

Supporting Foster Youth Transitioning into Adulthood:

A Literature Review

by

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**Supporting Foster Youth Transition into Adulthood:
A Literature Review**

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Dedication or Acknowledgement Page

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Abstract

"We were founded on the idea that everybody should have equal opportunity to succeed...Where you start should not determine where you end up"

- President Barack Obama

Each year thousands of children and youth come into the care of British Columbia's Ministry of Children and Family Development. For various reasons, these individuals are unable to live with their birth families and are moved to foster or group homes for an indeterminate amount of time. These individuals are at risk, as they begin their journey through the care of the ministry without the consistency and support which is afforded to their peers by their families. As these youth enter their teenage years and beyond they begin their transition into adulthood with little preparation and lack of support. As a result many youth struggle through this period of their lives by needing to drop out of school in order to financially support themselves, experiencing feelings of loneliness and isolation, and homelessness. This capstone explores how practitioners can bridge this gap in supporting foster youth in care in making the successful transition into adulthood. By maintaining supportive relationships, encouraging high school and post secondary education, as well as supporting youth in finding affordable housing, it is my hope that more youth will have success as they enter into adulthood. Using the framework of The Life Skills Tool Kit, foster youth will have immediate access to their personal and educational records, as well as essential life skill information, in the hopes that they stop falling through societies cracks.

Keywords: adulthood, age out of care, birth parents, connections, counsellor's role, education, foster care, foster child/youth, foster parents, high school, homelessness, life skills, love, ministry of children and family development, relationships, social worker, support, teacher, transition, tool kit, youth

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Supporting Foster Youth Transitioning into Adulthood:

Chapter 1: The Problem

"The experience of foster children in the child welfare system neither nurtures nor helps them to develop into productive, functioning adults. The trauma of abuse or neglect, disruption from frequent placement moves and school transfers, and lack of adequate nurturing, guidance, and support result too often in former foster youth not attaining the skills they need to support themselves as adults"

- Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006, p. 165.

Introduction

Researchers have labelled the period between ages 18 and 25 as "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 1997), which reflects the fact that most Americans do not expect their children to complete the transition to adulthood until they are at least 23 (Shirk & Strangler, 2004). Contradictory to this belief, when a youth in care turns 18 or 19 they are considered to be an adult and are no longer eligible to receive any provisions from the child welfare system (United States), or the Ministry of Children and Family Services (Canada). They automatically graduate to the next phase of their lives with, "very little assistance from their families, communities, or government" (Geenen & Powers, 2007, p. 1085). It is a bittersweet moment, as these youth simultaneously celebrate entering into adulthood while facing the reality that their supportive network is coming to an end.

Background to the Problem

According to Ferrell (2004), there are presently about half a million children in foster care, and approximately 20,000 of these youths will turn eighteen years of age, be classified as adults and emancipate or "age out" of the system each year. Based on a British Columbia study

entitled, *On Their Own: Examining the Needs of B.C. Youth as They Leave Government Care*, "approximately 8,000 children are in care in B.C. every year with about 700 of them aging out of care annually" (Turpel-Lafond, 2014, p. 10). Many foster youth transition out of the foster care system with few, if any financial resources; limited education, training, and employment options; no safe place to live; and with little or no supports from family, friends, and the community; making them particularly vulnerable to negative social outcomes such as jail, homelessness, unemployment, teen pregnancy and parenthood (Atkinson, 2008; Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Courtney et al., 2007; Fowler, Toro, Tompsett, & Hobden, 2006; Reilly, 2003; Shirk & Strangler, 2004).

Numerous studies have been implemented which seek to explore the hurdles which foster youth experience in the child welfare system and the isolation they face. Although research makes evident that investments in education are the most effective means to reduce poverty and unemployment, deter crime and lower incarceration rates (Noguera, 2002), child welfare advocates assert that children in foster care are not receiving the opportunities to learn what they need and deserve (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006, p. 165).

The Research

In order to thrive "each of us needs closeness on one hand and distance on the other, we need affirmation, support, security, love, and approval and independence, autonomy, freedom, and self-direction" (Richardson, 2010, p. 17). Based on the findings of McGoldrick, Carter, & Preto, (2011), "individual development always takes place in the context of significant emotional relationships and that the most significant are family relationships" (p. 5). The "need for togetherness originates, like everything else, in the family of origin" (Richardson, 2010, p. 21).

Many studies have coined the "term 'foster care drift' to describe the practise of youths in the foster care system who often spend years 'drifting' through temporary foster home placements" (Atkinson, 2008, p. 186). Further, "close to half of youths in foster care spend at least two years in the foster care system and almost 20% spend five or more year in foster care" (Atkinson, 2008, p 186). Presently in Canada Child and Family Services supports and protects approximately 85,000 children. For various reasons, children and youth become guardians of the state and live in foster care until they reach the age of adulthood. While this may be a short-term placement for some, the majority of these individuals will experience a lack of consistency and stability in their lives.

In 2004, the Child Welfare League of America reported that the states were especially weak in helping children achieve their permanency goals in a timely manner and in supporting families with services they need to care for their children. Consequently, private foundations such as The Casey Family Programs, which was established in 2003, aim to shed light onto "the consistent lack of positive adult outcomes of young people who have been in and out of home care, including disproportionately high school dropout rates, unemployment, homelessness and incarceration" (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006, p. 165). The findings of the Child Welfare League of America (2004) illustrate that, "states were especially weak in helping children achieve their permanency goals in a timely manner and in supporting families with services they need to care for their children".

According to the Pennsylvania Alliance for Children, (1974) it is both impractical and inhumane to place children, whether coming from their own disrupted homes or from institutions, with foster parents who are not well prepared to help them benefit emotionally and socially from such placement. Therefore it is essential that we "develop better definitions of this

complex role and in offer training and evaluation programs to parents and professional involved in the foster care system" (Guerney, 1977, p. 361). Based on the findings of Turpel-Lafond (2014), "young people leaving care face a double challenge: less access to the informal resources of family, friends and community and a greater need for support in each of these informal area of their lives" (p. 16).

Statement of the Problem

In order to more efficiently address the gaps in life skills required for youth aging out of care, it is essential that we examine the foundational skills necessary for one to become a well-rounded independent member of society. In 2001 The Casey Family Programs document entitled 'It's My Life' highlighted seven areas of competencies which need to be addressed in order for the development of children and youth in care and their successful transition into adulthood. The following seven areas can be illustrated through: education, housing, relationship, life skills, identity, youth engagement, emotional healing and financial support as key areas that help determine how successful a youth is likely to be in life after care (Reid & Dudding, 2006, p. 3).

According to Turpel-Lafond (2014), "there is a consistent message from research over the last 20 years, it is that the transition to adulthood has become longer, more complex and much harder to define" (p. 12). While the majority of youth entering adulthood have been previously exposed to these transitional skill sets, many youth in care have lacked the stability of placements, family members, or care givers to teach them these lessons. While these essential seven overarching factors support one another in the success of the children and youth I will be focusing my research on the former three. These essential life skills can be seen through

obtaining safe and affordable housing, completing their high school education, and developing meaningful and lasting relationships with their peers and adults in their lives.

Housing

"Instead of dealing with problems, they ship us from group home to group home"

Youth quoted in National Youth in Care Network, 2003

Having the ability to find and maintain a safe and affordable place to live is a skill set that many of us take for granted. It is a foundational need, which we likely learned from our parents or guardians as we approach adulthood. With their guidance and support the majority of young adults move out on to their own when they are financially, emotionally, and mature enough to become independent. Unfortunately, for youth in care this transition does not necessarily occur when their support system is in place or when they have a safe and affordable place to live.

In previous decades, when one's child reaches the age of adulthood (19 years old) they would find employment and move out onto their own. However, this is not consistent with the standards of today. The 2011 Canadian census showed that "42.3 percent of young adults ages 20 to 29 that year resided in the parental home either because they had never left or because they had returned home" (Turpel-Lafond, 2014, p. 16). Young adults in today's generation are more focused on education and employment and as a result either continue to live at home, or attempt to live independently only to return home. Turpel-Lafond's (2014), findings revealed that "during the period 1981 to 2001, the percentage of Canadians ages 25 to 34 who were still living at home with their parents more than doubled" (p. 16).

Further, Turpel-Lafond estimates that between 150,000 and 300,000 people are homeless in Canada and that nearly a third of them are 16 to 24 years old. (2014). This vulnerable and young age group represents a significant portion of the amount of homeless individuals in the

United States. In a study by the Casey Family Program (2003a), they discovered that "22% of former foster care youth were homeless for one or more nights within a year after being officially discharged from care" (p. 14).

