The voices of youth formerly in foster care: Perspectives on educational attainment gaps

Elysia V. Clemens*, Heather M. Helm, Kristin Myers, Christina Thomas, Matt Tis

University of Northern Colorado, 501 20th St., Greeley, CO 80639, United States

ABSTRACT

As a population, youth who experience foster care graduate from high school at rates well below their non-foster care peers (National Working Group for Foster Care & Education, 2014). A Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) study was conducted to better understand the perspective of former foster youth on the graduation gap and their experience in school. Analysis of focus group data revealed one overarching domain, *emotional consequences*, as well as seven additional domains that related to youths' experiences surrounding their educational attainment: resilience, basic needs, internalized messages about education, educational stability, consequences of school mobility, fastest or easiest positive exit from K-12, and recommendations from youth. This research highlights the challenges faced by 16 former foster youth, their perspectives regarding the need to raise expectations, and their suggestions for closing the educational attainment gap.

1. Introduction

Middle- and high-school students in foster care, as a population, are failing to meet grade-level academic standards or attain high school credentials at rates comparable to their non-foster care peers (e.g., Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2014; U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The large gaps in academic achievement and educational attainment between students in foster care and their non-foster care peers have been amply demonstrated by linking state-wide child welfare and education data (e.g., Barratt & Berliner, 2013; Burley, 2013; Clemens & Tis, 2016; Colorado Department of Education, 2016; Texas Education Agency, 2013). Researchers have offered possible explanations for the gaps in achievement and attainment based on correlational studies, which have established connections among factors such as trauma history, residential mobility, school mobility, and poor educational outcomes (Chambers & Palmer, 2010; Clemens, Lalonde, & Sheesley, 2016; Reynolds, Chen, & Herbers, 2009; Romano, Babchishin, Marquis, & Fréchette, 2015). Advocates suggest that for students in foster care, the trauma and mobility factors are exacerbated by a lack of communication and alignment between the child welfare and education systems (e.g., Annie E. Casey, 2014).

Foster care students' relatively low academic achievement and educational attainment is a complex problem of practice, and as such, the solution likely requires dramatic systemic change. Specifically, both education and child welfare systems need to not only change internally, but also become better aligned with one another. Increasingly, partnerships between local child welfare and educational agencies are attempting to improve alignment and systematically address the educational needs of youth in foster care. Agencies in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Allegheny County, Pennsylvania have shown that such innovative collaborations can be successful (American Bar Association, 2015; Public Broadcasting Service, 2016). In these counties, educational and child welfare information is shared in real time, informing educator, child welfare, and liaison staff's efforts to ensure that the educational needs of youth in foster care are being met. Substantial gains have been made in graduation rates for students in foster care through these child welfare and education agency partnerships (American Bar Association, 2015; Public Broadcasting Service, 2016). However, though such local partnerships are growing in popularity, they are not yet the standard practice for most youth in foster care. In most geographic areas, schools do not even have records of which students are in foster care, much less best practices for supporting these students (Annie E. Casey, 2014; Smithgall, Jarpe-Ratner, & Walker, 2010).

In the face of this complex problem of practice, researchers, policymakers, and thought leaders have limited access to rigorous thematic analysis of youth's experiences as students in the foster care system (Levy et al., 2014). Even less information is available on youth's own recommendations for improving their educational experiences and supporting their progress toward a high school diploma. According to Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, and Fogarty (2012), allowing youth who are direct recipients of publicly funded services, such as

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foster care, to actively participate in creating change will ultimately benefit the youth and the community. Indeed, there is a long history of the federal government seeking the perspective of special populations to aid in decision-making. For example, many state and local governments have specifically established youth councils to provide youth's perspectives regarding the development of legislation and the funding of youth programs (Forum for Youth Investment, 2010; Harper, 2016). In the case of foster care students' educational experiences, the value of listening to the youth's perspectives is to provide educators, child welfare staff, and policy-makers with commonsense and experience-based recommendations that are not clouded by administrative barriers to service delivery.

