

Former Foster Youth Application of College Transition Theory

Tyra Voget

Abstract

Past research on the process of transitioning to college has focused on the factors that contribute to a student's ability to cope with transition (Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson; 2006). However, this past research does not take into account the unique challenges faced by students who have transitioned out of the foster care system. Former foster youth (FFY) have experienced large disruptions in their adolescence that can sometimes include a break in familial relationships, changing schools, and even a loss of independence and freedom when being thrust into government care (Courtney, Teraro, & Bost, 2004; National Conference of State Legislators, 2019; Wolanin, 2015). This paper proposes an application of college transition theory through the lens of the experience of former foster youth. Based on extensive literature review of FFY's mental health challenges, preparedness for higher education, and relational support, this paper uses the four factors of Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a theoretical framework to view the college transition process for FFY, while posing a fifth factor that is unique to this student population.

Keywords

foster youth; college transition; theory

Tyra Voget is an emerging student affairs professional who will be graduating from the Indiana University Bloomington Higher Education & Student Affairs M.S.Ed program in May of 2021. She has worked as a paraprofessional in Residence Life, Diversity & Inclusion, and Civic Engagement for the last two years. Her favorite part of her graduate experience has been seeing the connection between her research and her practice and being able to apply what she has learned in real time. She has a passion for innovation & advancement in higher education, especially in regard to underrepresented student populations like low-income students, first generation college students and students of color. In her free time, you can see her recreating recipe videos, guiltlessly watching reality television shows, and attempting to DIY new home decor.

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Foster youth are at a significant disadvantage when it comes to achieving a higher education, where 70% aspire to obtain a higher education, yet only 20% actually enroll (Wolanin, 2005). Their disadvantages are further seen through their degree attainment, where only 2.5% of foster youth obtain a four-year college degree versus 23.5% of their peers (Fernandez-Alcantara, 2014). Though college degree attainment for foster youth continues to remain proportionally low, there is little research that offers insight on the experience of this student population. Foster youth have not received the level of recognition or attention that other underrepresented groups like, low-income and racial/ethnic minorities have when it comes to focused efforts to increase their success in college and therefore, the majority of student affairs professionals are ill-equipped to support these students (Wolanin, 2005).

In regard to former foster youth's (FFY) transition to college, there are many different factors that contribute to their lack of success in higher education. A few of these factors include a lack of academic preparation that is the product of disruption from their previous school networks, increased levels of mental health issues that stem from trauma from their experiences that led them into the foster care system and their experiences within the system, and a lack of ability to manage both their day to day struggles and their academic pursuits (Gross, 2019; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2014; Wolanin, 2005). FFY also tend to face challenges in regard to their family dynamics after leaving the foster care system, regarding the relationships with their biological parents, siblings, and their former foster families, which is likely to affect their transition to college (Courtney, 2009).

This paper will focus on analyzing the experience of former foster youth to present an application of existing theories that focuses on the development of this specific student population during their transition to college. It is important to look at the ways that their psychological and relational struggles affect their transition into college using existing theories as a framework to understand the development of these students. The lack of focused efforts to increase the success of this population in college makes it necessary to propose an alternate application of transition theory for FFY to give student affairs practitioners the tools needed to help create space and support for these students that will ease their transition into college. The definition of terms will be presented, followed by the literature review, then the application of existing theories, concluding with recommendations for student affairs practice and further research.

Definition of Terms

In order to understand the experience of former foster youth transitioning to college, it is important to understand what their experience going into and transitioning out of the foster care system may have looked like. To give further insight into that experience, a list of relevant terms will be defined in this section.

Foster care is a process of providing temporary living to children “intended to ensure a child’s safety and well-being until a permanent home can be re-established or newly established” (Fernandez-Alcantara, 2019, p. 2). Children are appointed into foster care through the judicial system when a determination is made that it is unsafe for a child to remain at home with a parent or guardian (Bethany Christian Services, 2019). In 2017, an estimated 442,995 children were in foster care and the average length of stay is around twelve months, however, over twelve percent of children remain in foster care for three or more years (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Foster parents are trained caregivers, licensed by the state and are there to provide stability and normalcy to the child, while also preparing them for permanent placement, either through reunification or adoption (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019). Foster parents are different from adoptive parents because in the case of foster care, the state holds all of the legal rights of guardianship over the child (Nguyen, 2012). The large majority of foster youth are placed in homes with foster parents (lead by nonrelatives at 45% and relatives at 32%), but a small percentage of foster youth will be placed in what is called a “group home” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Group homes, sometimes referred to as “congregate care,” are live in group settings where groups of foster children “live together with staff members who work in shifts; shelters; residential treatment centers and other non-family living situations” (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019, para. 8). Group homes are typically reserved for children who need more restrictive housing, such as those who have mental illness diagnoses or heightened behavioral problems; however, overuse of group homes has resulted in 40% of children placed in group homes having no documented problems that would warrant a group home placement (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015).