Finding affordable housing is "likely more difficult for foster youth transitioning to adulthood who often lack the financial knowledge, resources and skilled assistance to enter this scarce competitive low-income renter market" (Lglehart, 1995, p. 422). As a result, although living situations vary considerably among foster youth in early adulthood foster youth are less likely to live with family members (Lglehart, 1995), less likely to own a home (Pecora et al., 2006), and more likely to live in an apartment (Buehler et al., 2000) than similarly aged adults in the general population. Lower earnings typically seen among foster youth (Buehler et al., 2000; Goerge et al., 2002; Macomber et al., 2008) may also make it more difficult for them to save up the costs of security deposits or advance rent payments. A lack of credit or renter's history further adds to the challenge of finding housing for foster youth (Housing for Youth Aging out of Foster Care, 2012).

In 2001, Berzin, Rhodes & Curtis compared housing outcome for foster youth to a matched sample of youth who share similar risk factors and to an unmatched sample using data from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Based on their findings, they discovered that "foster youth struggle more in the transition to independent living in comparison to both groups showing higher rates of homelessness, less housing stability, poorer neighbourhood quality, and more reliance on public housing assistance" (Berzin, Rhodes, & Curtis, 2001, p. 2119).

Another noted challenge is that foster youth often feel ill-prepared to navigate the process of finding housing and few receive concrete assistance in obtaining housing at discharge

(Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kalyor, & Nesmith, 2001; Reilly, 2003). Even among foster youth who find housing in early adulthood, many of their housing arrangements lack stability (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009). Multiple moves in the period following care are extremely common (Courtney et al., 2010; Reilly, 2003). For many foster youth, "limited family support and a history of housing instability make it difficult to obtain stable, independent housing as young adults" (Courtney et al., 2007, p. 2120).

The physical and emotional stress of not knowing where you are going to live can take a toll on this country's most vulnerable youth. Smithgall, Gladden, Yang, & George (2005), explain that the detrimental effects of never knowing where to call home and for how long you'll be welcome is emotionally damaging to youth. For many youth, they are "constantly living in homes in which they have no real stake, possibly with families that they feel may reject them at any time or in a group home where misbehaviours can result in eviction" (National Youth in Care Network, 2006, p. 13). The unfortunate reality for many youth in care is that the transient lifestyle of moving from placement to placement is a part of their reality and it will impact on all aspects of their life (Casey Family Program, 2003a, p. 13).

Education

"...the first thing that they do when they are dealing with behaviour problems is they want to suspend, and especially for a kid who is disconnected to school, that really does not do very much for them".

Youth quoted in Smithgall, Gladden, Yang & Goerge, 2005

In today's working world, having a high school diploma is necessary in order to find secure employment and typically to earn above minimum wage. However, for those who are unable to complete their high school GED (General Educational Development) or school leaving

certificate run a risk finding and maintaining stable employment, as well as being employed in low-skill and possibly low paying jobs. According to Turpel-Lafond (2014), "a person's level of education is one of the best indicators of the likelihood of achieving adult success, permanent employment and a living wage" (p. 12).

For children and youth in care, there are a multitude of factors which contribute to their struggles in obtaining academic success. For instance, "placement instability can lead to a revolving and unmanageable sequence of school changes, leaving children to negotiate making new friends, managing new teacher and learning a new curriculum in a system where they are consistently playing catch up" (Turpel-Lafond, 2014, p. 23). The insecurity which the child or youth experiences can be extremely stressful for them as they are suddenly uprooted from the lives they once knew. It is not surprising that as a result, "children who frequently move between placements don't form attachments to caregivers, impacting on their ability to do this in school" (Reid & Dudding, 2006, p. 10)

In order for these children and youth to discover success in the educational system other aspects of their lives much be addressed. They require guidance through their transitions and support for their traumatic experiences. If this is not provided, "those children and youth who suffer from emotional issues that aren't adequately addressed are not able to learn while in school, despite the best efforts of educators" (Smithgall et al., 2005, p. 10). According to the National Youth in Care Network, (2001), "a child or youth who is traumatized from years of abuse and neglect will not be able to explore their full potential in the classroom without having their emotional needs met as well" (p.10).

As children in care grow up to become youth in care they acquire the additional stresses associated with leaving the financial support of the ministry when they turn 19 years of age. For

many foster youths in senior high school, passing grade 12 courses can seem of little importance when you do not yet have a job, housing in place, and your 19th birthday is fast approaching. Unfortunately, those "without adequate levels of transitional supports are at greater risk of experiencing negative outcomes as young adults than their non-care peers" (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005, p. 212). For example, "they are significantly more likely not to graduate from high school and are less likely to attend or complete college or university" (Havalchuk et al., 2006). Based on the findings of Turpel-Lafond (2014), educational attainment is closely associated with positive personal outcomes and in terms of education, young people who continue to receive support past the age of majority appear to have a higher likelihood of successfully transitioning out of care" (p. 18).

Relationships

"Sometimes when you're separated from your family you can't really expect love from others...or you can expect it, but you must realize that it may not come. The burden rests on the foster child to adapt to the situation"

Youth quoted in Festinger, 1978

It has been widely researched that in order for children and youth to thrive they require the attention and support of a caring adult relationship. According to Turpel-Lafond (2014) "youth in care do better when they have strong social supports and feel connected to their families, schools and communities" (p. 21). While this can be seen through their birth families, foster families, or support workers, many develop this connection through their peer friendships, boyfriends and girlfriends. Studies have shown that youth who continue to have relationships with their birth parents and extended birth families have better outcomes and ensuring this

relationship exists when possible and in the best interests of the child, can help youth both in the present and in the future (Reid & Dudding, 2006, p. 7).

Yet, unfortunately for many children and youth in care developing and maintaining meaningful relationships can be difficult. According to Turpel-Lafond (2014), "being abused or neglected within their families may leave them unwilling to risk further hurt, separation or betrayal by investing in new relationships" (p 20). As a result of repeated foster home changes and enrolling in new schools, creating and maintaining these relationships with others can be challenging. Further, "entry into care can create a physical and emotional distance from family members, especially when the child is placed far from home or family contact is deliberately restricted" (Turpel-Lafond, 2014. p. 21). Therefore, having a positive and trusting relationship with an adult or an external support system plays an important role in helping youth overcome challenges, as children need to be encouraged by peers and adults in order to feel a sense of accomplishment and belonging (Reid & Dudding, 2006).

The Canadian and International Research on Outcomes for Youth in Care show that "youth have better outcomes when they have strong social supports and feel connected to their family, school and community" (Reid & Dudding, 2006, p. 6). Allowing youth transitioning into adulthood to maintain a supportive network would allow them the continuity and continued guidance from their team. Even more compelling is that youth themselves are saying that they need to have at least one supportive adult relationship as they make the transition to independence (Reid & Dudding, 2006, p. 6).

According to Reid & Dudding (2006), people who fail to develop secure emotional attachments in childhood are more likely to experience relationships problems later in life and that parent-child relations appear to have a strong influence on the types of relationships children

establish as they transition from adolescence to young adulthood" (p. 7). In order for people to thrive, "people need to feel that they matter to someone and that they have people who matter to them. This sense of mattering is what allows a feeling of connection to other people and to communities" (Turpel-Lafond, 2014, p. 21).

Purpose of the Literature Review

The purpose of my literature review is to develop a deeper understanding of the circumstances a child or youth experiences as they exit out of the care of the government. I aim to discover a more comprehensive insight into areas of potential growth and successes, as well as their shortcomings and challenges. The compilation of this literature review and the synthesis of the research findings will serve as a guide for teachers, counsellors, foster parents, and social workers in supporting some of our most vulnerable youth as they transition into adulthood.

In order to assist these helping professionals work with children and youth exiting the governments care, I will be examining strategies that can be put into practice and recommendations for these practitioners to be implemented into our school systems. As an educator and future counsellor I believe it is vital to recognize the strength of an individual who is no longer living in the care of their birth parents by honoring their resiliency in the face of this adversity. Developing an awareness of the multitude of challenges a child or youth in foster care may face, specifically in the educational system, is a vital piece that we must acknowledge and respect as educators.

Through my study, I hope to gain further insight into these key challenges youth face as they enter into adulthood and out of the care of the government. This knowledge will provide a framework in understanding the most effective ways in supporting their successful transition

during such a significant era of their lives. It is my hope that the research review will guide my practices not only with students, but with their foster families, birth families, and other educators.

I am interested in learning from other countries, provinces, and agencies concerning the successes and challenges they face in transitioning their children and youth from the supportive network of the government into adulthood. From my part time employment as a Residential Support Worker (RSW) with children and youth in foster care, I believe a lack of continuity between provinces, agencies, and countries exists which continues to hinder their growth and success. Each of them working as an independent entity based on their own guiding principles, age of transitioning out of care, and the level of support given into adulthood. While there are numerous connections and overlap shared between their stories of loneliness and isolation, it ultimately comes down to geography and what province or country they live in, which determines the level of supportive services that they will receive.