In this study, the researchers invited youth who had experienced foster care during middle school or high school to review educational data points from their state, share their experiences relative to that data, and offer recommendations for closing the foster care high school graduation gap. Researchers used a Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) method to identify themes in youth's experience that may offer insight into how to support student progress toward earning a high school credential. Through this approach, the human experience contextualizes and augments the quantitative data, such as low high school graduation and high school mobility rates. The resulting recommendations are grounded in the youth's experiences.

2. Problem of practice: disparate educational outcomes for secondary students in foster care

Students in foster care across the country are graduating at rates well below their non-foster care peers. The Legal Center for Foster Care and Education (2014) estimated that only half of the students in foster care earn a high school credential by age eighteen, and some statewide studies suggest that rates may be even lower. In Colorado, fewer than one in three students who experience foster care during high school graduate with their class (Clemens, 2014; Colorado Department of Education, 2016). Studies in Washington State suggest that graduation rates for students in foster care are between 35 and 55% (Burley, 2010, 2013). These foster care graduation rates reported by researchers and state agencies are all well below the national graduation rate of 82%, which describes the percentage of all students who earn a high school diploma within four years of initially entering ninth grade (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

The failure of secondary students to make progress toward earning a high school credential is illustrated annually by dropout rates, which is the percentage of students in foster care who stop attending school each year. Students in foster care drop out at 2.5 to 4 times higher rates than their peers (Barratt & Berliner, 2013; Colorado Department of Education, 2017; Texas Education Agency, 2013), and dropout events are dispersed throughout the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades (Barratt & Berliner, 2013; Clemens, 2014). Students who experience foster care tend to drop out earlier in their high school careers than their non-foster care peers (Colorado Department of Education, 2016).

Proportionally, more students who have experienced foster care earn an equivalency diploma (e.g. GED) than their non-foster care peers (Clemens, 2014; Parra & Martinez, 2015; U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016; Wolanin, 2005). The more frequently students in foster care change high schools, the more likely they are to earn an equivalency diploma compared to graduating (Clemens et al., 2016). The disproportionately high rates of equivalency degrees for students in foster care suggests a problem of practice because research indicates these degrees are not equivalent in terms of labor market or employment outcomes. For example, findings from the Midwest study of former foster youth revealed that employment rates and earnings are higher for young people who graduated from high school than those who earned equivalency diplomas (Okpych & Courtney, 2014). The disproportional rates at which youth who experienced foster care earn a diploma suggest there might be

systemic reasons why individuals in this population are experiencing this outcome.

2.1. Reasons for disparate outcomes: trauma and mobility

Research indicates that students in foster care face particular challenges that may account for their disparate educational outcomes. Specifically, when compared to their peers, they are disproportionately affected by trauma and school mobility (Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2014). The practical challenges associated with students' experiences of trauma and mobility can be exacerbated by a lack of coordination, communication, and alignment between the child welfare and education systems (Annie E. Casey, 2014).

2.1.1. Trauma

Students who experience trauma may present in the classroom as disengaged in school or not focused on learning (Cole et al., 2005; Widom, 2013). A study of school adjustment found that maltreated foster children showed lower social-emotional competence, including lower emotional regulation and inhibitory control, than their non-maltreated peers (Pears, Fisher, Bruce, Kim, & Yoerger, 2010). Salazar and colleagues found that transition-age foster youth are approximately twice as likely as their peers in the general population to have met criteria for PTSD at some point in their lifetime, suggesting not just the presence of trauma, but the significance of that trauma's impact (Salazar, Keller, Gowen, & Courtney, 2013).

Youth often enter foster care having experienced recurrent trauma in early childhood at the hands of trusted adults, resulting in complex trauma (Greeson et al., 2011). It is no wonder that maltreated youth may struggle in school since, as Buckley, Lotty, and Meldon (2016) put it, "children who experience on-going trauma over time … are too busy surviving" (p. 36). Complex trauma impairs maltreated youth across multiple domains, including attachment, biology, cognition, and self-concept, in addition to the other domains mentioned above (Cook et al., 2005). Removal from the home and other placement changes are additional traumatic experiences, compounding the problem (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015).

