providing a variety of academic, counseling, and college preparatory service (Kuenni, 2005).