Reunification is one way that foster youth transition out of the foster care system. It is a process of reuniting foster youth with their parent/legal guardian, through supervised, unsupervised, overnight, and weekend visits (Bethany Christian Services, 2019). Statistics from 2017, report that 49% of children leaving foster care are reunited with their parent or legal guardian and 24% are adopted (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Aging Out is a term used to describe foster youth who exit the foster care system as a result of them turning either 18 or 21, depending on the laws of their state (Aging Out, n.d.). This is a small percentage of foster youth, however, this way of exiting the system can be the most detrimental for youth as they lose funding from the state in the form of housing, living expenses, and health services (Aging Out, n.d.; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Literature Review

In order to specifically apply transition theory to former foster youth’s transition into college, a literature review of the challenges that they face in regard to their mental health, preparedness for higher education/adulthood, and familial/close relationships was necessary to provide a basis for understanding the population. A review of their challenges will then be followed by a review of existing student development theories that will provide a framework for the application of college transition theory to former foster youth.

Mental Health Challenges

Former foster youth face many hurdles that are far greater than the general population of students entering college. One large one is their battle with mental health that is largely caused by trauma from “maltreatment, frequent changes in situations and transitions, broken family relationships, inconsistent and inadequate access to mental health services, repeated exposure to traumatic events, and the stigma of being in care” (Bullock et al., 2019). A study shows that as many as 80 percent of foster youth have mental health issues in comparison to around 20 percent of the general population (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016).

Although these issues continue to exist after a youth leaves foster care, they are less likely to utilize mental health services than their non-foster youth peers (Bullock et al., 2019). One study found that the reasoning for this lack of utilization is that foster youth feel as though they have no control over their options for treatment, a feeling they already feel through their lack of control over their life situation in foster care (Sakai et al., 2014). Foster youth may also feel uneasy about disclosing their mental health struggles because of their fear of “being singled out for special treatment, which exacerbates a feeling of difference and alienation and fear of others’ low expectations” (Bullock et al., 2019, p. 24). This feeling of being “singled out” and alienated by their peers might have also manifested early on in their life as they entered the foster care system. In some cases, foster youth who enter the system do so quite swiftly and may be uprooted, not only from their home, but from their school (Mabrey, 2014). Feeling unfamiliar with their new school and the new people surrounding them, oftentimes, causes them to feel “unstable” and they, therefore might lose confidence in themselves and their ability to succeed in this new environment (Mabrey, 2014).

Preparedness for higher education/adulthood

Former foster youth lag well behind in educational attainment as well as in their transition to adulthood compared to their non-foster youth peers (Wolanin, 2015). A study in Illinois, Iowa, & Wisconsin from 2004, reported that about 80 percent of foster youth moved schools at least once, 1 in 3 moved more than five times, and 18 percent had missed close to a month of school due to disruptions of foster care placements (Courtney et al., 2004). These disruptions can lead to many challenges for foster youth academically such as; a disconnection from school friendships, a shift in what the student is now learning in the classroom, and a loss of class credits (Gross, 2019). Moreover, though a study showed that, when relevant services are provided, foster youth who participated in a college preparatory program were just as likely to enroll and succeed in college as their non-foster youth peers; foster youth were far “less likely to have taken college preparatory curriculum” (Burley & Lemon, 2012; Gross, 2019, p.26).

College, for the majority of students entering in, is also the first step into adulthood. Not only are they tasked with keeping up with the academic rigor of earning a higher education, but they are also expected to have “basic adult competencies” (Wolanin, 2015, p.11). However, for most FFY, especially those who “age out” of the foster care system, they grow up in a system that has impeded on their opportunity to practice living independently under the watchful eye of a caregiver (Wolanin, 2015). Youth in foster care typically are restricted from participating in all sorts of activities that might help them develop self-sufficiency in their teen years; such as getting a job, going on dates, or even changing their hairstyles (National Conference of State Legislators, 2019). Those placed in group homes have even less self-sufficiency as they are put on strict curfews and have “lengthy approval processes” that “further contribute to [their] loss of independence and decision-making” (National Conference of State Legislators, 2019, para.6).