A history of trauma and the resulting deficits often result in maltreated youth meeting the diagnostic criteria for ADHD, conduct disorder, communication disorders, and attachment related disorders (Cook et al., 2005), all of which can present obvious challenges to a student's educational engagement. Further complicating the difficulties posed by foster students' trauma backgrounds are the triggers they are likely to encounter at school. Reminders of their trauma can come unexpectedly from seemingly benign sources, such as a particular word, smell, or topic covered in class; these triggers can catch students off-guard and impact their learning (West, Day, Somers, & Baroni, 2014).

Despite the unique needs presented by students who have experienced trauma, educators may be unaware of these students' need for trauma-informed educational approaches because there may be a lack of systematic coordination and perceived issues of confidentiality (Williamson, 2013). Educators' lack of awareness about trauma-informed approaches can further compound the trauma's impacts on educational outcomes. Training can help educators understand trauma, reduce potential triggers, and create safe environments for students who have experienced trauma (West et al., 2014).

2.1.2. School mobility

Students who experience foster care during high school typically change schools three or more times (Clemens et al., 2016). These frequent changes pose unique challenges. For example, when students change schools, they may be subject to different graduation requirements or lose course credit due to incomplete or delayed transfer of school records (McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2002; Levy et al., 2014; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004). In addition, students who change schools during the academic year may miss

opportunities to learn key concepts, leading to knowledge gaps, particularly in math (Cutuli et al., 2013; Mehana & Reynolds, 2004). The adult and peer relationships that support educational success might also be disrupted (Coleman, 1988; Levy et al., 2014).

When child welfare and educational agencies do not communicate and share information across both the student and population levels, the educational needs of these youth can be overlooked (Annie E. Casey, 2014).

The existing foster care literature does not explicitly connect the practical challenges associated with mobility to students' expectations of their ability to earn a high school credential. However, it is possible that students' expectations mirror advocates' belief (e.g., Annie E. Casey, 2014) that school mobility is a barrier to progress toward a diploma. Educational expectations are the beliefs that youths hold regarding what is possible to achieve given their circumstances (Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001). Expectations are distinct from aspirations, which encompass the individual's hopes and goals, such as graduating from high school or going to college. A mismatch between aspirations and expectations, specifically high aspirations together with low expectations, is associated with low achievement (Khattab, 2014, 2015). When marginalized populations of students do not believe that it is possible to achieve their goals, they then adjust their aspirations and behaviors to align with their low expectations (Kirk et al., 2012). Raising students' expectations, or their beliefs about what is possible, can be an educationally protective factor that ultimately leads to increased aspirations and engagement in school (Hass, Allen, & Amoah, 2014; Khattab, 2015).

2.2. Efforts to align child welfare and education systems

The federal government has recently created a legislative framework that may encourage alignment between child welfare and education agencies, as well as consistent attention to the education of students in foster care. The framework includes the 2008 Fostering Connections Act (FCA) and the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The FCA was a sweeping piece of child welfare legislation that introduced a child welfare requirement to plan for the educational stability of students in foster care (Clemens et al., 2016). In 2014, a U.S. Government Accountability Office report indicated that states were not consistently implementing the educational stability provisions. One challenge they cited was the lack of a requirement for educational agencies to coordinate with child welfare on these provisions. The following year, the ESSA was passed, which complemented the FCA by establishing a reciprocal requirement for education and child welfare agencies to attend to educational stability when each youth's foster care placement changes.

The FCA and ESSA provide three educational stability protections: a "standard and deliberate" process for determining whether a school change is in a child's best interest; a guarantee of transportation back to the school of origin as needed; and immediate enrollment and transfer of records when a school change is necessary. These educational stability provisions require that every time a school move is proposed for a student due to a change in child welfare placement, communication must occur between child welfare and education agencies about the student (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Local child welfare and education agencies must determine how to implement these protections, and youth perspectives may inform the processes.

