

TRANSITION NEEDS OF FOSTER YOUTH

By Nicole L. Helmer

In Wisconsin, foster youth exit out of the system at age 18 or at high school graduation, whichever comes last. On an average day in Wisconsin, almost 8,000 children are living in foster care (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families Foster Care Fact Sheet, 2010). Upon exiting the foster care system, these children are expected to be independent while the average age of financial independence for adults in America is 26 (Krinsky, 2010). The expectation that foster youth be independent at the age of 18 or 19 in Wisconsin places a tremendous responsibility on the educational system.

This study gathered qualitative information about the experiences of youth transitioning out of foster care into adulthood from the perspective of former foster care youth, foster caregivers, and professional service people in the foster care system. The purpose of this study is to establish if the basic needs of foster youth in Wisconsin based upon the Theory of Human Motivation by Abraham Maslow are being met and to determine areas that need to be improved upon before they transition into an adult.

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF FOSTER
YOUTH IN TRANSITION

by

Nicole L. Helmer

A Thesis Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Science in Education


Special Education

At

The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
Oshkosh, WI 54901-8621

December 2013

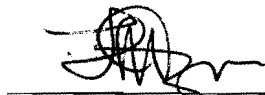
COMMITTEE APPROVAL

 Advisor

12-16-13 Date Approved

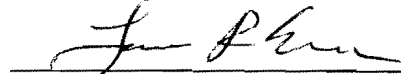
 Member

12-16-13 Date Approved

 Member

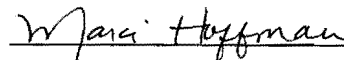
12-16-13 Date Approved

PROVOST
AND VICE CHANCELLOR



12/16/13
Date Approved

FORMAT APPROVAL



4/18/13
Date Approved

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	III
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION.....	1
Theoretical Framework.....	3
CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW	8
Physiological Needs	8
Safety Needs.....	9
Love Needs	11
The Esteem Needs.....	12
Self-Actualization Needs	16
CHAPTER 3 -- METHODS	19
Participants.....	19
Setting	20
Methods.....	21
Interviews and Conversations	22
Validity and Reliability.....	23
Coding and Analysis.....	25
Exposing Researcher Values	26
CHAPTER 4 -- RESULTS.....	28
Need #1 -- Physiological Needs	28
Need #2 – Safety Needs	30
Need #3 – Love Needs.....	34
Need #4 – Self-Esteem	38
Need #5 – Self-Actualization	42
CHAPTER 5 -- DISCUSSION.....	45

LIST OF FIGURES

<i>Figure 1: Depiction of Hierarchy of Needs 1</i>	4
--	---

Chapter 1 – Introduction

In Wisconsin, youth in the foster care system are required to exit the system at the age of 18 or after high school graduation, whichever comes later. For many youth, exiting out of the system means that they must be completely independent for all of their needs, including housing, food, and transportation. Lighthouse Youth Services in Cincinnati, Ohio, states the average age of financial independence in America is 26, eight years later than when youth in foster care are expected to be independent (Krinsky, 2010).

As of December 31, 2011, there were a total of 6,435 children placed in out-of-home care in Wisconsin. Children 11 and over represent 42% of the youth placed in out-of-home care (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (WI DCF), 2013). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) requires that students age 14 and over receive postsecondary transition services. These services are defined as a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that: (a) is designed to be within a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, and community participation; (b) is based on the individual child's needs, taking

into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests; and (c) includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and, if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation (Building the Legacy, 2011).

According to the WIDCF, approximately 26% of foster youth in 2010 had a documented disability, with another 27% either not yet determined or not specified (Wisconsin DCF, 2013). This means that in 2011, 1,668 youth in the foster system had documented disabilities and another 1,716 youth were possibly disabled but not yet identified. Each of these children would be going through the Wisconsin education system and may possibly receive services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Youth who have exited the foster system earn an average of \$6,000 per year, only one-third have a driver's license, less than half have over \$250 in cash, and less than 25% have needed household goods to live independently (Krinsky, 2010). While the education system cannot be responsible for providing foster youth with a job, driver's license, and money; it is responsible for adequately preparing these students for living independently after graduation from high school. In a Midwestern study conducted using information from youth located in Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin, "fourteen percent reported being homeless at some point after exiting care and 54% of those who had ever been homeless had been homeless more than once" (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009, pp. 31-32).

All individuals have specific needs in order to become successful in life.

Abraham Maslow (1943) developed his Theory of Human Motivation which is discussed below. This Theory offers five basic needs that all humans have. There has been no study that finds foster youth are less likely to have these needs than other youth. Therefore, these needs are just as prevalent, if not more prevalent, in foster youth than other youth.

Studies have shown that the transition needs of foster youth are complex and must be individualized to meet the needs of that particular youth. Foster children are more likely than others to become homeless after leaving the system, more likely to earn less money after graduation from high school and less likely to have an adequate support system after they leave the foster care system. If the foster youth are receiving special education services, they are required to have a post-secondary transition plan by IDEA. This post-secondary transition plan should meet the transition needs of foster youth including the mental health intricacies and independent living skills needed to be independent upon graduation and exiting from the system.

Theoretical Framework

Maslow (1943) developed his Theory of Human Motivation which outlines five basic needs of all humans. These are often portrayed in the shape of a pyramid, with the most basic of needs at the base and the highest point of the pyramid identifying the point

in which the human-being is doing what he is meant to be. Maslow records it as “What a man *can* be, he *must* be” (emphasis in original).

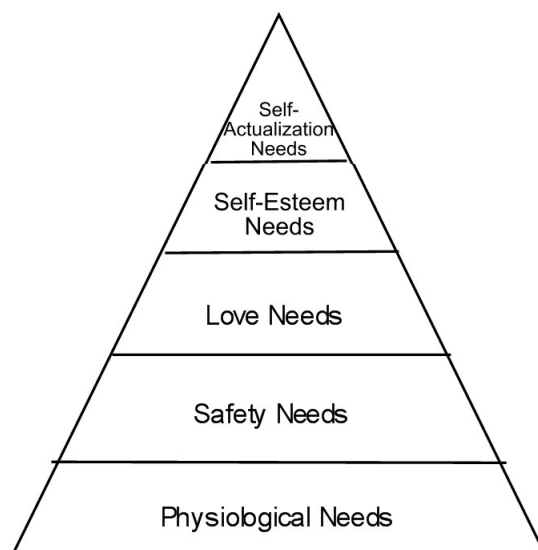


Figure 1: Depiction of Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow hypothesized that as each need is met, the human is then able to focus on needs at the next level. For example, the most basic of needs, the physiological need of hunger must be met because, as Maslow states, “all capacities are put into the service of hunger-satisfaction, and the organization of these capacities is almost entirely determined by the one purpose of satisfying hunger” (1943, p. 374). Maslow believed that capacities that are not used to satisfy hunger would then be pushed into the background. He put forth the idea that once hunger is satisfied, it no longer is at the forefront of that person’s motivations and other needs emerge.

Braxton and Krajewski-Jaime (2011) utilized Maslow’s hierarchical theory of needs in relation to the American foster care system in their paper and analyzed the system’s “ability to address the developmental and mental health issues of children

entering foster care” (p. 47). Their findings indicated that the American foster system is, in many cases, able to meet the first two levels of needs in Maslow’s theory.

The American education system must work in conjunction with the American foster system to provide for the higher level needs as dictated by Maslow’s theory. The foster system alone is not able to adequately address the needs of love, esteem, and self-actualization (Braxton, 2011). Leone and Weinberg (2010) found that foster children frequently have complex educational needs and that they are less likely to receive the appropriate education than their peers.

This paper will focus on the needs of foster youth as they transition out of high school and exit the system. A review of the literature along with qualitative data gained through interviews will provide a focus to determine areas that need to be improved upon before they transition into an adult. It is the intent that once focus areas are determined, the educational system and the foster care system will work in unison to provide the best services possible to foster youth.