Importance of Study

Recognizing that adolescence is a challenging time for many individuals, we must acknowledge the greater difficulties that one inherently faces when living in, and exiting foster care. It is important to research the significant gaps which foster youth face that hinder their successes and enjoyment in life. Understanding and identifying these grey areas will allow practitioners, educators, and foster families to support youth in a more successful transition out of care and into adulthood. The importance of this literature-based capstone is to best inform educators in supporting students in foster care who will be graduating and aging into adulthood.

Summary

Turning 19 and entering into adulthood can be an emotionally challenging and scary time for all youth, but especially for youth in foster care. Having to say good bye to the safety and

security of their foster families and the financial support from the ministry to now living independently. Suddenly trying to make it solely on their own can be an overwhelming experience. Your friends continue to have the love and financial support of their families, as they go on to university, careers, or travel, while you are left alone to pick up your own pieces. For 700 youth in B.C. this is how they spend their 19th birthdays. It is a bittersweet moment as they enter into adulthood.

In order for youth to successfully leave the safety and security net of their family and home, numerous steps must be implemented and supports need to be put in place. A transition plan and continued assistance from caregivers, the ministry, and practitioners is required for this growth to be a positive one. While these essential life skills are not inclusive of, they include obtaining safe and affordable housing, completing their high school education, and developing meaningful and lasting relationships with their peers and adults in their lives. I am suggesting that with these three advantages, youth have a much greater likelihood of success. Without them, we can see through devastating statistics that we are systematically failing youth who exit the foster care system.

Outline of Remainder of Paper

Throughout the remainder of this paper I will look at the importance of supporting and educating our youth in transitioning into adulthood. In Chapter II, I will explore the approaches that other countries and provinces have employed when working with their youth in care aging out of the support network of the government. Chapter III will describe how teacher and counsellors in the education system can help support youth as they make this transition out of the care of the ministry.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Introduction

It is clear through the literature there must be a mutual responsibility and shared accountability across agencies to properly address the educational needs of youths in foster care, otherwise that whole cycle of marginalization and poverty continues for their entire life (Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2006). Having a supportive team is crucial to the success and growth of all individuals, not specifically children and youth in care. This unique group of individuals could thrive and live to their potential if they were to be afforded the same comforts and allowances as their peers.

Historical Background

The notion of children and youth living in the care of guardians other than their birth mother and father is not a new concept. In fact, some of the earliest records indicate that in England during the mid 1500's poor children were indentured until they became an adult. These laws "lead to the development and eventual regulation of family foster care in the United States and was the beginning of placing children into homes" (National Foster Parent Association, 2015).

Until recently in Canada records of youth in care exiting the system have been limited. According to Craig (2001) while there is paucity of Canadian research in this area, longitudinal research on outcomes for Canadian youth from care is essentially non-existent and has been recognized as a major knowledge gap by researchers, practitioners, and policy makers alike.

Definitions

- Age of Majority - In BC, children are considered adults instead of minors at age 19. In other parts of Canada, the age of majority is either 18 or 19, while in the United States and elsewhere, it can be as high as age 21. (British Columbia Family Maintenance Enforcement Program, 2015).
- Child - A person under the age of 18 years of age, and includes a youth unless otherwise specified. (The Foster Care Handbook, 2015).
- Custody - Having care, control (physical residence, etc.) and maintenance of the child. (The Foster Care Handbook, 2015).
- Director of Child Protection - A person designated by the Minister of Children and Family Development under the CFCSA Act. The Director may delegate any of all of his or her powers, duties, and responsibilities under the Act. (Turpel-Lafond, 2014, p 43)
- Former youth in care - A young person who is no longer living under the care of the ministry. (Turpel-Lafond, 2014, p 43)
- Foster Parent - Are people who come from many different backgrounds and with many different life experiences. They all share a commitment to caring for children who are coping with a very difficult time in their young lives. Children do not need perfect foster parents, but they do need adults who are committed to caring for them. (Becoming a Foster Parent, 2015).
- Guardian - A guardian is the person who is responsible for the care, maintenance, and well-being of the child. Typically, a child's guardian(s) are the mother and/or the father. However, any other individual may be appointed a child's guardian by way of a Court order or agreement. (The Foster Care Handbook, 2015).

- Permanency - The objective is for every child to be a wanted and valued member of a family unit, and to live in an environment with nurturing caregivers who will support the child through a successful transition into adulthood, and who are prepared to facilitate the establishment and/or maintenance of lifelong positive relationships. The goal of permanency planning is to cultivate a sense of belonging and wellbeing for each child receiving services under the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act. A successful permanency outcome is one that builds on stability, attachment and belonging for the child. (The Foster Care Handbook, 2015).
- Practice - The professional method in which caseworkers work with a family, utilizing practical and academic knowledge. (The Foster Care Handbook, 2015).
- Social Worker - a profession concerned with helping individuals, families, groups and communities to enhance their individual and collective well-being. It aims to help people develop their skills and their ability to use their own resources and those of the community to resolve problems. (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2015)
- The Child, Family and Community Service Act (CFSA) - Is the legislative authority for the ministry's Child Protection Services. Under the Act, the Minister designates the Director of Child Protection, who in turn delegates the provision of child protection services across the province to child protection social workers. (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2015).
- The Ministry of Children and Family Development - The Ministry works together with Delegated Aboriginal Agencies, Aboriginal service partners and approximately 5400 contracted community social service agencies and foster homes, cross government and social sector partners to deliver inclusive, culturally respectful, responsive and accessible

services that support the well-being of children, youth and families. The primary focus is to support vulnerable children and their families using a client-centered approach to service delivery that builds on the family's existing resources and capacities. (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2015).

- Youth - A person who is 16 years of age or over, but under 19 years of age (Turpel-Lafond, 2014, p. 44)
- Youth Agreement - A youth agreement is a legal agreement between the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) and youth aged 16 to 18. The purpose of the agreement is to help youth gain independence, return to school, or gain work experience and life skills (Turpel-Lafond, 2014, p 44).
- Youth in care - A young person who is under the care of the ministry (Turpel-Lafond, 2014, p. 44).

Responsibility for Youth in Care in British Columbia

In British Columbia, the Child, Family, and Community Service Act (CFCSA) is provided by the regional ministry offices and authorized by the child welfare agencies. Through these agreements, the Provincial Director of Child Protection transfers authority to delegated Aboriginal Agencies (DAAs) to undertake child welfare responsibilities. The ministry's 12 service delivery areas in B.C. support the child welfare programs by providing various services such as an intake team. This team of skilled helping professional assess, report, make community referrals and work with the family for up to 30 days. If further support for the family is required, their file is then transferred to the family support or family development response teams, where cases can be separated for youth, children in the permanent custody of the ministry, and for children in the process of adoption. (Turpel-Lafond, 2014).

Canadian Examples

British Columbia

In 2007 Deborah Rutman, Carol Hubberstey, and April Feduniw completed their final report of a three-year longitudinal study called *When Youth Age Out of Care - Where to From There?* In partnership with BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, Greater Victoria Child and Youth Advocacy Society, and the National Youth in Care Network, they explored the various outcomes of youth who exit the foster care system. In order to address this growing concern, *The Promoting Positive Outcomes for Youth from Care* study was designed to gain a better understanding of the challenges, successes, supports and resources that youth face as they leave government care and was conceived to address.

Researchers followed 37 youth over a 2.5 year period interviewing them on four separate intervals which were staggered 6-9 months apart. Participants were selected from two communities in British Columbia, one a metropolitan center and the other from a small town to participate in four face-to face interviews. The focus of this study was to address, "what are young people's experiences and status over time in relation to various life domains including social relationships and support, physical and mental health, criminal justice system, education and employment, during the period of their imminent of recent aging out of care" (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007, p. 2).

From the first initial wave of data, researchers noticed a pattern between youth who had previously lived in care and those who had not. The data indicated that youth from care had: (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007, p. 5)

- A lower level of education
- Were more likely to be on income assistance at age 19

- Engaged in higher levels of alcohol and drug use
- A more fragile social support network, as well as tenuous ties to family and
- Reported that their single biggest health condition was depression.

Results from the second stage of interviews continued along the same path as the first.