The ESSA also requires that students in foster care be included in state report cards, which ensures that the educational outcomes for the population of youth in foster care will be tracked in similar ways to other unique populations of students. The existing research suggests that large gaps in achievement and attainment will become increasingly visible as states begin to systematically include foster-care-involved students in accountability reports (e.g., Barratt & Berliner, 2013; Burley, 2010; Colorado Department of Education, 2016; Clemens & Tis, 2016;

National Working Group on Foster Care & Education, 2014). Given the complexity of the problem of practice—particularly that students in foster care tend to face trauma and frequent school changes—it is likely that there are still untapped opportunities for child welfare agencies, education agencies, and other stakeholders to better support these students' progress toward earning a high school diploma. Qualitative research on these students' experiences is crucial in developing solutions to this complex problem of practice (Day et al., 2012; Levy et al., 2014).

3. Method

The purpose of the study was to gain insight into state-level data on the educational attainment and mobility of students in foster care by inviting groups of former foster youth to review the data and share their reactions to those data, their experiences in public education, and their recommendations for closing the high school graduation gap. The three guiding questions were (1) What factors do former foster youth believe contribute to how students in foster care exit the K-12 system (i.e., graduate, complete [earn a GED], or drop out)? (2) Why do former foster youth believe substantially more students in foster care are earning a GED than a high school diploma? (3) What do former foster youth recommend to improve educational outcomes for students in foster care?

3.1. Consensual Qualitative Research

Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR), a primarily constructivist approach (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997), was used to guide the research design and method of data analysis. This approach was selected because it is an inductive, data-driven process for examining phenomena (i.e., patterns in educational experiences) from participants' perspectives. Further, the consensual process is a rigorous approach to arriving at data-driven findings (Sim et al., 2010).

CQR focuses on data collection, typically through interviews utilizing open-ended questions, to gain understanding of individual perspectives about an experience. The CQR approach "incorporates elements from phenomenological (Giorgi, 1985), grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and comprehensive process analysis (Elliot, 1989)" (Hill et al., 2005, p. 198). The focus of CQR is on reaching consensus among a team of researchers while analyzing the data and constructing the findings, rather than focusing on single researcher interpretations of the data. The CQR process engages a team of researchers in a rigorous process of independent data analysis, ultimately leading to consensus. This process allows for multiple perspectives to be considered when viewing the data and when representing the voices of the participants. At least one auditor is also involved at each stage in the process to reduce the impact of power dynamics or premature consensus that might exist in the research team. The researchers involved in the study believe that CQR allowed for subtle meanings to be conveyed during the interview process with foster youth, to be understood and revealed through the variety of researcher perspectives and experiences. This process helps to "unravel the complexities and ambiguities of the data" (Hill et al., 2005, p. 200).

Understanding and managing researcher expectations and biases is a key aspect of qualitative research in general, and CQR in particular. Prior to meeting the youth and conducting interviews, the research team wrote independently about their biases and expectations related to foster youth and the foster care and educational systems. After engaging in independent reflection, the research team met to discuss these perspectives, including personal or professional events that contributed to their opinions. Conversations among the research team about expectations and biases was ongoing throughout the data collection and analyses. When examining the findings of this research, it is important for the reader to consider that the researchers all identify as women of European-American descent. None of the researchers had personal

experience as foster care youth.

3.2. Participant recruitment and sample

Following approval from the University of Northern Colorado's Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were recruited by staff at a large metro-area United Way that serves former foster youth. An email invitation describing the study was sent to a network of CASA programs and other non-profit direct service providers in the area that also serve youth in foster care or former foster care youth. The criteria for participation were (1) one or more foster care placement(s) in middle school or high school and (2) age 18 + at the time of data collection. There was no specified level of educational attainment or length of time in foster care, nor were participants who were experiencing kinship placements eliminated from participation. A gift card and lunch were provided as incentives. Two dates were set for focus group participation, and potential participants were invited to attend on either date. Two groups were run simultaneously on each date in a United Way meeting space. The resulting participant pool included youth who had been served by a variety of metro-area programs.