Familial/close relationships

The social transition to college is likely to be difficult for former foster youth from the very beginning, especially when thinking about their relationship experiences. As mentioned previously, when entering the foster care system, foster youth experience a disruption of their relationships with their friends, parents, and sometimes even siblings (Wolanin, 2015). Their relationship with their foster families can also see strain through strict policies that prohibit foster children from being treated in the same manner as a biological child; like being able to vacation with their families or being able to spend the night at an extended relative’s home (National Conference of State Legislators, 2019). Foster youth might also experience frequent moves during their time in foster care, bouncing from home to home, which leaves them with a feeling of rejection or loss (Hallas, 2002). For those in group homes who lack family structures, they lose the ability to “experience regular family life, develop practical skills and build bonds with adults who will care for them” (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019, para.21).

When thinking through college opportunities, foster youth often lack the familial support of navigating the higher education system; having to turn to school counselors who “may not understand the unique and complex needs and issues of young people in foster care who are transitioning to college” or their caseworker who “may not have the time nor expertise to help students navigate the college admission and financial aid process” (National Conference of State Legislators, 2019, para.8). Even those who go through a reunification process and return to their parent or guardian often feel unable to rely on their support given the history of their relationship, and may even feel as though their parent or guardian is relying on them for support, which can add extra stress to foster youth who are transitioning to college (Courtney, 2009).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Transitions, according to Goodman et al. (2006), is defined as “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p.33). Youth transitioning into foster care experience what is referred to as an unanticipated transition, being removed from their parent or guardian’s care and placed into the system. All transitions move through phases identified as “moving in”, “moving through”, and “moving out” (Schlossberg, 1984). Though FFY transitioning into college is an anticipated transition, the ways in which they might cope with this transition can be directly affected by their experiences “moving in”, “moving through”, and “moving out” of the foster care system.

According to Schlossberg (1984), there are four factors that influence an individual’s ability to cope with transition: situation, self, social support, & strategies. Situation refers to multiple factors such as concurrent stress, trigger, and role change. Self refers to personal and demographic characteristics like socioeconomic status or ethnicity, but also psychological characteristics like self-efficacy and ego development. Social support includes family, friends, and institutions, and strategies refers to the way one copes with transition, whether that be by controlling the meaning or modifying the situation. These four factors will serve as a framework for understanding the challenge of transitioning to a collegiate environment for former foster youth.

External Formulas

External formula is the first phase of Baxter Magolda’s Theory of Self Authorship. It argues that students entering college start out with a dependency on their formed relationships, such as their relationships with their family and friends, to help make meaning of their identity and values (Baxter Magolda, 2004). Students in this phase do not have authorship of their own lives as they rely on their external formulas, yet they believe that they are operating independently. Former foster youth transitioning into college experience the concept of external formulas much differently than the average student, because of their strained familial relationships and their experience moving both in and out of the foster care system. For example, FFY who were brought up in the system and aged out, may only be able to see themselves as wards of the state in which they must abide by certain curfews or restrict themselves from activities that their peers might be participating in, as was the norm for them while they were in the system (National Conference of State Legislators, 2019). This is an example in which FFY may be defined by their external formulas, but they are not naive to believe that that way of thinking was formed independently by their own choosing. Another example would be FFY who are reunified with their parent before entering college. The parents of these youth may not be a source of external formula at all for them as the relationship that they have with their parent, oftentimes, has shifted because of their inability to rely on them for support and therefore, the parent has little to no authority in their life.

Sanford's Challenge and Support

Sanford’s theory of Challenge and Support shows the ways in which the level of challenge and support a student receives affects their success in college. Sanford argues that in order for growth to occur, the level of challenge and support a student experiences must be balanced; too much support and the student will not face challenges that will help them learn and too much challenge and the student might find the task unbearable and decide to quit (Sanford, 1962). Quite simply, this theory will be used as a framework to paint a picture of where FFY are in regards to the level of challenge and support they receive from external factors and how this knowledge can be used to determine the level of challenge and support these students might need from student affairs practitioners as a result. In short, FFY receive very low challenge and support from external factors which brings them at a level of “disengagement” on the Challenge/Support scale that results in a lack of determination and optimism (Sanford, 1962).