These findings included: (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007, p. 5)

- Transience was considerable - 30% of participants had moved four or more times in the first year and half after leaving care
- Homelessness had been experienced by 45% of participants
- More participants were on income assistance at Time 2 than at Time 1
- Nearly a third of participants (30%) were now young parents, and of those, 60% had had some type of Ministry of Children and Family Development involvement
- Youth reported financial hardship as the worst or most challenging aspect of leaving care, along with the loss of supportive relationships
- Depression continued to be the most frequently reported health issue. Depression and/or depressive symptoms/treatment was experienced by 48% of participants, a jump from 38% at Time 1

The results from the first and second wave of interviews also suggested a feeling of disconnection with social service networks. Throughout the interviews, "youth noted the unnaturalness, arbitrations and finality of the severing of these relationships and experienced them as a loss that challenged their successful transition from care" (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007, p. 5).

During the fourth interview, there was a significant shift in the number of youth struggling to find and maintain affordable living accommodations. According to the fourth

interviews, "20% (n=4) were in low income housing whereas at Time 2, 6% (n=2) were in low income housing" (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007, p. 17). Similar to these findings, during the Time 2 interviews, "45% n=15 of youth participants reported that they had experienced homelessness at some point in their life" (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007, p. 18). Further, the data revealed that, of all "homeless" youth, 73% (n=11/15) were homeless from ages 13-16 years" (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007, p. 18), and that "53% (n=8/15) of homelessness youth were homeless for more than 3 months" (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007, p. 18).

Historically, graduating from high school has been a challenge for many youth exiting from care. During the first wave of interviews, 32% (n=12) of the youths in the study had completed high school or were attending post secondary. In comparison, when the same group of participants were interviewed approximately two years later, 52% (n=11) of those interviewed did not complete high school. Based on these findings, "less than half of our participants had finished high school by age 20 or 21" (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007, p. 18). Compared to other same aged youth living at home in these two BC regions, 71-72% complete high school (BC Stats, 2003). (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007, p. 18). Consequently, all of the participants in this study who had not graduated high school by the time they turned 19, did not return to complete it at a later date. During interviews 3 and 4, "some of the reasons provided for not returning to school included: working full time, not having the funds, being pregnant or parenting, finding learning difficult and not having educational goals" (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007, p. 19).

During each wave of interviews, participants were asked how connected and supported they felt from family members, friends, and other professional supports. Being connected was

defined as "being or feeling emotionally close, regardless of the amount of contact they had with the person" (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007, p. 32). During each interview, the majority of participants revealed that they felt more connected to their sibling(s) (74-82%) than to their mother, father, or any other family member (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007, p. 32). Throughout the study, feeling of connectedness to their families did not vary and the majority of participants felt closer to their mothers than their fathers.

Ontario

"Our government has listened carefully to youth in and leaving care. That is why, together with the Youth Leaving Care Working Group, we have developed new resources and supports that will help these young people handle the challenges that they face so they may reach their full potential"

Laurel Broten

Minister of Children and Youth Services

On November 18th and 25th 2011, the province of Ontario held Canada's first hearing for youth in and leaving the care of The Children's Aid Society (CAS). Youth of all ages gathered together at the Youth Leaving Care Hearings at Queens Park, the provincial legislature to share their experiences and stories of being in and leaving care. On Day One of the hearing, there were more than 300 people in attendance and by Day Two more than 500 people came to listen to the 183 submissions of current and previous youth in care. Through the impact of their struggles and challenges, it became apparent more support was needed for Ontario's most vulnerable youth.

Following this hearing, a report was submitted by current and former youth in care to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services in May 2012 entitled, 'My REAL Life Book'. As a

result, The Youth Leaving Care Working Group was created in July 2012 to develop the first recommendation from the youth's life book. The group comprised of nine youth in and from care and seven community members from youth service organizations and met 11 times over the next five months to complete an action plan for fundamental change.

According to The Youth Leaving Care Hearing Team (2012), "almost 17,000 of Ontario's 3.1 million children are in the care of Children's Aid Societies (CAS), which means that on any given day, 1 out of 182 children in Ontario is in care" (p. 33). From these 17,000 children and youth, "the Province of Ontario is the legal guardian of more than 8,300 Crown Wards; these are children and youth who are living in various parts of the care system" (The Youth Leaving Care Hearing Team, 2012, p. 33). It is therefore not surprising that "just 44% of youth in care graduate from high school, compared to an 82% graduation rate for the general population" (The Youth Leaving Care Hearing Team, 2012, p. 33) as well, "43% of homeless youth have had previous child welfare involvement and 68% have come from foster homes, group homes and/or a youth center" (The Youth Leaving Care Hearing Team, 2012, p. 33). It is clear from the statistics on youth leaving care in Ontario that there is a fundamental need for change.

On January 24, 2013 this action plan titled, 'Blueprint for Fundamental Change to Ontario's Child Welfare System' was submitted to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. It is organized into seven overarching themes, which provides goals and recommendations to ministry and service providers. These themes can be seen as (Final Report of the Youth Leaving Care Working Group, 2013, p. 3):

- Relationships
- Education and employment

- Healthy development
- Transition support
- Youth justice
- Group care
- Ministry policy

Recommendations for these themes were further subdivided into short term (1-3 years), medium-term (4-6 years), and long term (7-10 years) time frames. According to The Final Report of the Youth Leaving Care Working Group (2013) "these time frames recognize that while some recommendations are relatively straightforward to implement, others will require additional consultation, development of new policies, processes, or partnerships, and in some cases may require legislative change" (p. 4).

Having a caring and meaningful relationship with others is fundamental to the growth and success of all children and youth. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the first recommendation and priority, from The Final Report of the Youth Leaving Care Working Group is to strengthen these relationships. Based on their findings here are a few of their recommendations:

- Every child and youth in and from care has permanent lifelong relationships that meet their personal and cultural needs
- Children and youth in care grow up with many opportunities to develop permanent, supportive relationships with caregivers, staff, community members and extended family
- Children and youth in group care have consistent and stable relationships with group care staff

- young people who are receiving child welfare services are provided with consistent information and assistance (pre-and post-natal) to support them in caring for their children and to help create permanency for their families

(Final Report of the Youth Leaving Care Working Group, 2013, p. 7)

Based on such a staggeringly low graduation rate of 44%, children and youth require more support to stay in school and successfully graduate from high school. Recommendations from The Final Report of the Youth Leaving Care Working Group (2013, p. 9) included:

- Children and youth in and from care are supported to participate fully and successfully in elementary and secondary school
- Caregivers demonstrate the importance of school success to children's and youth in care and support them to meet their full educational potential
- Teachers and school staff are knowledgeable about mental health, emotional health, social, cultural and educational challenges that children and youth in and from care may face and are able to connect them to appropriate programs offered in the school and the community
- Youth in and from care and their teachers workers, and caregivers have information about options and supports for post-secondary education, training and apprenticeships
- Youth in and from care and their teachers, workers, and caregivers have ongoing discussions about career plans and options starting from an early age
- The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities make the Student Assistance Program application process an easy and accessible as possible for youth in and from care
- Aboriginal children and youth have access to distinct and culturally appropriate educational supports in their communities

- Have access to increased financial supports for post-secondary education that allow them to attend school part-time or to take more than four years to graduate
- Children's aid societies partner with businesses, trade associations, and youth-serving community agencies to provide meaningful work experience/internship opportunities for youth in and from care

In order to transition to adulthood there are many steps which must be successfully negotiated by the youth. This is a challenging process and based on the recommendations from the Final Report of the Youth Leaving Care Working Group (2013, p. 14):

- Have transition plans that relate to their goals and that identity and prepare them to access relevant supports long before they leave care
- The ministry raise the age of Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM) to 25 in phases
- Youth from care have prescription and dental health insurance coverage from age 18 to age 25
- Youth from care have the option to be connected to youth in transition workers
- Children's aid societies work with youth to explore housing options before they leave care, including connecting them with supportive or transitional housing
- Youth from care have access to information about services that meet their specific needs (e.g. LGBTQ, faith and cultural identity) available to them in the communities where they live

As a result of these and other recommendations identified in the 2013 Final Report of the Youth Leaving Care Working Group, the Ontario government has since begun to invest in new resources and support for children and youth in and leaving care. These include:

- Raising the minimum monthly financial support to youth aged 18-21 to \$850 - an increase of \$187
- Providing \$500 per month to youth aged 21-25 enrolled in OSAP - eligible postsecondary education and training programs
- Introducing new mentorship opportunities for young people in care
- Enhancing training for caregivers
- Funding up to 50 new youth in transition workers to support young people leaving care. They will provide support and advice on life skills, such as money management and job searches to youth aged 16-24 who have left care
- Ontario is investing approximately \$24 million in new resources and supports to help youth in and leaving care transition to adulthood and succeed
- In 2011-2012 there has been a 3.2 per cent reduction in the number of kids in the care of the CAS's and almost 8,000 children have been adopted through CASs.
- In response to the Youth Leave Care My REAL Life Book report, a private members bill was introduced in the legislature to designate May 14 each year as Children and Youth In Care Day

("Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services", 2013)

Supports available once they leave care:

- Youth who are 16 and 17 years old and who have left care can return to their children's aid society to receive supports up to the age of 18 through the Renewed Youth Supports Program
- Once youth turn 18, they may be eligible to receive financial and other supports until the age of 21 through Continued Care and Support for Youth agreements.