There were a total of 16 participants in 4 focus groups (focus group 1, n = 5; focus group 2, n = 5; focus group 3, n = 3; and focus group 4, n = 3); one participant chose not to comment beyond introductions and did not complete the demographic questionnaire. The average age of participants was 21.6 years, with a range of 18 to 26. The majority (n = 10; 66%) of the focus group participants were female. Just over half identified themselves as multiracial (n = 8; 53%) meaning that they endorsed two or more of the federal race categories. The remainder of the participants described themselves as white (n = 7; 46%).

Youth reported 1 to > 32 foster care placements (Mdn = 6) and 0 to 8 school changes during high school (Mdn = 3). Forty percent (n = 6) of the youth reported graduating from high school, and 27% (n = 4) reported earning a GED. The percentage of students who had graduated from high school was similar to the statewide data on students who earn a diploma by age 21 (Colorado Department of Education, 2016). The percentage of participating youth who reported earning a GED was higher than the statewide data (Colorado Department of Education, 2016). Ten youth reported dropping out of school one or more times, only one of whom re-engaged in school and earned a high school diploma. Table 1 depicts the educational information reported by participants.

3.3. Data collection procedures

The lead author began data collection with a 5 to 10 min presentation on school mobility and educational outcomes (Fig. 1) for Colorado youth involved in foster care. This served to frame the focus groups in a common understanding of the state-level data. Next, participants were invited to share their reactions to the data and participate in 60- to 75-minute focus groups led by either a faculty member or doctoral students in a Counselor Education program. All focus group facilitators had graduate-level training in collecting qualitative data and extensive experience in group facilitation. At the end of each focus group, participants were given a demographic questionnaire to complete.

3.3.1. Presentation

In the presentation, youth were informed that fewer than one in three students in foster care graduated with their class, and that the high school graduation gap widened over time. Youth were also informed of the following data points:

(a) Proportionally, more students in foster care earned a GED than what was typical for Colorado students as whole;
(b) Students in foster care dropped out earlier in their education (i.e., often in ninth, tenth, or eleventh grade) than is typical for Colorado students as a whole; and
(c) Students in foster care changed schools at nearly three times the state school mobility rate.

The data points that the youth reviewed were from the Colorado Study of Students in Foster Care and were based on statewide findings from 2008 to 2013 (Clemens, 2014; Parra & Martinez, 2015). During the presentation, participants were invited to ask questions to clarify their understanding of the information.

3.3.2. Focus groups

Focus group interview questions were designed to elicit information about each participant's experiences related to the education data, as well as their recommendations for improving educational outcomes for students in foster care. Participants were invited to brainstorm their thoughts and reactions to the data verbally and/or by drawing or writing on poster-sized illustrations of the data. Additionally, a semistructured focus group protocol guided the discussion through four key areas: (a) widening of the high-school graduation achievement gap, (b)
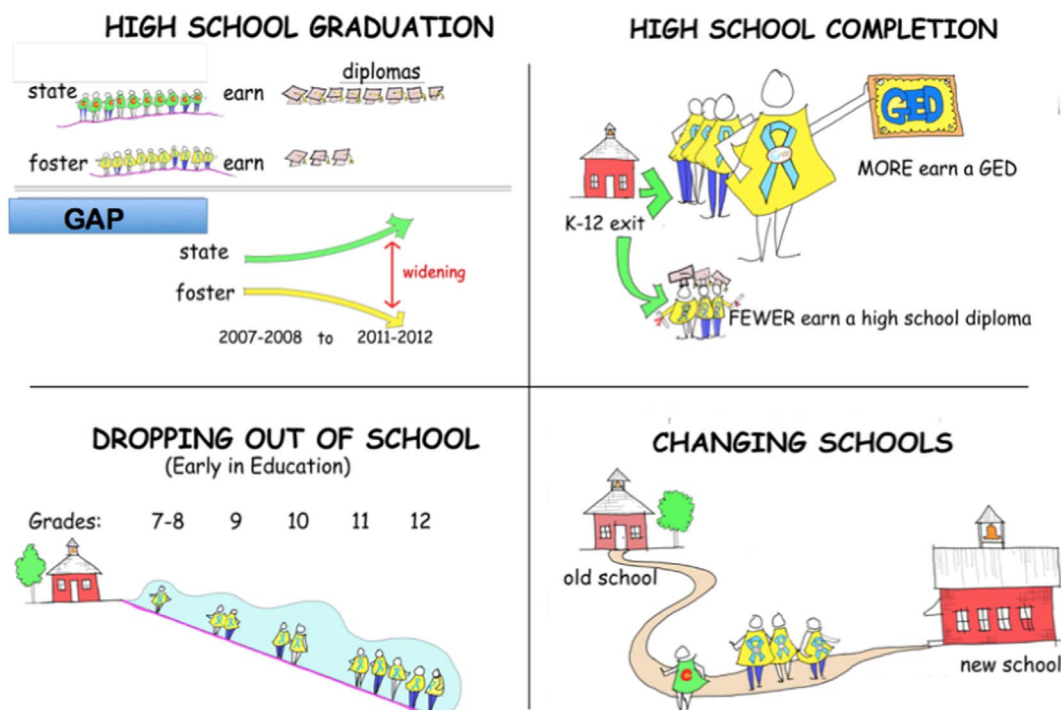
Table 1
Educational information reported by participants.