Former Foster Youth Application of Transition Theory

The application of transition theory to former foster youth focuses on the ways in which former foster youth's past experiences transitioning in and out of the foster care system affect their transition into higher education. This application of theory will focus on the 4 factors that affect student's ability to cope with transition as a framework to better understand former foster youth's challenges. Because the experience of former foster youth is so complex, the concept of External Formulas will be used within Schlossberg's transition theory under the factor of social support to help better understand the ways in which external formulas influence former foster youth differently than their peers and therefore the degree to which they may rely on their family units, for example, will look differently as well. Sanford's theory of Challenge and Support will then be explored as a concluding framework to see how their transition is affected by the amount of external challenge and support they receive, and to what degree colleges and universities must create conditions to find a positive balance between them. An additional factor, sustainability, will be presented as a fifth factor in the former foster youth college transition to explain the additional tasks that FFY must complete in order to be successful in their college transition, because of the differing challenges that they face in relation to the general student population.

Situation

Factor number one in Schlossberg's Theory, situation, has many different items identified under its umbrella. The application of this theory for FFY focuses in on control and concurrent stress as factors that contribute to this population's ability to cope with transition to college. Control, according to Schlossberg (1984), refers to the aspects of the situation in which the student might feel is in their control. For former foster youth, especially those who have aged out of the foster care system, they have experienced a transition in which they had little to no control over the change that was happening in their life. These restrictions for former foster youth who experienced foster care towards the end of their adolescence, may continue to be felt as they transition into college. In these cases, former foster youth may feel less in control of their transition to college because of those experienced restrictions.

Concurrent stress is another factor under the umbrella of situation. Former foster youth are much more likely to experience concurrent stress, or stress that is a result of issues outside of college, than their peers. Their family dynamics or their lack of support within the foster care system can cause more stress to their college transition than is normal for the average student. For example, former foster youth who are reunified with their families prior to attending college, are likely to experience heightened and consistent family discourse that may add extra stress to the college transition (Courtney et al., 2001). Former foster youth, especially those who have aged out of the system, are likely to feel concurrent stress when it comes to figuring out accommodations for housing during school breaks as well if they do not have families to go home to or friends to stay with (National Conference of State Legislators, 2019). These added stressors may cause these students to feel weighed down or unable to cope with the stress that transitioning to college brings as well.

Self

Self is the second factor of Schlossberg's factors that contribute to a student's ability to cope. The application of this theory for former foster youth will focus on the aspects of personal characteristics in regard to FFY's state of health, as well as their level of self-confidence. As was discussed in the literature review, FFY often experience serious mental health issues as a result of trauma from their experiences before, during, and after their stay in foster care (Bullock et al., 2019). This trauma can lead to heightened levels of depression and anxiety and presents a level of mental health issues that often surpass the average college student (Bullock et al., 2019). This, layered on top of FFY's loss of self-confidence as a result of

disruptions in their relationships and education, can lead these students to feel as though they cannot rely on themselves through their college transition.

Social Support

Social support is the factor in which former foster youth might feel the most lacking in when it comes to their ability to lean on the people or resources in their lives for support during their transition to college, even though it may be the most imperative considering where students are in their identity development when entering college. Baxter Magolda's Theory of Self-Authorship argues that students start out in phase 1 where they follow the plans that are concocted for them by external formulas, which include their parents, peers, and other authority (Baxter Magolda, 2004). External formulas for former foster youth, however, differ from the majority of their peers, because they often do not have the support of their parents or guardians behind them as they are transitioning to college and they also may not have previous school friends that hold their influence either because of frequent moves that have disrupted relationships (Courtney, 2009; Wolanin, 2015). Those who have aged out of the system and are no longer receiving support from the state, are also forced to turn away from that as a source of influence and support. Because of this, former foster youth might be more likely to need to lean on the support and influence of friendships they make in college and resources provided by the university to help guide them in their transition as well as their identity development.