- Savings from the Ontario Child Benefit Equivalent Program may help meet some of the needs of older youth. Through this program, youth also get help learning how to manage their money
- Starting in the summer of 2014, eligible youth aged 21 to 24 who have left care can access prescription drug, dental and extended health benefits
("Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services," 2013)

Support for Post Secondary

- Education championship teams also provide support. This could include mentoring or orientation programs to former youth in care to help with the transition to college or university. The teams include representatives from local school boards, children's aid societies, college and universities, community agencies and Employment Ontario
- Youth ages 21 to 24 (inclusive) and enrolled in Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) eligible post secondary education and training program can get a \$500 a month through the Living and Learning Grant during the school year to help with their living costs
- Every university in Ontario has partnered with the government to provide 100 per cent of tuition costs for youth who are eligible for Continued Care and Support for Youth. A third of Ontario colleges also provide free tuition to eligible youth
- other financial supports for post-secondary education include college and university application fee refunds and bursaries, tuition grants, income exemptions, and loans through OSAP.
("Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services," 2013)

Other supports for youth in care:

- Ontario will strengthen caregiver training for foster parents and group homes staff to better support youth as they transition to adulthood
- School boards have been invited to submit applications to run pilot programs for youth in care or receiving CAS services in the 2013-2014 school year. These programs will help students do better in school.

("Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services," 2013)

Ontario is the first province in Canada to make such dramatic changes to their policies and procedures for children and youth in and leaving care. This inclusive model, which is based on the voices of children, youth, and community members represents a holistic model for transition and success for our most vulnerable children and youth. Based on the workings of The Final Report of the Youth Leaving Care Working Group (2013), they believe that "to be successful, the child welfare system must allow every youth person in and leaving care, no matter where they are, who they are, or what their circumstances are, the best possible opportunity to achieve their potential" (p. 4).

The United States:

Nevada

In 2000 Thom Reilly examined the data from the Child Welfare Action Form to track children and youth in Nevada's foster care system. After receiving informed consent, Reilly interviewed the youth from September 2000 and January 2001. During these four months 105 youth were interviewed in 60-90 minute sessions. Each of the youth who were interviewed had left care at least six months prior to this study. Reilly's 2003 study explored, " the post discharge functioning of youth in the following areas: employment, education, living arrangements, health

care and safety, legal involvement, preparation for life in the community, support systems, overall adjustments, and indicators of difficulties and successes" (p. 729).

From the original 239 names of youth who had recently exited care, researchers were able to make contact with 105 of these individuals. Researchers used various methods in order to locate participants such as; reaching out to their previous address, connecting with a range of foster parents and group homes, as well as putting up posters in locations known to be frequented by youth. Interviewers received three hours of training and were matched with their participant based on gender. These eight (n=8) interviewers were graduate students from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, School of Social Work.

Participants were asked 10 questions about their current and former living arrangements, how many times they have moved, as well as 12 questions about their current and previous educational experiences, which were adapted from Cook's (1991) study (Reilly, 2003, p. 731). In order to gauge the levels of participants support system, "the researcher adapted questions from Courtney and Piliavin's (1998) study about current contacts; how close participants were to various individual's (using a response scale ranging from 1 [very close] to 4 [not close at all], which was averaged to form a composite score); dating relationships, children, sexual activity, violence in dating relationships; and perceived social support" (Reilly, 2003, p. 731).

Results indicated that 50% of the 105 participants did not obtain a high school certificate, "the number of young adults obtaining a high school degree rose to 69%, with 30% indicating they were attending or had attended college" (Reilly, 2003, p. 735). Although 75% of participants revealed that they aspired to one day obtain a college degree, numerous studies have found that out-of-home placement poses serious challenges to educational achievement" (Bart, 1990, Blome, 1997, Mech & Che-Mn Fung, 1999).

In addition, 2% of respondents disclosed that they were currently homeless. While "since leaving foster care, a startling 36% indicated that there had been times when they did not have a place to live (19% reported living on the streets and 18% lived in a homeless shelter) (Reilly, 2003, p. 736). Since leaving care 35% of the 105 participants had moved five or more times, which raises the question about the need for stability in the lives of these youth. Research has found that "multiple placements while in foster care were linked to several negative circumstances, including and increased likelihood of having trouble with the law, being incarcerated, living on the streets or being homeless, having higher rates of pregnancy, and experiencing violence in a dating relationship" (Reilly, 2003, p. 741).

When asked about their current contact with others, "most respondents reported contact with siblings (74%), relatives (63%), former foster parents (54%), grandparents (45%), their birthmothers (37%), group home staff (35%), their birth fathers (30%), or previous caseworkers (29%) (Reilly, 2003, p. 737). Data also concluded that, "positive support systems are critical to the successful transition of youth in the community and these supports can provide needed resources for these youth as they experience unexpected circumstances and obstacles to life on their own" (Reilly, 2003, p. 742).

John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program came into effect in 2000 when the United States Congress passed the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) in 1999. This program was created to prepare youth for the transition into independent living while also recognizing the importance of permanency in planning for adulthood. In order to prepare youth, the "FCIA doubled the amount of federal money available to assist states in providing

independent living services and it focuses on education, employment and life skills training (Kessler, 2004, p. 30).

In order to ensure a continual level of service, states are required to use a portion of these funds to offer continued support and services to foster youth who have aged out of care. They are also encouraged to use "up to 30% of their funds to pay for the room and board of 18- 20-year-old former foster youth, which ensures that youth at risk of homelessness have supports in place to lessen the likelihood of becoming or remaining homeless" (Reid, & Dudding, 2006, p. 30).

To support the educational challenges that youth transitioning out of foster care face, The John H Chafee Program urges that for youth who are likely to experience difficulty adapting into adulthood that the state allow for post-secondary education and training vouchers up to \$5000 in order to support them in their transition. Further, "states may allow youth participating in the voucher program on their 21st birthday to remain eligible until they reach 23 years old, with the stipulation that they are enrolled in a post secondary education or training program and are making satisfactory progress towards completion of the program (National Foster Care Coalition, 2005, p. 7).

Further, the Foster Care Independence Act "included language calling for the federal government to work with states to develop and implement within 2 years a system to track outcomes (including measures of educational attainment, employment, avoidance of dependency, homelessness, non-marital childbirth, incarceration and high risk behaviours) that could be used to assess the performance of states in operating independent living programmes" (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006, p. 210). On April 28 2009 the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) was implemented, thus requiring states to begin reporting their data outcomes by 2011.

According to this act, "beginning October 2010, states will be required to report data on young people currently and formerly in foster care who received independent living services ("served youth") and youth formerly in care regardless of whether they received independent living services ("tracked youth")" (Freundlich, 2010, p. 36).

Further, states will be required to collect baseline information for all young people in care at age 17 and then follow up with a sample of those individuals at ages 19 and 21. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008a). States will survey young people and report data on six outcomes: (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008b)

- Financial self-sufficiency (employment data, assistance receipt)
- Educational attainment (enrollment/attendance, completion)
- Positive connections with adults (adult connections are not defined)
- Homelessness
- High-risk behavior (incarceration, substance abuse referral, childbirth)
- Access to health insurance (Medicaid, other insurance)

The Midwest Study

From 2002 and 2007, 732 youth ages 17 to 18 years who were under the care of the child welfare agency were interviewed three separate times during The Midwest Study. This longitudinal study examined the adult functioning of former foster youth as they transitioned into adulthood in the states of Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin through three different periods of interviews. Each of these states varies in the age which youth in care transition into adulthood. In Illinois a youth can remain in the care of child welfare until they are 21, whereas in Iowa and Wisconsin the age of adulthood is 18 years old.

In 2006 this study was the "first large scale longitudinal examination of the transition to adulthood for foster youth who came of age after the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999" (Courtney, Dworsky, 2006, p. 210). The first interview was completed by 732 youth ages who remained in the care of the child welfare agency. These youth ranged in ages from 17 to 18 years old and they were interviewed between May 2002 and March 2003. The "first interview focused on the experiences of the youth while in care and covered a variety of domains including, employment, physical and mental health, social support, relationships with family, delinquency and contact with the criminal justice system, victimization, substance abuse, sexual behaviour, and receipt of independent living services" (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004, p. 7).