Stability & exit from K–12 system					
Age entered foster care	# of foster care placements	# of school changes in high school	# of dropout events (7–12)	Highest grade attended	Exit from K–12 system
15	1	2	0	12th	Graduated from HS
3	3	0	0	12th	Graduated from HS
8	> 32	3	1	12th	Dropped out
3	5 or 6	5	0	12th	Graduated from HS
14	5	N/A[a]	7	8th	Completed (GED)
15	7	3	1	11th	Completed (GED)
7	5	3	1	12th	Dropped out
7	6	3	0	12th	Graduated from HS
6	11	7	2	12th	Graduated from HS
7	No response	6	1	No response	Completed (GED)
5	10 to 12	2	1	12th	Dropped out
13	22	7 or 8	1	11th	Dropped out
14 or 15	2	3	0	12th	Graduated from HS
9	Many	Not sure	1	11th	Dropped out
11	Moved every 8 months from age 11 to 18	Every 8 months	2	12th	Completed (GED)

[a] Youth indicated changing schools 19 times prior to high school.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION

DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL
(Early in Education)

CHANGING SCHOOLS

Fig. 1. Illustration.

Table 2
Focus group facilitation and question guide.

Introduction and activity	Large paper split into four quadrants by key data points (see Fig. 1)
	Rotate (approximately every 45 s) and write words/symbols that capture your first reaction to the key points
	Introductions and share initial reactions to data
Transition questions	What kinds of experiences do students in foster care have in school?
	What was different for you in school because you were in foster care?
	How do you think these relate to findings from the trend study?
Key questions	Please talk specifically about your experience with:
	Changing schools
	Working toward graduation or a GED
	Dropping out
Ending question	What else would you like to add?

GED versus high school diploma, (c) patterns in dropout events, and (d) school mobility. Focus groups were used to facilitate this process, as researchers have noted that the interaction among group members can help youth clarify their ideas and describe their experiences with a level of clarity that might not be achieved through an individual interview (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007). The interview protocol is located in Table 2.

Focus groups were audio-taped to preserve a verbatim account of what was said and to capture participants' emotions and inflections in tone when responding to group leader prompts and when interacting with each other. The focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription company, with each individual participant labeled so their responses could be considered both independently and within the context of the group. Following each focus group, the researchers independently took notes on their thoughts, feelings, questions, and reactions to the focus groups and to each participant. These notes were shared with the research team as a part of the ongoing commitment to understanding researcher expectations and biases. By engaging in this level of transparency with each other, the research team could discuss diverse perspectives, while attempting to accurately represent the voices and perspectives of the youth participants, eventually reaching consensus.