It is reasonable to assume that the subject of this study will inevitably evoke many outlying questions and possible answers with regard to the study of transitional needs of foster youth in Wisconsin. While these outlying questions may prove to be interesting topics of study, the primary focus of this study is to identify the areas of need that foster youth in Wisconsin ages 12 and over have and to provide insight into possible solutions. Other prospective research areas that may develop are rejected as the primary purpose of this research may include the social needs of foster youth, family planning and prevention, and potential criminal experiences faced by foster youth. It is also

acknowledged that this research may have specific limitations in its ability for generalization to other populations because of the unique qualifications for independence that foster youth have upon exiting of the system.

For the purposes of this study, the following will be the operational definitions:

1. Foster youth is defined as a child above the age of 12 who are placed with a non-relative through the juvenile court system to be in the best interest of the child's protection and welfare.
2. Transition age is defined as the age at or above 14 years of age.
3. Transition needs are defined as those needs which are identified as being vital to a student's independence upon graduation from high school and exiting out of the foster system.

When looking at and identifying the transitional needs of foster youth in Wisconsin, it is taken for granted the idea that the youth will remain in foster care until they either age out at the age of 18 or exit after graduation from high school, whichever comes later. While youth may decide to leave the foster system at the age of 18 and prior to graduation from high school, the intention of this study is to determine the needs of those youth who choose to remain in the system until they have graduated high school. What needs do foster youth have in relation to transitioning from high school into the real world? What can the education system do differently to provide for these needs?

A review of the current literature pertaining to foster youth and their success after high school, the themes that have become evident in previous studies in regard to their needs as related to Maslow's Theory, and the idea of a community of transition service

providers can be found in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 will outline the methods in this study, including the subgroups of participants, how they are connected to this study, and the types of interview questions that were put forth to the participants. An in-depth look at the results of the interviews and how they relate to Maslow's Theory is put forth in Chapter 4. Chapter 4 discusses how each participant's responses connect to one or more of Maslow's basic human needs and, if applicable, what the participants feel could have been done to meet these needs more accurately. A discussion regarding the results and how this study can impact the transitional needs of foster youth can be found in Chapter 5; and more specifically, what the community and educational system can do by working together to better meet the needs of foster youth in transition.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Foster youth have been experiencing transition to adulthood since the beginning of the foster system. As the educational system continues to grow in evidence of the transitional needs of all youth, foster youth are often lumped in with the non-foster youth. In terms of special education, foster youth are also not singled out for their unique transition needs. Previous studies, as discussed below, have found that foster youth are more likely to experience homelessness, periods of unemployment, and make less money than their peers. The educational system has a responsibility to help students with special needs prepare for life after high school. Studies have shown that a high amount of foster youth have special education needs and thus should be afforded the transitional services that IDEA requires. If foster youth are serviced in the same manner as their non-foster peers, is the education system missing key components that are needed for foster youth to be independent after exiting the system?

Physiological Needs

According to Maslow (1943), the most basic of needs are in the physiological plane. The sharpest of needs is hunger which must be satisfied to sustain life. If hunger is not satisfied, all of the body's resources focus on meeting this basic need first. Maslow goes into detail regarding the concept of homeostasis, which is the body's effort to maintain a normal state in the blood stream. This effort focuses on our desire to sustain a

balanced diet of salt, sugar, fat, and water content. Our bodies tell us what is deficient. Braxton and Krajewski-Jaime (2011) found that this most basic of needs is met by the youth being in the foster system, however, some foster youth may not have this need met as it should be. Maslow (1943) theorized that the person who is “lacking food, safety, love and esteem would most probably hunger for food more strongly than for anything else” (p. 374). This basic need must be met before the student’s brain is able to function at a level which includes learning. If the youth is not convinced that this particular need is going to be met on a regular basis, the youth is not ready to move to the next level of needs. How can the educational system work with the youth to ensure that this need is met?

Safety Needs

The second tier of needs identified by Maslow center around personal safety. In fact, Maslow believes that “practically everything looks less important than safety, (even sometimes the physiological needs which being satisfied, are now underestimated). A man, in this state, if it is extreme enough and chronic enough, may be characterized as living almost for safety alone” (p. 377). Survivors of abuse often live under the status of flight-or-fight. Youth are not exempt from this status. According to WI DFS (2013), in 2011, 68% of the children in out-of-home care were because abuse and/or neglect were alleged (p. 12).

Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, and Fogarty (2012) found the common theme of concerns regarding personal safety which would fall under Maslow's second tier in the hierarchy of needs. Their report states that a foster youth's concern regarding personal safety at school as well as out of school may have a negative impact on the youth's performance in school. While Braxton and Krajewski-Jaime (2011) believe this second tier is met once the youth enters the foster system, Maslow's theory indicates that this may not be the case. Maslow identifies that a child's need for safety centers on an undisrupted routine or rhythm. Inconsistency in the child's home life, parent caregivers and their need for an organized world can cause anxiety and make the child feel unsafe. Studies surrounding foster youth have consistently shown that many youth who are in the system are often transferred between foster homes. Van Ryzin, Mills, Kelban, Vars, and Chamberlain (2011) noted that Minty in 1999 stated that between 20% and 50% of youth in long-term foster care has a stay that ends prematurely. One study cited by Van Ryzin, et al. found that approximately one-third (32.3%) of placements studied in three child welfare agencies experienced 8 or more placements while in the system and another study cited that almost 50% of youth in care reported that they had changed schools a minimum of 4 times since being placed in the system. Youth having numerous placements, especially those who have been identified as having emotional or behavioral challenges, means the basic need of safety may not be met simply by being placed in the foster system.

Love Needs

Maslow theorized that once the basic physiological need and the safety needs are met, human beings will begin to experience longings for love, affection, and belongingness. This is the level at which most of Day et al.'s (2012) themes find common ground with Maslow. A number of Day et al.'s (2012) themes fit into this level in Maslow's hierarchy including the need for permanent relationships with adults outside of school; need for connections with teachers and adults who understand the unique challenges of foster youth; and the need for teachers to be sensitive to unique learning needs. Each of these needs center around a youth's need for understanding and acceptance. Maslow theorizes that lack of these needs being met is the most commonly found core in cases of maladjustment and more severe psychopathology. Braxton and Krajewski-Jaime (2011) also found that the "absence of a nurturing environment during early development negatively affects a child's self-regulation abilities, a factor that may result in later behavioral, emotional, and attention difficulties" (p. 49). Another factor to think about is if the youth is in the foster system, there is nothing saying they will stay in the system until they graduate from high school or age-out of the system. Youth are able to remove themselves from the system at age 18, whether they have graduated from high school or not. Other youth, as discussed in Chapter 4, choose to leave the system and school well before their 18th birthday.

Studies such as McCoy, McMillen, and Spitznagel (2007), show that many youth who are allowed by state law to remain in the system until the age of 21, as the youth in this Missouri study, left the system before aging out. The results of the McCoy et al.

study show that youth began leaving the system after their 17th birthday and 51.7% had exited the system by their 19th birthday. There were indicators of who left the system earlier and those indicators included foster youth who had a history of multiple placements, youth who had externalizing behavior problems, and those youth who had a support system of family. Of those youth who exited the system the earliest, those who had family tended to live with family.

According to Maslow, all humans need love. This does not exclude foster youth and the nature of their status may place them at a higher need for love than their peers. Foster youth have often faced rejection by parents, foster parents, or extended family. Whether this rejection is real or imaginary, it must be addressed before the youth can move onto the next need.

The Esteem Needs

Maslow's fourth tier centers on the need or desire for a "stable, firmly based, (usually) high evaluation of themselves, for self-respect, or self-esteem, and for the esteem of others. By firmly based self-esteem, we mean that which is soundly based upon real capacity, achievement, and respect from others" (p. 382). Maslow went on further to say that satisfaction of self-esteem needs leads to feelings of confidence, strength, and capability. Day et al. (2012) also has themes centered on this tier, specifically the need for more support and independent living skills to help in the transition to adulthood and independence. All youth need confidence when they enter

into the adult world in order to face the challenges. Foster youth, with this high incidence of homelessness, joblessness, and not having a long-reaching support system, may have higher needs of self-esteem and confidence than their peers.