The participation in the second interview changed to 603 interviewees from 732 and was conducted between March to December 2004. The questions in the second interview were centralized around their experiences since the first interviews and for some, their experiences since leaving care. The youth were again interviewed between their 21st and 22nd birthday. During this final interview, all of the participants were no longer in care as they had reached the age of adulthood.

Once the youth had reached the age of adulthood, the majority of the individuals were having difficulties transitioning to life on their own. According to the study of *The Early Outcomes for Young Adults Transitioning from out-of-home care in the USA* by Courtney & Dworsky (2006), "too many are neither employed nor in school, have children that they are not able to parent, suffer from persistent mental illness or substance use disorders, find themselves without basic necessities, become homeless, or end up involved with the criminal justice system" (p. 211).

A significant number of foster youth transitioning into adulthood struggle to graduate from high school or obtain their general equivalency degree (GED). According to Courtney & Dworsky (2006), "more than one-third (37.1%) had neither a high school diploma nor a GED compared with 90.6% of the national sample" (p. 212). In addition, "those still in care were more than twice as likely to be enrolled in a school or training programme as those who had been discharged (66.7% vs. 30.8%) and young adults in care were over three times more likely than their counterparts who were no longer in care to be enrolled in a 2- or 4- year college (37.2% vs. 11.7%)" (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006. p. 213). The educational successes of those in care appear to be improved when foster youth are able to stay in care longer than their 18th birthday.

Homelessness continues to be a challenge for youth transitioning out of the child welfare system, as they are unprepared and have little to no income to support themselves with. At the time of this study, although "only two of our study participants were homeless at the time of our interview, about one in seven (13.8%) of those no longer in care reported that they had been homeless at least once since they were discharged and more than one-third reported that their living arrangements had changed twice or more during that period" (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006, p. 213).

Based on the findings from Courtney et al, (2004), the interviews that were conducted when the "study participants were 17-18 years old suggest that foster youth about to make the transition to adulthood generally come from very troubled families, have suffered significant trauma prior to entering out-of-home care, have significant educational deficits and too often have experienced care histories that only exacerbate the challenges they brought with them into care (Courtney et al, 2004, p. 217). Yet despite the numerous challenges youth transitioning out of care face, "this study also illustrates that youth in care have a higher likelihood for success

when they are able to slowly transition out of care with the support and guidance of family and the child welfare system". (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006, p 218).

The Casey Family Programs

“...we will use every resource we have to see that children put at risk by family circumstances have the means to grow into hopeful citizens with worthy futures.”

- Casey Family Programs

Jim Casey, the founder of United Parcel Services (UPS) grew up in a close household and through the lessons of his parents, Jim began to understand the value and importance of family and devoted himself to becoming a private foster care provider. The foundations that he created in 1966: The Annie E Casey Foundation and The Casey Family Programs were established to help those who did not have a strong supportive family life like he did. Their mission is to, provide and improve, and ultimately, to prevent the need for foster care by providing direct services and promoting advances in child welfare practices and policies (Reid, & Dudding, 2006).

Based on the research of The Casey National Alumni study, they "found that life skills preparation, completing high school diploma or GED before leaving care, scholarships for college or job training, participation in clubs and organizations for youth in while in foster care, not being homeless within a year of leaving care, minimized academic programs and minimized use of alcohol or drugs are all characteristics that predicted the level of success for a foster care alumni (Casey Family Programs, 2003a). The Casey Family Programs has created programs based on this study to successfully support youth in care transitioning out of the foster care system.

According to a national study of high school graduation rates, "54% of foster care alumni had completed high school while 72.5% of Casey alumni had received a high school diploma or GED by the time their case closed, with a total of 86% obtaining a diploma or GED at some point in their lives, while the general population has a high school/GED completion rate of 80.4%" (Reid, & Dudding, 2006, p. 29). Through extensive financial, as well as social and emotional support The Casey Programs demonstrate the potential and educational possibilities of youth in care.

Further, "over 85% of all youth in this program participate in an extra-curricular activity such as sports, the arts religious organizations or other hobbies, as the Casey programs financially supports this involvement and makes it possible for these youth when it would be otherwise unavailable" (Reid, & Dudding, 2006, p. 29). Believing in creating a balanced and well rounded individual, this programs places a strong emphasis on extra-curricular activities which allows children and youth in foster care "to show their value both personally and academically" (Reid, & Dudding, 2006, p. 29). The Casey Family Programs illustrate the potential that these children and youth possess when they are supported in multiple aspects of their lives and the greater probability that they have to transition successfully into adulthood.

International Studies

Australia

In 2003 St. Luke's Anglicare in the Australian rural city of Bendigo introduced a Leaving Care and After Care Support Service (LCACSS), which provides holistic and comprehensive assistance including case management; links to designated housing; transition units for independent living; living skills education; links to education and training; family support including rebuilding connections; and practical and material support to store and acquire suitable

clothing and furniture" (Bonnice 2003, p. 72). This model emphasizes strengthening links with family, community, and addressing ones cultural needs through a developmental approach of each individual so interventions are appropriate to both their age and state of maturity including those who have an intellectual disability (Mendes, 2011, p. 70). This service promotes a multi-faceted approach, as it examines key areas of support necessary for a transitioning youth.

Mendes, an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work at Monash University in Melbourne Australia explored the significance of a community development model for supporting foster youth transitioning out of care. He based his study on the services provided by St. Luke's Anglicare in Benigo. In his paper, Mendes argues that "a community development support model based on a partnership between professional social welfare workers and local community networks is most likely to enhance opportunities for the social inclusion of care leavers" (Mendes, 2011, p. 69). Here, community development "is defined as the employment of community based structures to address social needs and collectively empower groups of people to determine their own destiny" (Mendes, 2011, p. 71).

In Australia, most states and territories have introduced specialist leaving care and after care programs and supports, particularly in the state of Victoria (Mendes, 2011, p. 70). In 1998, "the Victorian government introduced a Leaving Care Service Model Project which aimed to strengthen support for young people leaving care aged 14-18 years" (Mendes, 2011, p. 70). In addition a "mentoring program was provided for some care leavers" (Mendes, 2004), and through the Children, Youth and Families Act of 2005, Victoria legislated for the provision of leaving care and after care services for young people up to age 21 (Mendes, 2011, p. 70). This model of social inclusion "for care leavers would aim to promote participation in mainstream activities by linking care leavers with a range of professional and community supports" (Mendes,

2011, p. 70). Further, these supports would address key developmental needs in areas such as housing; education, employment and training; social and family relationships; self care; health; and financial support and independent living skills (Pinkerton 2006).

The Role of the School

The role which a school plays in the life a foster youth is pivotal towards their success in transitioning into adulthood. As Atkinson (2008) explains, "maintaining a stable school could help reduce the negative educational outcomes associated with growing in the foster care system" (p. 199). As youth begin to enter into adulthood and exit the care of the ministry, the connections and supports that are made during this stage as well as the significance of graduating from high school could be life changing. Yet despite this, "as children move, their educational records fail to follow them or arrive far too late; in the process they lose critical services and both general and special education entitlements" (Atkinson, 2008, p. 192). Furthermore, "changing schools frequently, "reinforces a cycle of emotional trauma of abandonment and repeated separations from adults and friends" (Atkinson, 2008, p. 193).

One of the underlying factors is that "foster care youth suffer because they do not have caring adults to advocate for them in the school systems" (Atkinson, 2008, p. 192). In order to address these concerns, Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea (2006) recommend "creating a designation of educational liaisons to advocate for the educational needs of children in foster care to; ensure timely enrolment in and checkout of school; maintain and transfer school records; and ensure appropriateness of school programs" (p. 172). Developing an all-encompassing framework by "including the educators as members of the initial intake teams for all foster youth, as they would be responsible for examining available education records and providing assessment in areas in which no information exists" (p. 172). Having one professional to connect with and distribute

information to all the key individuals will likely reduce confusion, frustration, and wait time amongst the youths support network. Furthermore, this may bring a sense of connection and inclusion amongst all the youths support networks.

The Role of the Social Worker

The roles and the responsibilities of a social worker is not an easy position or one that they take lightly. They are front line workers and are responsible for the safety and well being of children and youth all across British Columbia. Each day they make decisions that directly affect the lives of others. Social workers are overloaded with cases of families and individuals in distress and can be required to make decisions on their behalf with the individuals best interests in mind. Although each child or youth in the foster care system is assigned a social worker, not all of them are able to find the time to work in collaboration with them. Interestingly, in a study that interviewed 72 participants in the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services foster care program "foster youth expressed sympathy for the caseworker around the challenges of communication and collaboration" (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007, p. 428). Further, the foster youth also "expressed understanding for the caseworkers large caseloads and lack of experiences" (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007, p. 428).