Strategies or Coping Responses

The final factor in student's ability to cope with transition according to Schlossberg's theory is strategies or coping responses. Since FFY experience lack of support in all of the other three factors, their ability to develop strategies to cope with their transition that are positive and productive are likely to come from the influence and support they receive from the institution itself. Sanford's theory of challenge and support provides the framework for practitioners to see where FFY students are at in regard to their level of challenge and support from their external influences. FFY students receive a low level of challenge and support from external factors causing them to have a decreased sense of optimism and determination according to Sanford (1962), which in turn, can decrease their ability to obtain positive coping responses. Former foster youth lack challenge as they have experienced an inability to practice independence by being restricted from tasks within the foster care system that their peers have the ability to participate in, like getting a job (National Conference of State Legislators, 2019; Wolanin, 2015). They also lack challenge because they experience a lack of expectations from those around them to enroll in college, let alone graduate (National Conference of State Legislators, 2019). Their lack of support comes from their inability to rely on their families and sometimes even their former caseworkers and high school counselors who were often either busy with supporting the student in other areas of their life or ill-equipped to support the student in their unique position (National Conference of State Legislators, 2019).

Sustainability

Because of the developmental difficulties FFY face in every factor of Schlossberg's Transition Theory, they are challenged to complete additional tasks in tandem with the 4 factors presented. Therefore, the analysis of former foster youth's college transition presents a potential fifth factor that must be considered when thinking about FFY's transition to college, and that is sustainability. As previously explained, FFY may have experienced many challenges during their previous transitions in an out of foster care (Gross, 2019; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2014; Wolanin, 2005). FFY, because of their previous experiences with transition, may feel a sense of instability and impermanence surrounding the transitional circumstances of their life (Mabrey, 2014).

Sustainability is therefore a factor of transition that may need to be considered in FFY college transition in order to create persistence. FFY must feel as though the transition that they are experiencing is not a fleeting or unretainable circumstance, but something that can be managed and nurtured to have a positive, everlasting impact. This sustainability includes finding people and structures to rely on that will not, in a moment's notice, disappear. It must also include having the ability to develop coping responses and self-efficacy that can withstand unexpected change. FFY students must feel that there is sustainable growth that occurs and will continue to occur, both during and after the transition that they experience, so that they will have a greater chance of persistence.

Recommendations for Practitioners

Student affairs practitioners should recognize their role in supporting these students by providing them with an environment that challenges them to live up to a potential that they may not have been encouraged to by their family or other forms of external authority, both academically and extracurricularly. They must also provide them with a higher level of support and stability than the general student population, as they are likely to need that as well. For example, within academic advising, advisors should be knowledgeable about the academic preparation of the student prior to entering college, as it is likely to be hindered by frequent school changes or a disruption in their schooling. Advisors should provide a higher level of individualized support for these students, but also set high and consistent expectations for them as well, giving them both a high level of support and challenge (Sanford, 1962). Practitioners in orientation and transition should work to develop programs or initiatives that further support FFY in finding involvement opportunities that will give them a sense of belonging as well as challenge them to see their autonomy in their college experience (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Schlossberg, 1984).

One example of an initiative that has been put forth by an institution to support foster and former foster youth is the Bruin Guardian Scholars program at the University of California, Los Angeles, in which recipients receive “scholarships, year-round housing in the dorms, academic and therapeutic counseling, tutoring, health care coverage, and a campus job. Scholars also receive the basics that many of their non-foster care peers receive from their families, such as bedding, towels, and other necessities for personal care” (Mitchell, n.d.). Programs or offices from universities that include even a few of these initiatives are likely to have a positive impact on the success of this student population.

Conclusion

The application of transition theory to former foster youth's college transition combines Schlossberg's transition theory, Baxter Magolda's concept of external formulas, and Sanford's theory of challenge and support to create a framework for understanding the college transition process for former foster youth. An additional factor of sustainability must also be considered to recognize how the instability of their past transition experiences may affect their ability to persist in their college transition. Though former foster youth experience similar challenges as the general student population, their experience transitioning in and out of the foster care system provides them with an extra set of challenges that can affect their transition into college.

In order to further support former foster youth in their transition to college as well as ensure continued success through their progression in college, researchers must investigate more in regard to this population's feelings of self-efficacy and identity. Research should also be conducted to further investigate the role of foster parents in the lives of former foster youth in college and how these relationships affect their transition. Additionally, it is important to recognize that the application of these theories do not fully address the nuances of FFY's experiences transitioning to college, specifically as it relates to differing social identities like race, gender, and sexual orientation. These identities also play a major role in college transition and practitioners must educate themselves on the varying issues this

student population faces in order to create strategies for supporting these students as well as to advocate for and inform scholarship around the former foster youth student population.

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