This tier is the most affected by interactions with school personnel. Foster youth who are age 14 or older enrolled in the public school system and identified as having special education needs are required to have a transition plan in place to assist the student in becoming independent at the age of 18 or upon graduation from high school. The majority of the youth's day is spent interacting with peers and school staff and if the student is involved in after school or extracurricular activities (another theme brought about by Day's, 2012, research), even more time is spent in these surroundings.

The transition plan is a fundamental part of helping foster youth become independent before leaving the system. Casey Family Programs developed a Road Map for Learning in 2007 aimed at improving the educational outcomes of children in foster care. Sheehy et al. found that "up to 80 percent of youth in foster care aspired to go to college, but few had actually taken the coursework to enroll" (as cited in Casey Family Programs, 2007, p. 72).

Employment plans are a required area of the transition plan for youth in special education. If foster youth are to be independent after exiting the system, whether they are going on to post-secondary education or not, employment needs must be addressed. The National Collaborative on Workforce & Disability for Youth Institute for Educational Leadership developed a guide which noted that of the 500,000 children in foster care, 30 to 40% are also in special education (Negotiating the Curves Toward Employment: A

Guide About Youth Involved in the Foster Care System, nd). There are many reasons for this large percentage, which are not in the scope of this paper. The term “transition cliff” is introduced in this guide and referenced as the “time period when young people age out of youth systems and attempt to access adult services” (p. 7). The guide defines successful transition as one where upon exiting out of the system, the youth is “pre-disposed to a life of meaning and purpose” (p. 7). Transition cliff seems to be an appropriate word to use when exiting the foster system.

Children who enter foster care are often faced with additional issues based on their circumstances. These issues often involve emotional and behavioral challenges because of past abuse and neglect. As stated earlier, the absence of a nurturing environment in the youth’s early years can affect the child’s self-regulation skills and lead to behavior and emotional challenges during their teenage years. These challenges are often apparent in the school setting but are also apparent in employment situations. Studies cited by Henig (2009) in her study, *Employment aid for youth aging out of foster care: Extending one-stop career centers to include a division for foster care youth*, indicated that 25 to 50% of foster youth are typically unemployed after aging out and those who are employed are earning below the poverty rate.

Both the special education system and the social services system require youth to have a transition plan for becoming independent after exiting the system or graduating from school. These service providers often do not come together and work in tandem to ensure the best needs of the students are being met. In their study, Amodeo, Collins, and Clay (2009) identified best practice methods for those in the social services realm for

working with older youth who are transitioning out of foster care. Unfortunately, in order for the foster youth to truly succeed, training and workshops need to be combined for all professionals involved in the transition plan of the youth. In Wisconsin, this has not happened on a continuous basis as evidenced in Chapter 4.

The Bridges Transition Framework, as identified by Van Ryzin et al. (2011), was developed by William Bridges in 1970 to help individuals manage change. Although this framework can assist in understanding the changes that occur during transition, it does not identify nor describe the actual needs of foster youth in transition to adulthood. In their study, Del Quest, Fullerton, Geenen, and Powers (2012), citing research done by Geenen and Powers (2006) documented “the lack of coordinated transition planning between special education and child welfare and the level of utilization of special education transition services by eligible youth in foster care” (p. 1605).

One of the most interesting concepts comes from psychologist and philosopher of education John Dewey. Dewey (1916) noted that democratic values were the most powerful force in building responsibility in children. Perhaps the best way to fulfill the self-esteem needs of foster youth is to look at other disciplines. Brendtro and Mitchell (2011) discuss Harvard socio-biologist Edward Wilson’s solution of consilience – finding powerful simple truths that transcend narrow disciplines. Wilson found that key areas include the following:

- Values: respect for all
- Practical experiences: using the experience of professionals
- Social sciences: studies of social interaction of humans

- Natural sciences: research on brain and behaviors

The concept of consilience towards working with youth leans toward the idea of positive interactions in all phases of contact including in the school environment and the foster home environment. Different persons developed positive environments for youth in crisis, including Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi as far back as 1798 who opened a school for children in war-torn Switzerland. Each of the environments discussed in Brendtro and Mitchell's (2011) paper were successful until the death of the individual who started them leading to the idea that finding successors with the same drive and compassion for working with youth in crisis is a formidable feat.

Self-Actualization Needs

After all the previous tiers of needs have been met, Maslow theorized that one final tier remains. This tier is often called self-actualization which refers "to the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially" (Maslow, 1943, p. 383). Maslow's more precise statement is "what a man *can* be, he *must* be" (p. 383).

For foster youth in transition, this need is first met by having a sufficient income to meet their basic needs including food, shelter, warmth, and enjoyment. In another study, it was determined that education "is a powerful determinant of quality of life and confers economic, social, civic, and personal benefits" (as cited in Day et al., 2012, p. 202). The Chafee Foster Care Independence Act and the Social Security Act require the

child welfare agency to include a transition plan for youth age 16 and over which comprises a written plan, the Independent Living Plan (ILP), outlining the services and programs that will help the youth experience a successful transition from the system to adulthood (Kelly, 2009). Unfortunately, because of funding and resources, ILPs are often not as thorough and individualized as they should be (Kelly, 2009). The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 amended the Social Security Act to extend the age of eligibility for foster care youth services from the age of 18 to 21, but left it up to the states to determine what age they would age out youth (Courtney et al., 2011). There are specific restrictions in place by states that make it difficult for youth to be eligible to remain in care after the age of 18 or graduation from high school, whichever is later. Courtney and Dworsky's study (2011) involved current and former foster youth in college discussing the issues they believe were barriers to success. The questions that were asked of the youth were taken from the draft data collection form produced by a U.S. Children's Bureau workgroup and included items involved in general education, college prep classes, job search services, financial literacy, and others. This study reinforced the Midwest study conducted earlier and noted that most foster youth in transition did not receive the different forms of help that are called for in federal legislation. Courtney and Dworsky also found that those who did receive the help were more likely the youth who would naturally ask for help, which brings up the question of what is being done to identify those youth who are in most need of help and are most likely not going to ask for help.

Henig (2009) in her study on employment aid for youth aging out of foster care found that the one-stop career centers that are under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) need to expand their options and include a section for foster youth. The WIA, passed in 1998, is an “employment system that allows the needs of businesses and jobseekers to come together” (Henig, p. 574).

How can the education system better meet the needs of foster youth in meeting each of Maslow’s needs? In order to meet these needs, does the education system and other professionals who provide services to these youth need to work together? This study looks to answers these and other similar questions. The methods used to address these questions will be explained in detail in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 -- Methods

This study is intended to recognize the educational needs of foster youth in transition by giving voice to former foster youth, their caregivers, and the professionals who serve them on the effectiveness of the transition plans for exiting out of the foster system, and what they feel is needed to be able to have a successful transition to adulthood. It is the focus of this study that once needs are identified, the education system and the foster care system work together to provide services to students that are needed to have a successful transition into adulthood and be self-reliant.

Participants

Three subgroups were solicited for participation, with each sub-group having a minimum of two participants. The first subgroup was former foster youth. The majority of participants were between the ages of 16 and 21 who have exited out of care for various reasons. This subgroup received transition services through their local education agency. In this subgroup, there were three participants who have exited out of the system, Vicky, Missy, and Cade. These participants were identified through personal knowledge of the researcher as having been former foster youth and were asked to be participants in the study.

The second subgroup was made up of professionals who have worked with youth transitioning into adulthood, whether they were working with foster youth or youth not in foster care. One participant of this subgroup was contacted by the researcher because of

her prior research surrounding foster youth or their prior involvement with foster youth. Once identified, she was asked if she would be a participant of the research. A second individual was identified through prior knowledge of the work she had done with foster students and was asked if she would be a participant of the research.

The third subgroup was made up of professionals in the social services area who work with youth placed in out-of-home care. These professionals are familiar with the transitional needs of foster youth who are expected to be independent when they exit out of the system. Participants in this group were identified by contacting the social services department in a specific county and requesting to speak with workers were interested in being a part of the study. Two workers, Jane and Ellen, identified themselves as being interested in the study and chose to become participants of this study.