Based on an article by Prop, Ortega & NewHeart (2003), "they examine the idea of self-sufficiency as it relates to youth transitioning from the foster care system by reshaping practise approaches by emphasizing the values of interdependence, connection and collaboration" (p. 259). Here the relationship is based on active collaboration, mutual respect, and shared decision-making between the youth and their social worker. Using this framework, youth in care would become active participants in all decisions that affect them. Having an integral role in the decision making process would likely create a more meaningful outcome and likely to be maintained. By

"involving youth in the decision to seek connections and assisting them with developing and maintaining connections is an important role of the child welfare caseworker and foster parent" (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007, p. 433).

Although many social workers are unable to spend as much time with their clients as they would like, for many youth their social workers are the only consistent adult in their lives. Based on the study by Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown (2007), approximately 25% of participants named their former foster parent(s) or their former social worker as someone whom they could turn for either emotional or practical support" (p. 37). The role of the social worker "will be based on active collaboration, mutual respect, and shared decision-making between the youth and the caseworker (Lee, 1994)

The Role of the Youth

Nearly all of the children and youth in foster care do not enter the government system voluntarily, but rather forcefully with little to no say in the decisions that affect them. They are assigned a social worker (or case worker) and the majority of them are placed in the care of unfamiliar foster families, overcrowded group homes, or in some cases family relatives.

In a 2007 study by Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter they interviewed 72 participants in the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services foster care program. Their study intended to "ask the youth themselves and their circle of support (foster parents and social workers) what they saw the challenges to be and what additional services would be helpful"(Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007, p. 426). The voices of youth in care unanimously identified greater communication and having a voice in the decisions made that affect them. In this study, the participants "noted the unnaturalness, arbitrariness and finality of the

severing of these relationships and experienced them as a loss that challenged their successful transition from care" (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007, p. 4).

Existing Canadian literature echo's the findings from Rutman, Hubberstey, and Feduniw as a study by the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies found that, "youths principal concern was lack of reliable emotional support, described as loneliness, having no one to turn to, talk to, and having no one to turn to when uncertain or confused, followed by a lack of financial support (OACAS, 2006, p. 6). According to Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter (2007), "youth need permanent connections, whether formal or informal, to ground them in the community and provide the support traumatized youth often lack" (p. 433).

Moving Towards an Empowering Model of Practise

Based on a study by Geenen & Powers (2007), "if limited resources are to truly have a meaningful impact, then bold, innovative strategies must be considered and evaluated; the extraordinary experiences of these youth require extraordinary practices rather than typical services" (p. 1098). For many, these limitations are not the responsibility of the youth who are transitioning out of the foster care system, but rather on the system itself. They are being raised in an organization that does not consider the lifelong and holistic needs of the individual, and instead focuses on a specific day in which they become of age. The lack of continued support and guidance when one turns 19 is disheartening as it does not allow much room for successes.

Taking the first steps towards an empowering model of practice for youth in care will provide foster youth with a sense of control and ownership in their lives. For the majority of children and youth in care, the notion of empowerment has unfortunately be an unfamiliar model of practice in their lives. This will be the first time they have been included in the decision making process and looked to as the experts in their own lives, thereby making the outcomes

more meaningful and likely to. They will become a part of their own planning process, which will in turn make the decisions made more meaningful and likely to be maintained.

According to the research of Prop, Ortega, & NewHeart (2003), another method to working with children and youth in care is to encourage and foster their interdependent living. Here, "focusing on interdependence cultivates and encourages connectedness of youth to others in their community and emphasizes skills that help youth achieve this kind of connection" (Prop, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003, p. 264). The focus of this model includes "an overall emphasis on and development of the attitudes, values, and beliefs about the youths self-efficacy (Parsons et al., 1998). Based on this philosophy, "involving youth in their own care, training, and emancipating process will help to combat the powerlessness and learned helplessness many feel after years in the system" (Prop, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003, p. 265). As "youth are provided opportunities to have more power over their own lives, to be in charge of their own case plans, and to make decisions about their own future, they will become more invested" (Prop, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003, p. 265).

Summary

Based on the findings and models of other provinces, states, and countries, creating a supportive network for youth transitioning out of government care could greatly increase the likelihood of success when entering adulthood. Research indicates that a disconnect exists when a youth in foster care graduates into adulthood without any further care or financial support from their social workers, foster families, and the government. They are ill prepared for this transition and as a result many experience homelessness, lack of education, and severed relationships with social workers and foster families. Creating a collaborative network and transition plan for youth exiting the care of the ministry is a multifaceted approach and would

rely on the support of the ministry, foster families, and the educational system. Working in partnership, these three systems could ease a youths transition into adulthood.

Chapter 3

Implementing a Life Skills Tool Kit

Introduction

This chapter is designed to support teachers, counsellors, social workers, and foster parents in bridging the gap youth in the foster care system are faced with when transitioning into adulthood. By implementing the use of a Life Skills Tool Kit when a youth turns 16 until they reach adulthood, they will have an on-going documentation of their life skills, education, and supportive network. Having their own personal record can be an instrumental component to their success if they have to move foster families, social workers, or schools.

Looking closer to a movement Kamloops British Columbia has created through a document entitled '*A Way Home*', they have identified a framework that concentrates on prevention, housing, and supporting youth through on-going collaboration, strategic planning, and consistent monitoring in the professional collaborations formed to prevent, reduce, and end youth homelessness. This comprehensive and holistic approach works with youth by valuing their voices and includes them in their own process. By creating a structured and inclusive framework with as much continuity and stability possible, foster youth become increasingly supported in their transition into adulthood.

Implementing Life Skills Tool Kit into the School System

Understanding the significance of and learning how to perform life skills is an ability that is usually passed down from our parents, extended family, and from other significant relationships. These skills range from opening and maintaining a bank account, creating a balanced shopping list, and learning how to drive. They are essential in our daily life, as they keep us safe and help us maintain our overall health and well being. These life skills are continually evolving as we

adapt to new situations and pivotal moments occur in our lives. Yet unfortunately, if an individual is not connected to a significant and consistent adult to teach and guide them through this process, it is easy to see how significant gaps in skills would be unavoidable.

For many youth in foster care, the concept of going to school can be the only constant in their lives. Being shuffled around from various foster homes, assigned and re-assigned to different social workers, and enrolling in new schools is all too often the reality of their lives. By developing a Life Skills Took Kit filled with a youth's personal identification, school records and work examples, a life skills check list which they are currently completing, and the contact information of supportive adults in their lives, they will be better equipped to have the tools to support them as they transition into adulthood. Because "despite significant challenges, youth in out-of-home care possess the strengths and power to succeed, so long as they receive resources and support from caring adults" (Casey Family Programs, 2001, p.1).

Having school districts implement a universal "Tool Kit" for children and youth in care would ensure that they are able to perform and develop these essential life skills and curriculum based knowledge without having to begin the process over from the beginning. The Tool Kit would provide information and support the youth in learning how to access or perform the following life skills:

- Cooking - creating a variety of healthy balanced meals for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks based on Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating
- Cleaning - understanding the importance of and how to maintain household cleanliness
- Laundry - how to read clothing labels, wash clothes, and the significance of clean clothes

- Personal hygiene - understanding the importance of personal hygiene and the consequences of not taking care of yourself.
- Banking - how to open up a bank account and how to maintain good credit
- Maintaining a healthy life style and well being
- Employment and job training

Further, the Tool Kit would include copies of the youth's personal documentation while their originals would be safely maintained at a record keeping facility at the ministry. When the youth turns of age and enters into adulthood they would be given the originals, and a copy would remain on file at the ministry for 5 years after leaving care. The documentation would include:

- Birth certificate
- Care card
- Social insurance number
- Passport
- Medical documentation

Unfortunately for many children and youth in care, enrolling in school and living in a foster home can be a short term placement. Based on a number of extenuating factors, they could live in various cities and be registered in multiple school districts during the same calendar year. Based on a 2002 study by Powers & Stotland, it is believed that about 50% of foster youth change schools at least four times after beginning their formal education. According to some experts, it takes a child 4-6 months to recover academically from the disruption of changing schools (Florida's Children's First, 2011). With such emotional upheaval and disconnection in their learning, it can be difficult for a new school to assess and determine the educational level and sometimes emotional needs of the child or youth. Therefore, it is essential that copies of the child or youths

school records accompany them in their Tool Kit. This would include literacy and numeracy samples, as well as a previous report card of the last grade obtained.

Identifying the youth's supportive networks and allowing the youth to be a part of their own process is paramount to their success, as they are an integral part of the team and need to understand the roles and responsibilities of all the members. By "effectively engaging with young people and becoming partners in the planning process, practitioners can enable youth to identify their own talents and needs based on a comprehensive self-assessment" (Casey Family Programs, 2001, p. 9).