3.4. Data analysis

The CQR data analysis process (Hill et al., 1997; Hill, Davis, Prout, & Tisdall, 2004) is divided into three phases: identifying domains, distilling core ideas, and conducting cross-analysis. Domains or major themes provide a conceptual framework for the data. Core ideas reduce the raw data of an entire focus group transcript into a succinct description of participant ideas that is comprehensive, yet manageable. Focus groups were treated as the unit of analysis for development of domains and core ideas. During the cross-analysis phase, the researchers reorganized the data from focus groups to individual participants. Categories were identified that crossed multiple participant responses. An auditor was used during each phase of the analysis process to check the data analysis and provide feedback on coding.

3.4.1. Domains

Consistent with the CQR process, each member of the research team independently read each focus group transcript. Three of the four research team members generated the list of domains, while the fourth served as an auditor. These initial domains were developed through a review of the literature, existing knowledge about the educational experiences of youth involved in foster care, and the focus group content. The research team met to come to consensus on the list of domains, and then each member independently coded the transcripts into those domains. Each individual statement and domain code was considered and not assigned a final domain until disagreement and inconsistencies in coding were resolved and consensus was reached during a team meeting.

3.4.2. Core ideas

After a list of stable domains was established, the research team divided the content of each domain into core ideas. Every effort was made by the research team to avoid imposing meaning onto participant statements, but instead to stay true to the intended meaning of the

participant. The same coding and auditing processes employed for the domains were applied to the core ideas.

3.4.3. Cross analysis

The purpose of cross-analysis is to consider the stability of findings across participants. The research team examined the domains and core ideas for all focus groups, and through a brainstorming and consensus process, created categories that were represented across multiple individuals. Members of the research team independently coded the data into categories at the participant level. The researchers considered both the content of the statement and the context within a focus group. After consensus was reached and the auditor conducted a final review of the data, NVivo was used to generate frequency data and to assess representativeness of categories across participants in the sample.

3.4.4. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the degree to which the data can be trusted and deemed credible. The researchers in this study focused intentionally on maintaining trustworthiness throughout the research process, including when developing the questions for the focus group, in recruitment of participants, and through data analysis and interpretation. CQR was chosen specifically for this purpose, as the process of reaching consensus at every stage of data analysis decreases the chances that the biases or preconceived ideas of a single researcher will influence the results. It is important to note, however, that no research method can guarantee that biases are completely eliminated.

An additional attempt to increase trustworthiness occurred prior to conducting the focus groups. As previously described, the members of the research team who were leading the focus groups and analyzing the data met to discuss (and reveal) their assumptions, biases, and experiences that might influence their perspective on the data being collected and the subsequent reporting of the data. This occurred both before and after the focus groups, providing an opportunity for the research team to hold each other accountable to representing the data as accurately as possible.

An additional effort to increase trustworthiness was implemented by using the drawings completed by participants during the focus groups. The researchers incorporated the opportunity for youth to represent their feelings, perceptions, and viewpoints through nonverbal means (i.e., drawings and writing) on a large poster board. The images and writings on these poster boards were used to triangulate the data from the interviews (the verbal accounts of the participants). In each of the focus groups, the participants primarily wrote words that represented the feelings associated with their experiences. These were echoed in the transcripts of the verbal responses from the participants.

Finally, member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to confirm the accuracy of the findings, with the intent of increasing the trustworthiness of the data. Following data analysis, all participants were sent a comprehensive summary of the findings. Findings were presented in both graphic form and with illustrative quotes. Though the researchers did receive some responses from the youth, none of their responses were substantive in nature or suggested changes to the findings.

3.4.5. Transferability

Transferability of qualitative research refers to the degree to which the findings from the data have applicability to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The patterns in the data and the selection of educational outcomes presented to the youth for review have specific transferability considerations. The data collection occurred in the metro area of a state where child welfare and education data-sharing had been newly implemented at the state level, but had not yet occurred systematically at the local level. Per state statute, each school district had a dedicated child welfare education liaison; however, those liaisons had varying proportions of their workload dedicated to this role.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the transferability of qualitative data can be maximized by providing thick descriptions of the data and the research process. Providing sufficient detail in the research enables readers to make informed decisions about the degree to which the findings are transferable to other times, settings, and people. In this study, deliberate attempts were made to fully describe the participants, the research question, the research procedures, the data analysis process, and the findings from the data.