Setting

Each interview was initiated via telephone call identifying the research plan and requesting the willingness of the individual to be a participant. Once consent was reached, a discussion was held identifying the physical location the participant would feel most comfortable for an interview. In the event the participant was located out of state, a phone interview date and time was then identified. Prior to any interviews being conducted, a signed consent form was received from the participant stating their willingness to be interviewed and whether they would like to receive a copy of the study upon its finalization. For out-of-state participants, this document was faxed between parties. In-state participants had their interviews conducted in-person while each out-of-

state participant had their interview conducted via telephone. Each participant was given a pseudonym for identification throughout the study that cannot be traced back to the individual.

Methods

A phenomenological study was conducted with three former foster youth, two individuals who have previously conducted research on foster youth and two individuals who are currently working with foster youth in transition. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2010) a phenomenological study is “a qualitative method that attempts to understand participants’ perspectives and views of social realities” (p. 108). The study attempted to understand the participant’s perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of the foster care system and how educational environments service the transitional needs of foster youth. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant to gain a better understanding of their experiences in the transition of foster youth into adulthood. The interview started with structured questions (see pp. 22-23) that led into more in-depth questions related to the participant’s unique experiences. Each interview was recorded digitally and then transcribed for accuracy. Where applicable, the interviewer also took notes to relate back to specific areas of the transcribed interviews.

The data were analyzed using the data analysis spiral as described by Leedy and Ormond referencing Creswell (1998), to identify the common themes in the participants’

descriptions. Specifically, each of the needs described by Maslow was coded and then each statement made by a participant was also coded to those specific needs.

Gholafshani (2003) found that in quantitative research, “reliability and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor, and quality in qualitative paradigm” (p. 604). Data was gathered through interviews and conversations. The checks were done to ensure the validity of the research through interview, conversations and transcription.

Interviews and Conversations

I had conversations and interviews with the participants identified in the sub-groups above. The interview questions were first reviewed, revised, and critiqued by experts in the field of foster youth in transition including Day and Dworsky. The questions were based on specific information known to the researcher from personal experience, information gleaned through the literature review, and the reviewers’ comments. The semi-structured interviews included the following questions:

1. Did any of the classes you took while in high school help to prepare you for life after high school/foster care?
2. What classes did you take while in high school that you feel best prepared you for life after graduation/foster care? Why?
3. What type of preparation do you think youth who will be exiting foster care need for life after high school?

4. Once you graduated, did you feel you were prepared to be independent? Why or why not? What could have made you feel differently?
5. Did you participate in any activities while you were in high school that benefitted you after you left foster care? Which ones and how did they benefit you?
6. What information have you learned that you feel was the most important for life after foster care/graduation?
7. Do you think foster youth transition needs are different from non-foster youth?
8. How do you think foster youth transition needs are different from non-foster youth? Can you explain in detail?
9. Did you find any community resources that were helpful in your transition into adulthood?
10. What community resources have you found to be most helpful in your transition into adulthood and why?

These interviews were often in the form of brief conversations, in depth conversations, interviews by appointment, and phone conversations. I taped and transcribed the in-depth interviews and I embedded observer comments in the transcribed text as I reviewed it. I wrote down informal conversations as soon as possible, and when possible, wrote during the conversations according to the comfort level of the participants while conversing.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability have long been used in the form of quantitative research. Using these terms in the area of qualitative research studies, such as this one, has caused different studies in and of themselves. Golafshani (2003), noted that to ensure reliability in a qualitative study, an “examination of trustworthiness is crucial” (p. 601). Researchers using a qualitative method, such as the method in this study, must ensure that their data is trustworthy. In this study, the data was digitally recorded, transcribed and coded by the researcher and a disinterested third party. Golafshani quotes Lincoln and Guba (1985) who state that “Since there can be no validity without reliability, a demonstration of the former [validity] is sufficient to establish the later [reliability]” (p. 601-602). Many have theorized that the use of triangulation, “a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126) may be one of the best ways to show validity and reliability in a qualitative study. Golafshani states that “[t]riangulation is typically a strategy (test) for improving the validity and reliability of research or evaluation of findings” (p. 603).

For this study, triangulation was used in the form of involving several data sources and their interpretations which gives multiple perceptions on the reality of transitional needs of foster youth. Multiple methods of data collection were used, including the taking of notes during interviews where the interviewee was comfortable with that option; observations by the researcher in the lives of foster youth in transition, the digital recording of the interviews which were then transcribed and coded by two different individuals using a color coding system. Each person had a copy of the

transcribed interviews and a color-code theme document. They were then asked to code each statement made by the participants into the theme they believed the statement belonged. The interview questions were reviewed, critiqued, and edited by experts in the field of qualitative research studies to ensure the validity.

Coding and Analysis

Data was collected and organized by breaking larger units into smaller ones, classified the data into groups or themes and then synthesized the data. Specifically, each of the higher needs as theorized by Maslow was broken down by incorporating the themes found by Day in her research studies. After each subsection of need (themes) was coded the transcribed, interviews were then taken apart by statement to determine what theme or need the statement addressed. The five themes that were color-coded were:

1. Physiological needs such as sleep, air, food, shelter, and warmth – green.
2. Safety needs such as protection, order, and law – blue.
3. Love needs such as family and affection – black.
4. Self-esteem needs such as achievement, status, knowledge or training, and aesthetic (beauty and balance) – yellow.
5. Self-actualization needs such as reaching your personal potential and transcendence (helping others) – orange.

This coding was done by the researcher and one disinterested third party. Each individual had a copy of the transcribed interviews and a color-coded copy of the themes.

Each statement by the participants was then coded into a specific theme. In the event the statement could be applied to two separate themes, the person was asked to prioritize the code. The inter-rater reliability, specifically the application of codes to the applicable theme, in this study was 96%. The four percent that were differently coded were discussed, debated, and a mutual agreement was made on the final coding.

Exposing Researcher Values

During this research I have continuously reflected upon my own expectations and values as a special education teacher and parent. I did this as a continuing reminder of the role my own beliefs and training may have in my interviews and data analysis. Due to the nature of my being a legal guardian of a special education student from 2001-2011, and knowing the challenges that particular youth had in transitioning to adulthood and independence, I needed to continuously review my own thought process while conducting interviews to make sure the follow-up questions were independently based. Ongoing self-reflection in memos and discussions with my university advisors throughout the research study has helped to identify any potential bias on the research and put it into perspective so that it would not have an impact on the outcome of the study.

After the interviews were transcribed, coded, and put into the correct theme, it came time to look at the results of the research. The transcribed interviews took on a life of their own in the voices that came through from the participants. In Chapter 4 you will

hear those voices tell their stories and what they believe could be if systems work together.

Chapter 4 -- Results

Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs and the work of Day et al. (2012) relate to the needs of foster youth as they exit out of the system. Braxton et al. (2011) noted that the foster system is not able to provide for each of the levels of need and I hypothesized that the educational system must work in conjunction with service providers in the foster system to ensure that the transitional needs of foster youth were being met.

Interviews were conducted with 3 former foster youth, 2 professionals and 2 social service professionals who directly service youth in foster care. Each interview was digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded. Multiple conversations were recorded and in some cases, more informal follow-up conversations were held and notes were written following those conversations. By transcribing the recorded interviews and following up in some cases with more informal conversations, the voices of the participants were allowed to directly impact the research study.

Need #1 -- Physiological Needs

Physiological needs are needs that human beings require in order to survive. These needs include warmth, shelter, food, sleep, and air to breathe. Our participants were living human beings who have succeeded in having these basic human needs met for some part, if not all, of their life.