This Tool Kit would include documentation of any learning challenges or any health related conditions that school personnel should be made aware of. Available data indicates that there are proportionally three times as many foster children in special education as there are other children (Alcorn, 2011, p. 7). Furthermore, most experts agree that about 50% of those children have been identified as having emotional or behavioral disorders (Choice et al, 2011). According to Casey Family Programs, (2001), "two critical factors that are known to help youth overcome the challenges they face are positive, trusting relationships with adults and connections to external support systems, such as schools, religious organizations, cultural communities and youth groups" (p. 7). Having this immediate physical, emotional, and educational documentation for a child or youth upon registration could support staff in making an appropriate school schedule balanced with any social and emotional support.

Future Recommendations

In the past decade there has been an increase in research exploring the outcomes of foster youth transitioning into adulthood. Some of the major findings suggest that a considerable number of youth who exit foster care, "live on the streets, lack the money to meet basic living expenses,

fail to maintain regular employment, are involved with the criminal justice system, are unable to obtain health care, and experience early pregnancy" (Reilly, 2003, p. 727). According the 2007 study by Geenen & Powers "if limited resources are to truly have a meaningful impact, then bold, innovative strategies must be considered and evaluated; the extraordinary experiences of these youth require extraordinary practices rather than typical services" (p. 1098).

In Kamloops British Columbia, a plan has been developed in the efforts to eliminate youth homelessness through a document called, '*A Way Home*'. What began as a simple question, of "how can we affect change and end youth homelessness?" (K. McParland, personal communication January 28, 2016) has transformed into a framework of three pillars that focus on prevention, housing, and supporting youth in a fight to end homelessness. Through on-going collaboration, strategic planning, and consistent monitoring, the staff, community members, and volunteers are creating a multilayered supportive network for youth.

A Way Home is a document that illustrates a wrap around approach Kamloops is using to supporting youth homelessness as it focuses on their past, present, and future through its framework. It is "a shift from managing homelessness to preventing and ending homelessness and we must not just focus on emergency services, but we must aim to stop homelessness before it happens" (K. McParland, personal communication, Jan 28 2016). Here, "prevention relies on activities designed to foster youth resilience, raise awareness of available supports, resolve family conflict, and plan for exits from government care, correctional institutions, and health care facilities" (*A Way Home*, 2014).

A Way Home acknowledges the various challenges youth experience in finding and maintaining safe and affordable housing. Therefore, they created a Housing First project for youth that rests on several core principles:

- Immediate access to permanent housing with no housing readiness requirements: clients do not need to meet certain requirements before being deemed ready for housing, as is the case in traditional “treatment first” models.
- Consumer choice and self-determination: clients have some choice in where they live and in what supports and services they receive.
- Recovery orientation: clients are given access to a full range of opportunities and supports that will enhance their well-being, rather than just meeting basic needs.
- Individualized and client-driven supports: clients are provided with a range of supports and services that suit their circumstances, and they may accept those supports if and when they feel they are ready.
- Social and community integration: clients are typically (but not always) housed in scattered sites around the community (as opposed to congregate housing) and given opportunities for social and community integration.

It is clear through the literature that there must be a mutual responsibility and shared accountability across agencies to properly address the educational needs of youths in foster care to make a difference, otherwise that whole cycle of marginalization and poverty continues for their entire life (Zetlin et al., 2006). Having a supportive team is crucial to the success and growth of all individuals, not specifically children and youth in care. This unique group of individuals could thrive and live to their potential if they were to be afforded the same comforts and allowances as their peers.

Therefore, in order to help youth successfully transition into adulthood we need to support them through this process and beyond. Youth need the continuity from their circle of support and to understand that they will not be alone once they become an adult. It is key that they need to

have a voice in decisions that affect them in order to make them meaningful and successful. The idea of collaboration, sharing information across organizations and with youth in care is fundamental in eliminating some of these barriers. Coming together in order to create a collaborative wrap around program for the youth would allow professionals to openly discuss and share information about how to best serve the youths needs and not duplicate previous strategies or services.

Significance of Supporting Youth Transitioning into Adulthood

Transitioning into adulthood can be an overwhelming and scary time for all youth, but especially for a youth exiting foster care. For many individuals, this type of 'care' is all they know and understand and "many leave foster care disconnected from supportive adults, services, and socioeconomic supports that would significantly increase their chances of becoming productive, self-sustaining adults" (The Annie E Casey Foundation, 2016). Yet more specifically, research has shown that "many live on the streets, lack the money to meet basic living experiences, fail to maintain regular employment, are involved with the criminal justice system, are unable to obtain health care, and experience early pregnancies" (Reilly, 2003, p. 727). These results are staggering, as many youth in care were making acceptable progress while being supported.

Numerous studies have proven that "the post-foster care functioning of youth provide convincing evidence that most youth who age out of foster care at 18 simply cannot make it on their own" (Courtney et al, 2005; Courtney & Dworshy, 2006; Furstenbery et al., 2005; Masten et al., 2006). With such an abrupt lack of support and guidance, it is difficult for youth to successfully support themselves independently. Further, Avery & Freundlich (2009), explain that "these youth simply do not have the developmental maturity needed for successful entry into adult roles - especially those with emotional, psychological, educational, and behavioural deficits resulting

from early childhood experiences of abuse, neglect, and abandonment" (p. 253). Therefore it comes as no surprise that the notion of "independent living" is simply not a feasible option for the majority of youth in foster care who, unlike children who are not in foster care, lack the social scaffolding of stable family and community networks" (Voices Issue Brief, 2004).

The deck is further stacked against these youth as they are unable to make the same wage as more experienced adults in the same role. According to Turpel-LaFond (2014), "while the average income for Canadians in 2009 was \$39,300, it was only \$17,700 for 20 to 24 year olds (p. 14). This is an enormous annual financial difference between these age groups, as foster youth become the working poor, struggling to support themselves. Based on a 2009 study, "the average one-person Canadian household spent \$38,776 per year to cover food, shelter, clothing, household expenses, personal care, health and the normal expenses of daily living" (Turpel-LaFond, 2014, p. 14). Based on these results, it comes with little surprise that many youth exiting care are unable to continue to post secondary school or find and maintain safe and affordable housing.

Further, in 2009 the Chaplin Hall Study explored the financial difference in keeping youth in care until the age of 21 versus the increase in lifetime earnings as a result from further education. According to the results, "the college graduation rate of former foster youth who leave care at age 18 as 10.2% and that the graduation rate would double if youth could remain in care until age 21" (2012, p. 37). The financial cost of supporting youth who are unable to successfully transition into adulthood outweighs the costs of maintaining their place in foster care or supporting them through their transition into adulthood. According to Elman (2012), "in British Columbia, more than half of the youth leaving care applied for social assistance within 6 months of leaving care in 2009/2010" (p. 41). Further, "for every \$1 spent on ECM until age 25, \$1.36 will be saved through lower costs associated with incarceration and social assistance, and an increase in tax revenue"

(Durham Children's Aid Society, 2012). Yet more importantly, the unsuccessful transitioning into adulthood is not only financially challenging for the youth, but can also be detrimental to their sense of self worth and self esteem.

Summary

Children and youth in the care of the government are being raised in an organization that does not always consider their lifelong and holistic needs, but rather focuses on a magical number which represents a specific day in which they become an adult. The lack of continued support and guidance when one turns 19 is disheartening as it does not allow much room for successes. For many this signifies a recipe for disaster, as they are ill prepared to leave their supportive network and begin functioning as an independent adult. In order to support them through this transition of their lives it is important that we encourage them to maintain their significant relationships, continue perusing education, and assist them in finding and receiving adequate housing. These are three essential and foundational needs in the life of any child or youth. It is "through interdependent relationships with family, friends, and community, and particularly through connections with competent and caring adults, transitioning youth have the resources and supports necessary to succeed in all of the important areas of their lives" (Casey Family Programs, 2001, p. 23).

Closing Thoughts

As a front line worker working with youth in care, a high school teacher, as well as a future counsellor, I appreciate the foundations that are being laid out and connections that are being made with our vulnerable youth. While it is clear that a disconnect exists when youth exit care, there is also a great undertaking by many governments and organizations to address this gap. In recent

years numerous studies and groups have been created in the hopes of identifying the best methods to support some of our most at risk youth. Teachers, social workers, counsellors, and foster parents have a strong will to do the 'right' thing within multiple systems that make caring for young people in care challenging. Perhaps a youth-focused toolkit would not only address the need to increase life skills and consistency for young people, but the sense of purpose for those invested in helping them. I believe through the dedication of many caring professionals and the resiliency of youth leaving care, they will soon make a more successful transition into adulthood and eventually there will no longer be a stigma attached to children and youth in foster care.

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