With regard to the need for food, Jane, a social service worker, noticed that foster youth would often be hungry at school. It may not only be foster youth who were hungry

in school, but for this discussion, we will focus on those youth. Jane stated that “Having a child placed in foster care is supposed to take care of their need for food, shelter, and warmth; but it doesn’t always work that way.” In a discussion surrounding teacher education on trauma and how to talk with foster youth, she spoke of the schools being under pressure to provide education services as a priority over managing a student’s emotional needs. Jane talked about how the two can be intertwined. “If you have a teacher who is really compassionate about their work, cares about the student and forms a connection to the student, they are more likely to worry about the emotional needs as well as the educational needs.” Jane mentioned that those are the teachers who worry about providing food to her students as well as teaching them.

Ellen, another social service provider stated that she had seen foster care in the other light. She had seen teachers or administrators call her “when a student is sleeping in the special education room and the teacher or administrator expects her to do something about it.” As she stated, she worked on a “regular basis with a special education instructor and their administration on the needs of foster youth” and stressed that “just because a student is sleeping in class it does not meet the criteria of what is needed to lock the student up in juvenile detention.” Granted, these students were usually in the emotional behavioral disability classification of the special education system in that school district and placed in a separate room for most of the school day.

Vicky remembered being homeless with her birth mother and sleeping in a station wagon. “I remember being really young, hungry, cold, and wishing there was someplace

we could go.” Vicky was placed in the foster system while her mom continued to sleep in her car.

Missy recalled being returned to her birth mother after being in foster care a number of times and wondered why it was allowed. “I remember the fights, the physical abuse was awful. We were hungry and afraid. My brother and I, we didn’t know what to do. Why would they send us back to this place? I was always blamed for getting us taken away, because of my ‘big mouth’, my mom would say.” Missy and her brother were bounced back and forth between foster care and their birth mother.

Need #2 – Safety Needs

The second level of need, safety, is mostly met by the placement of the youth in the foster system, as Braxton and Krajewski-Jaime (2011) stated. There are times, however, when the youth’s safety needs were not completely met simply by being placed in the foster system. As Dworsky and Courtney (2009) concluded in their paper, one of the predictors of homelessness was whether the youth had run from foster care along with the number of times the youth ran away. Further research has shown running continues to be a predictor. Additional predictors that have sustained the test of time are if the youth was physically abused along with the number of moves the youth had made while in the foster system.

Vicky is a former foster youth who was put into foster care when she was five. “I figure I moved around about 20 times. Sometimes it was because I ran away, other times

because they didn't want me there anymore." She was removed from her mother's custody when she was five because "we were living in a station wagon and my mom was crazy." At the time of the interview, Vicky was one year out of the system, was 19 and was taking care of her five week old baby boy. She was also homeless. Vicky was living with a boyfriend and his parents, although the boyfriend was not the biological father of her child. The basic need of permanent shelter has not been met for Vicky. Further evidence leans towards the accuracy of Dworsky and Courtney's (2009) findings includes that Vicky ran away from multiple foster homes and was even placed in an institution for a short period of time. While she stayed in foster care until she turned 18, she left before finishing high school. Vicky did eventually finish high school, but because she felt it was important and because she was pregnant and knew that she would need a diploma to get a job.

At the time of participation, Cade was 19 years old, graduated high school before leaving the system and was employed in the fast food industry. Cade was unable to obtain his driver's license prior to leaving the system and continued to live without it. He lived in a small rural community and therefore did not have the luxury of public transportation. While living out of the city limits after leaving the system, he was unable to get a job because his need for transportation to and from work could not be met. "I lived about 8 miles out of town and couldn't always get a ride so I couldn't get a job. I wasn't going to ride my bike in the winter ... you know how bad winters in Wisconsin can get." Since he did not have a job, he had to wait for an adult to offer to put him up in their apartment and let him pay back rent once he got a job before he could move. He

was paying off that back rent, but says “life could have been so much better if I had a driver’s license and car when I was done with foster care. I wouldn’t have had to rely on other people so much.” When he was in the foster system, he was unable to get a job because the foster home he lived in was “out in the middle of nowhere” and it was difficult for them to “haul us boys around” so he had not had enough money saved up to purchase a vehicle when he did exit the system. He acknowledged that it would have been difficult, but if he had the opportunity to drive to a job while still in the system, he could have saved enough money to buy a car before exiting the system and then could have lived on his own, instead of off the grace of others.

Further research by Dworsky and Courtney (n.d.) shows that the results of their Midwest study continue to hold true for those youth until the age of 26. In the 2009 Midwest study, youth living in Illinois could stay in foster care until they reached the age of 21. The thought behind extending foster care until 21 is that the youth would have a better chance of being ready for independence. What Dworsky and Courtney found with further research after their 2009 paper is that for youth who stay in foster care until the age 21, their rates of homeless until the age of 21 is less likely because they are able to stay in care. Further research has shown that once these youth leave foster care, they are just as likely to become homeless as the youth who were not able to stay in foster care until the age 21 (personal communication, April 2, 2013).

Missy was also a former foster student who became pregnant at age 15 and left the system. Missy was young when she was first removed from her mother’s custody. She kept getting placed back with her mother, even after Missy told of repeated abuse by

her mother's boyfriends. Her mother blamed Missy for being taken away and told her she had a "big mouth". Confused and often separated from her brothers, who were also placed in care, Missy equated sex with affection. "All I knew was sex, drugs and booze," she said. Before she left the system, "I didn't have any classes on parenting or anything like that. Even after I got pregnant, I didn't get any help with that part of it. I had to go by what I knew and what I've seen. They let me quit school when I was 15." She was allowed to quit school and exit the system when she was 15 without any aid or services. As Missy remembers it, when she told the school she wanted to quit, the school said "ok." Even though foster care had given her a glimpse of what life could be like, she had no idea how to achieve it. Her life with her biological mother was so dysfunctional she had no idea that life could be different.

After leaving the system, Missy had a baby daughter who was born with a brain injury. She had not had any parenting classes so she did not know how to parent. Missy said, "I had learned a little from my grandma, a little from my aunt, and, of course, a lot from my mother and I would try not to go there," along with what she had learned while being in the different foster homes. She had pieces of how to parent, but struggled to put it all together. Her daughter consistently cried and challenged the few good parenting skills Missy had. When Missy had called social services asking for help with her young daughter, she was told that unless she admitted that she was in danger of harming her daughter, services would not be offered. During this phone call, Missy stated, she was "cued" by the social service worker that she needed to admit that she was going to injure her daughter in order to get some help. Missy told the worker that "yes, that's a

possibility” in order to get services but now that statement is on her record. She stated, “I would have never, ever hurt her, but that was the only way I could get help. They cued me to say it so I could get some education on my daughter, how to handle her, so I could work with a psychiatrist.” Missy believes that the lack of preventative care leads towards more expense with dealing with the aftermath.

Need #3 – Love Needs

The need for love, affection, family-ties, and acceptance is strong in most human beings, according to Maslow. A person who has this need will feel “keenly, as never before, the absence of friends, or a sweetheart, or a wife, or children” (1943, p. 381).

Jane stated “One of the goals of foster placement is to have the youth feel as though they are a part of something, a part of the family, and of the community but the rules of the foster system, the overwhelming liability-worried system, is that the youth cannot act as other youth can act. They are not allowed to go to a friend’s house without permission from the social service worker and the foster parent, they are not allowed to ride all-terrain vehicles such as four-wheelers or snowmobiles, and getting a driver’s license is just about impossible while in the system. While there may be very valid reasons behind each of the system-imposed rules, the results are the same – the youth is not like his or her peers. By the time they reach their senior year of high school, this is evident to not only the youth, but their peers and the adults around them.” According to

Cade, “The feeling of belongingness and acceptance in the face of so many rules is almost non-existent”.

Missy also acknowledged how before leaving the system, she had no one she could depend on. “I could not lean on my biological family and after leaving the system, I had no one I could turn to.” This was reverberated among the other participants who all discussed the lack of support for foster youth once they leave the system. Most recognized that foster youth often do not have someone they could go and borrow money from in an emergency, and as Missy stated, even if they did, “you can only do that for so long.” It is more than that. It is the feeling that the foster youth have no one they can go back to, during breaks from college (if they are lucky enough to go to college), no one to visit on holidays. As Ellen stated, “Even if the foster parent is open to having former foster youth visit, if any of them have been involved in something on a criminal basis, they are not allowed back into the former foster parent’s home because it could jeopardize the current foster license.” Vicky essentially carried the same message, she had no one to turn to besides loosely-held friendships to rely on and those were strained when she had to continuously find a place to stay.

Many of the participants also discussed how the education system did not help them feel accepted or as if they belonged. Missy, Vicky, and Cade all discussed how because they were labeled from the beginning as having behavioral issues or emotional outbursts, they often felt the sting of a teacher’s words that reverberated through their classroom. Missy describes being placed in the lower functioning classes because she had so many unmet needs regarding her emotional health, she could not function in a

higher level classroom. Cade was often labeled as a trouble-maker when he was in elementary school, both by other students and by teachers. He described one episode in which because he was present, he was thought to have caused an incident in the boys' bathroom with urine, which he denies ever doing. "Just because I was always the one getting in trouble, they called my mom and told her I had peed all over one of the other boys. It was one of the boys that was always picking on me and I never did it, but it was assumed that I did for whatever reason."

Foster youth tend to move often and as it happened in each of their stories, they had to start over at new schools. Being the new kid was hard enough, but being a foster youth who had experienced trauma in one way or another, made it all the more difficult. Each of them described how they would act tough, get into the wrong crowd and in Missy's case, the booze, the drugs, and the sex was all she knew. Adults in the education system would single them out because of their behaviors, which would only ostracize them from their peers. Eventually, Vicky stopped acting up in school, but only after being institutionalized for her emotional and behavioral challenges. The same story goes for Cade, who was also institutionalized and eventually behaved in ways that would not call attention to him.

Both Cade and Vicky were sent to alternative school settings by their teachers and administration. Ellen and Jane were also familiar with alternative school settings. Jane described one particular school and teacher who had a tendency to remove the worst middle school students in his classroom and have them placed in an alternative setting with high school students, as old as 17 or 18 years. As Jane described, "What happens in

these alternative settings is shocking” and sometimes, by simply exposing the younger foster youth to the older, sometimes criminally involved youth, would be enough to push the foster youth into criminal behavior.

Ellen also described how she hears from foster youth who are sent to alternative site school settings and how they feel about it. She says she feels like the message is “You’re not valued enough and we don’t care about your education.” Ellen knew these kids were smart, but after having been sent to an alternative setting, their grades and effort would spiral downward. The students have heard for many years, often since they were young, that they were just trouble, not worth it, not accepted, you name it. Ellen said that sometimes the education system only reinforced these statements and had sometimes witnessed teachers or aides who “prod” the student until the student reacted, just to be able to get them out of their classroom.

Ellen was specific in another area that affected foster youth’s need for acceptance. “There is one particular school I go to and whenever I stop in, the teacher is sitting at a desk reading a newspaper” and the students were in cubbies without teacher instruction and were, in many cases, being overseen by an aide without the proper training and expertise in working with students with emotional and/or behavioral challenges. These students often talked of not being able to express their thoughts and feelings while in this classroom and were often left to their own devices with relation to learning new information. When they were interacting with an un-trained aide, emotions and behavior would often escalate due to the lack of training in working with youth with emotional and behavioral disorders.

Need #4 – Self-Esteem

The need for love and acceptance is often tied to the feelings of self-esteem, status, and achievement. For foster youth, the need to be accepted is often closely related to the need to feel a positive self-esteem and achievement. Day et al. (2012) found the theme of foster youth needing teachers to be sensitive to their unique learning needs. Participants in the study found that the way teachers interact with youth, specifically the unique emotional needs of foster youth, had a direct impact on the self-esteem of foster youth. As discussed under need #3, teachers who provoked students to misbehave or would have them removed for behaviors and placed in alternative settings sent a message to the youth that they were not accepted for who they were.

Self-esteem can often be viewed through the lens of education past high school. Missy says that “After I earned my GED, I went to a local college. I started at 19 but it took me a couple of years just to learn how to read.” At age 19, she couldn’t read above a 4th grade level. Missy wanted to become a Registered Nurse and so she needed to be reading at a much higher level. She took remedial reading classes to improve her skills and by age 21, she was beginning to take college level courses for her degree. She talked about during the time she was in school, she was under so much pressure from what was going on in her personal life and at home that she had difficulty separating herself from that and learning how to do things in school. Missy was placed in, what she says, were “very slow, never progressive” classes for those students with learning disabilities. She said “My teachers always claimed I had a learning disability, but I didn’t.” She ended up

going through college, graduating, and passing her state board exams without any additional assistance. She said, “No K-12 teacher ever picked up that I was working through trauma-related issues and was not learning disabled. They just kept me there”.

Many times foster youth in middle and high school do not have the self-esteem others do because of their own life experiences. When it comes to educators and how they can help the self-esteem of foster youth, Ellen and Jane both spoke of a need for educators and professionals who work with foster youth to be trained in trauma-related care. They believe that by having a better understanding of what happens to these children outside of the school, professionals can better connect with them inside the education system and encourage them to reach farther standards than before.

Ellen described sending schools information on trauma informed care but stated that she did not receive a response. She described instances of having described the trauma students have faced or certain mental health diagnosis and the educators had no idea what that meant or what that diagnosis meant for that student on an educational basis. She described foster youth who suffered lead poisoning and after describing this to the education staff, they were perplexed that lead poisoning could lead to so many learning challenges. Ellen felt like the education staff “knew the learning disabilities, the language and the lingo to use but that is it.” The growing belief that when you help a foster youth to believe in them selves, that they are not the labels that are put upon them, it can raise their self-esteem and their belief of what they can achieve.

That brings up another issue with a foster youth’s self-esteem – their Individual Education Plan (IEP) if they are in the special education system. The IEP is put in place

to even out the playing field when it comes to doing their school work alongside their non-disabled peers. Students with IEPs have a history of being singled-out when it comes to their educational needs, sent to different rooms, sometimes for the entire school day, away from their non-disabled peers. This can have an effect on their self-esteem. When asked how often they, as social service providers, have been invited to a foster youth's IEP meeting as a part of the IEP team, both Ellen and Jane said that the only time they feel like they are invited is when the youth is a chronic behavior problem and it is expected that they will solve the problem. Jane stated "I feel like the only time it happens frequently is if it is a kid that is really a problem for the school who is always coming to us instead of the parent, then I feel like I am always invited." Ellen concurs, stating that "I feel like if the school isn't getting a lot from parental involvement then they definitely want us there." Sometimes, they describe that if the student is "on paper" and involved with social services, even if they are not foster youth, they are asked for their calendar before the parent so that it can be ensured that they are able to be present at the meeting.

Describing the interaction of the youth in the IEP meeting, Ellen and Jane said that most of the time the youth is not present. Both wonder if it is because the youth does not want to be talked about as if they are not present or hear about the bad stuff. These IEP meetings are supposed to be about the positive things the student is doing, how their education is going, what assistance they need in order to meet their goals, and how the IEP team can help the student become everything they can. Cade and Vicky also said that they avoided meetings at school unless they knew an adult who was on their side would be there and they were assured that it would be a positive experience. When asked

whether the IEP meetings Jane or Ellen has attended have been more negative or positive, they both described having both experiences. Jane specifically stated that “I would say the majority has been probably positive and again, it depends on the school. The one school that I can think of in my head tends to be negative.” Ellen concurs and said “when they were negative, they were *really* negative.”

On the positive side of self-esteem, it appears that which foster home the youth is placed in may have a large impact on the youth. Jane described a particular foster home who worked with teenagers and their independent living skills. This foster home is described as one of the best for preparing the youth for independent living including the possibility of going to college. The youth are taken on college experience days and work on setting them up in an apartment, with a job and a savings account. The youth almost always have worked a minimum of two jobs before exiting out of care, have been instructed in financial management, and have been required to put away a certain portion of their earnings. Most of the youth have obtained a driver’s license, have saved enough for a car, have opened up both a checking and a savings account and have learned skills to be living independently. Ellen and Jane both said that this is not a reality for most foster youth in other homes. This particular foster home placed an emphasis on preparing the youth for living independently and would treat them as though they were a part of their family. The love and acceptance shown to these youth pushed them farther and made them work harder than youth who were not as openly regarded.

Need #5 – Self-Actualization

Maslow's highest tier describes the human beings' need for reaching their own personal potential. As he stated, "we shall call people who are satisfied in [the lower tiers] of needs, basically satisfied people, and it is from these that we may expect the fullest (and healthiest) creativeness. Since, in our society, basically satisfied people are the exception, we do not know much about self-actualization, either experimentally or clinically" (Maslow, 1943, p. 383). The former foster youth who participated in this study are continuously striving to fulfill the first four of the basic needs. A question arises regarding the rate at which these individuals would become satisfied people if they had been transitioned into independent living on a different scale.

Ellen and Jane described a 20-year-old collaboration system that has been brought back into their service plan that included an interagency monthly meeting with possible scenarios and each agency described how they would work within that scenario. This interagency collaboration brings to the forefront gaps in the system and has opened up dialogue between agencies, which sometimes leads to discussions that bring out into the open the frustrations between agencies and how each deals with specific issues. Each explained that the only real way to work together is to talk openly and honestly with each other and to "call each other out" when needed. This often leads to frank discussions about handling of issues and desired outcomes.

Another addition to the service agency's policies was the "permanency round table" which placed the people who are at the heart of the transition service plan for the foster youth at the same table, working up a plan that is overseen by the State of

Wisconsin and which would hold the service worker responsible for the implementation in a short timeframe. While this permanency round table was relatively new to the region, the service personnel involved in this study believe that if done correctly and in collaboration with the education system, the permanency round table could provide a better service to the youth and give them a greater chance of becoming satisfied people.

In terms of self-actualization, Missy was the participant who has been out of the system for the longest period of time. She was able to put herself through college and pass a State Board exam to become a Registered Nurse. Missy said, "I have gone farther than anyone believed I could," even after she exited the system and started college she was told to go for something easier than a Registered Nurse. She is currently being what she can be and is raising another child to be the best that he can be. Missy believes the education system and the foster system failed to help her achieve this highest level because she had to teach herself to read college-level courses, be a parent to a child with special needs without assistance, and ended up being in a violent marriage because of her need for shelter and love.

Vicky and Cade were working their way through the level of needs, both dependent upon others for shelter, food, and self-esteem. Of the two, Cade is further along as he was employed and paying rent. He was still dependent on others to help him with transportation. Vicky was technically homeless and was raising a young son on her own. She was able to meet her basic need for food because of state aid but said if this was gone, she wouldn't know what to do. With a young child, she didn't believe that she could work, find suitable child care and be able to afford it. Vicky had no driver's

license, no transportation other than a bicycle, and was completely dependent on her boyfriend and his parents for shelter and warmth.

The results of the research study have given us specific information as to the participants' experiences either being in the foster system or working with foster youth. In Chapter 5 we discuss the impact of the results and how changes can be made to integrate the systems that work with foster youth to best prepare them for life after high school.

Chapter 5 -- Discussion

This study gathered qualitative information about the experiences of former foster youth in their transition into independent living, educators who have worked with foster students through their transition, and social service persons' experiences of working with the education system and foster youth's transition services. Their knowledge, opinions, and experiences have given us greater insight into the specific needs of foster youth who transition into independent living status and what we, as professionals, must do to facilitate their independence. Their feedback regarding what works, what does not work, and suggestions to make foster youth transition into adult life more successful tells us that more communication and collaboration between agencies could greatly maximize the effect the services have on youth. The service personnel involved in the study gave a couple of examples of new collaborations that may provide better service to foster youth in transition.

The most basic of needs, according to Maslow, is the physiological needs such as air, sleep, and food. Our bodies and the earth we live on provide us with air and require us to sleep. We, as human beings, are required to provide food for our bodies to survive. Braxton et al. (2011) stated that the foster system provides this most basic of needs to foster youth. It has been my experience as an educator that although the majority of foster youth are provided with food, sometimes supplemental food is required while in the educational environment at times other than the scheduled lunch period. There have been times when a student has been unable to concentrate on their studies because they have been hungry. Maslow (1943) stated that all "capacities are put into the service of

hunger-satisfaction, and the organization of these capacities is almost entirely determined by the one purpose of satisfying hunger” (p. 374). In order to allow the student’s brain to concentrate on something other than hunger, supplemental food must be made available at times other than the lunch period, in certain instances.

Another issue that developed out of the research is the need for educators to be vigilant in their teaching, active in their professional development and dedicated to the education and care of the students in their classroom. Having removed the educators who have become lax in their teaching along with having the district provide adequate training on trauma centered care in the school system, foster youth become better prepared to be independent upon their exit out of the system. Collaboration between agencies and personnel involved in foster youth’s education and care must be amplified.

Specifically, the foster system cannot adequately meet the needs of tiers two, three, and four without assistance from the education system. Foster youth spend about half of their day inside the education system and the other half with their foster caregivers. It cannot be expected that only one of these systems meet all the needs of the foster youth. All Foster youth are required to have an Independent Living Plan. In addition, Foster youth who are also in special education are required to have Individual Education Plans with transition services after the age of 16. By combining these two documents into the Independent Living and Education Plan at a state-wide level, the service is more complete.

The people in the education system who work with foster youth need to have basic instruction in trauma centered care and mental health issues so that they can

adequately interact with foster youth. Foster youth's basic needs such as food and safety must be met before learning can take place. Foster youth who experience emotional and behavioral challenges are specifically vulnerable to self-esteem issues. In order for their need for status, achievement, and positive self-esteem to be met, they need to be placed in an education system that can properly work with them. Ostracizing them to alternative sites is not the answer and may cause more problems.

Based on the data collected, it appears that neither our educational system nor our foster care system is meeting the transitional needs of foster youth. As Dworsky and Courtney (2009) found, foster youth are exiting our system without the necessary tools to be self-sufficient. A large number of former foster youth are homeless, jobless and pregnant. If these foster youth are in special education, and a large percentage of them are, the educators and social service workers are required to transition them into adulthood the best way possible. Perhaps by working in a collaborative effort, from the start of a foster care student's fourteenth birthday, professionals can meet the transition needs of the youth.

Specific transition needs of foster youth appear to be based in direct relation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs but also appear to be intertwined with mental health needs. Mental health needs are also prevalent in foster youth. As discussed by Ellen, trauma-centered care training is available to public school teachers and administrators. The majority of foster youth have experienced some trauma in their lives, as evidenced by their entry into the foster system. Trauma-centered training must be incorporated at the public school level for all staff who will work with these youth.

Based on the above information, it appears that both the educational system and the foster system need to work with each other. For foster youth who have Individual Education Plans that include transition services, and also have Independent Living Plans in the foster system, these documents need to be shared between agencies. If possible, a shared document that combines both of these documents for foster youth could be entered into a statewide database where the individuals who are charged with implementing the transition plan have access to the document, similar to the Post-Secondary Transition Plan that is currently housed on the server of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction for every student over the age of 14 who has met the criteria to receive special education services. If the foster system and the education system worked together to ensure that foster youth are as prepared as possible to be independent upon exiting the system after high school graduation, maybe the percentage of homeless former foster youth would decrease.

REFERENCES

- Amodeo, M., Collins, M. E., & Clay, C. (2009). Toward best practice and innovation in independent living training: Experiences from the multi-state evaluation of federally-funded projects. *Children and Youth Services Review, 31*, 185-192.
- Blakeslee, J. (2012). Expanding the scope of research with transition-age foster youth: Applications of the social network perspective. *Child and Family Social Work, 17*, 326-336.
- Braxton, C., & Krajewski-Jaime, E. R. (2011). Exploration of the American foster care system: An experiential account. *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences, 6*(1), 47-56.
- Brendtro, L. K., & Mitchell, M. L. (2011). Positive psychology: Transforming young lives. *Reclaiming Children and Youth, 20*(2), 5-12.
- Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004 (2011, Sept.). Questions & answers on secondary transition, Retrieved November 19, 2012, from <http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/%2Croot%2Cdynamic%2CQaCorner%2C10%2C>.
- Carter Narendorf, S. & McMillen, J. C. (2010). Substance use and substance use disorders as foster youth transition to adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review, 32*, 113-119.
- Casey Family Programs (2007). *A road map for learning: Improving educational outcomes in foster care*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.
- Collins, M. E., Spencer, R., & Ward, R. (nd). Supporting youth in the transition from foster care: Formal and informal connections. *Child Welfare, 89*(1), 125-143.
- Courtney, M. E., Lee, J., & Perez, A. (2011). Receipt of help acquiring life skills and predictors of help receipt among current and former foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*, 2442-2451.
- Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2001). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into Practice, 39*(3), 124-131.
- Cusick, G. R., Havlicek, J. R., & Courtney, M. E. (2012). Risk for arrest: The role of social bonds in protecting foster youth making the transition to adulthood. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 82*(1), 19-31.

- Day, A., Riebschleger, J., Dworsky, A., Damashek, A., & Fogarty, K. (2012). Maximizing educational opportunities for youth aging out of foster care by engaging youth voices in a partnership for social change. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*, 1007-1014.
- Del Quest, A., Fullerton, A., Geenen, S., Powers, L., et al. (2012). Voices of youth in foster care and special education regarding their educational experiences and transition to adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*, 1604-1615.
- Dewey, J. (1916). Democracy and education retrieved from http://www.stephenhicks.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/dewey_john-poe.pdf.
- Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund (2009). Navigating rough waters: Addressing the transition needs of foster youth with disabilities in school. *Foster Youth with Disabilities in Transition Clearinghouse Project*.
- Dworsky, A., & Courtney, M. E. (2009). Homelessness and the transition from foster care to adulthood. *Child Welfare, 88*(4), 23-56.
- Dworsky, A., & Courtney, M. E. (2010). The risk of teenage pregnancy among transitioning foster youth: Implications for extending state care beyond age 18. *Children and Youth Services Review, 32*, 1351-1356.
- Geenan, S., & Powers, L. E. (2007). "Tomorrow is another problem" The experiences of youth in foster care during transition into adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review, 29*, 1085-1101.
- Geenen, S., & Powers, L. E. (2006). Are we ignoring youths with disabilities in foster care? An examination of their school performance. *Social Work, 51*(3), 233-240.
- Gerber, J. M., & Dicker, S. (2005). Children adrift: Addressing the educational needs of New York's foster children. *Albany Law Review, 69*, 1-74.
- Golafshani, N. (2003). Understanding reliability and validity in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report, 8*(4), 597-607.
- Henig, A. (2009). Employment aid for youth aging out of foster care: Extending one-stop career centers to include a division for foster care youth. *Family Court Review, 47*(3), 570-585.
- Hill, K., Lightfoot, E., & Kimball, E. (nd). Foster care transition services for youth with disabilities: Findings from a survey of county service providers. *Child Welfare, 89*(6), 63-81.
- Hollander, S., Budd, J., Petulla, W. A., & Staley, J. A. (2007). Helping clients transition to independent living. *Family Court Review, 45*(3), 444-454.

- Hook, J. L., & Courtney, M. (2010). Employment of former foster youth as young adults: Evidence from the Midwest study . *Chapin Hall Issue Brief*, Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago, Chapin Hall.
- Kelly, K. (2009). Education transition plans for children in foster care. *Child Law Practice*, 28(8), 121-124.
- Kim, H. K., Pears, K. C., & Fisher, P. A. (2012). The placement history chart: A tool for understanding the longitudinal pattern of foster children's placements. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 1459-1464.
- Kirk, R., & Day, A. (2011). Increasing college access for youth aging out of foster care: Evaluation of a summer camp program for foster youth transitioning from high school to college. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 1173-1180.
- Krinsky, M. A. (2010). A not so happy birthday: The foster youth transition from adolescence into adulthood. *Family Court Review*, 48(2), 250-254.
- Leedy, P. D., & Jeanne E. Ormrod. *Practical research: Planning and design*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, 2010.
- Leone, P., & Weinberg, L. (2010). *Addressing the unmet educational needs of children and youth in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems*. Center for Juvenile Justice Reform: Georgetown University.
- Longhurst, J., Jones, K., Hiatt, P., & Hart, L. K. (2011). Spreading wings with a safety net: The Montcalm transitional living program. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 20(2), 22-28.
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370-396.
- McClain, A. (2010). Helping our foster youth in transition. *Policy and Practice*, American Public Human Services Association.
- McCoy, H., McMillen, J. C., & Spitznagel, E. L. (2007). Older youth leaving the foster care system: Who, what, when, where and why? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 735-745.
- McLeod, S. A. (2007). Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Retrieved on April 12, 2013 from <http://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.
- McLeod, S. A. (2007). Humanism. Retrieved on April 12, 2013 from <http://www.simplypsychology.org/humanistic.html>.

- McLeod, S. A. (2008). Person centered therapy. Retrieved on April 12, 2013 from <http://www.simplypsychology.org/client-centered-therapy.html>.
- National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. (nd). *Negotiating the curves toward employment: A guide about youth involved in the foster care system*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership.
- National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability. (nd). *Guideposts for success*. Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership.
- Palladino, J. M. (2003). Orchestrating special education services for youth in foster care. *Beyond Behavior*, 12-16.
- Palladino, J. M. (2006). "Don't sell them dreams without the foundations": Collaboration for the transitional needs of foster care adolescents with disabilities. *The High School Journal*, 22-32.
- Palladino, J. M. (2009). A proposed model of retransformed qualitative data within a mixed methods research design. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, 3, 91-97.
- Powell, N.W., & Marshall, A. (2011). The relationship factor: Making or breaking successful transitions for youth at risk. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 20(2), 13-16.
- Powers, L. E., Geenan, S., Powers, J., Pommier-Satya, S., Turner, A., Dalton, L. D., et al. (2012). My life: Effects of a longitudinal, randomized study of self-determination enhancement on the transition outcomes of youth in foster care and special education. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 2179-2187.
- Sammons, A. (nd). The humanistic perspective 2: What are our needs? Retrieved on April 14, 2013 from www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.pdf.
- Sommer, H., Wu, L., & Mauldon, J. (nd). *California connected by 25: Efforts to address the K-12 educational needs of transitioning foster youth*. Berkley, CA: UC Berkley's Center for Child & Youth Policy.
- Stuart Foundation (2011). Education is the lifeline for youth in foster care *Research Highlights on Education and Foster Care*.
- The Leiden Conference on the Development and Care of Children without Permanent Parents, (2012). The development and care of institutionally reared children, *Child Development Perspectives*, 6(2), 174-180.
- University of Minnesota (2005/2006). Feature issue on children with disabilities in the child welfare system, *Impact*, 19(1).

- Unrau, Y. A. (2011). From foster care to college: The Seita Scholars Program at Western Michigan University. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 20(2), 17-20.
- Van Ryzin, M. J., Mills, D., Kelban, S., Rodriguez Vars, M., & Chamberlain, P. (2011). Using the Bridges Transition Framework for youth in foster care: Measurement development and preliminary outcomes. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 2267-2272.
- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Department of Workforce Development & Department of Health Services. (2012). *Seamless Collaboration With and For Students with Disabilities Transitioning to Employment and Adult Life*. Madison, WI.
- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. (2010). *Educational Services for Children Placed in Foster Care*, (DPI Bulletin No. 00106). Madison, WI: Student Services Prevention and Wellness Team.
- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. (2008) *Instruction and Services for School Age Parents*. Madison, WI: Student Services/Prevention & Wellness Team.
- Wisconsin Department of Children and Families Foster Care Fact Sheet (2010). accessed on December 9, 2012 at <http://dcf.wi.gov/children/foster/progserv/factsheet.htm>.
- Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. (2013). *Annual Report for Calendar Year 2011*. Madison, WI: Research and Operations Section.
- Zetlin, A. (2006). The experiences of foster children and youth in special education. *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability*, 31(3), 161-165.