4. Results

From the participants' perspectives on the educational data and their experiences as middle- or high-school students in foster care, eight domains emerged. The first domain, *emotional consequences*, was interwoven throughout the findings. The research team separated this domain from the rest of the results because it provides context for answering all three research questions. The descriptions of the other seven domains and categories are organized by research question, and each quotation is followed by a participant label indicating gender and a number (e.g., F1 = female one). To further ensure anonymity, these participant labels are not linked to the educational demographics in Table 1.

4.1. Emotional consequences

All participants described the emotional consequences of involvement with the child welfare system and of the impact on their educational experience. Emotional consequences could be associated with the events that brought them into the child welfare system, the actual out-of-home placements, and engagement with the systems that served the youth and families during that time:

> You're not just dealing with school and learning school things. You're learning how to stay calm and not be angry at life. Kind of deal with your situation, just deal with a lot of emotions. The case workers constantly needing—you're dealing with a lot of court hearings, just you're dealing with a lot more than just going to school and learning the ABC's (F9).

> It slows down the learning process because you're sitting here dealing with so much that you don't even know how to deal with your own mind (F8).

The emotional consequences described by participants were viewed as having a direct impact on all aspects of their life, and specifically on their ability to manage the demands of school. Participants emphasized that the emotional consequences of foster placement are underestimated and largely misunderstood, and they expressed feeling isolated and marginalized as a result. The data revealed that emotional consequences was not a distinct domain, but rather had implications across all seven of the other domains. Each of the remaining seven domains has specific implications for at least one of the three research questions; those implications are described below.

4.2. Research question one: Perspectives on exiting the K–12 system

What factors do former foster youth believe contribute to how students in foster care exit the K–12 system (i.e., graduate, complete [earn a GED], or drop out)?

Youth perspectives on exits from the K–12 system (i.e. earning a high school diploma, GED, or dropping out) revealed four domains: *resilience*, *basic needs*, *internalized messages*, and *educational stability*. Youth described the relationships among these concepts, their personal experience with these concepts, and the patterns indicated in the statewide data (Table 3).

4.2.1. Resilience

The research team observed that the youth in this study polarized to

Table 3
Summary of domains and categories.

Research question 1: What factors do youth believe contribute to how students in foster care exit the K–12 system (i.e., graduate, complete [earn a GED], or drop out)?

Domain/category	Frequency
Emotional consequences	General
Resilience	Typical
Basic needs	Typical
Internalized messages about education	General
Messages from professionals/programs	Typical
Messages from families: biological/foster	Variant
Messages from peers	Variant
Educational stability	General
Desire for school stability	General
Coordination of school transitions	Typical
Consequence is disengagement	Typical
Alignment of curriculum/graduation requirements	Variant
Recognition that "best interest" isn't always practical	Rare

Note: the *general* category applied to 15–16 of 16 cases; the *typical* category applied to 10–14 of 16 cases; the *variant* category applied to 4–9 of 16 cases; and the *rare* category applied to 3 or fewer of 16 cases.

the extreme ends of the continuum of engagement, from being disengaged from school to being highly motivated and driven to succeed. Youth who presented as more driven and who exited the K–12 system with a high school credential applied a resilience lens to their experiences, often reframing their experience such that they were stronger because of being a "foster kid." These youth presented descriptions of challenges in a way that showed a tendency toward resilience and successful adaptation.

> I firmly believe you can take any situation and make it positive. So even though you faced that, you can say to the next generation, "That's where I came from. Look where I am now" (M2).

> I've been to like twelve different middle schools and two high schools. Lost count of elementary because I've been in foster care practically my whole life. Definitely think like as far as curriculum goes it's harder because you might go to one school where they're learning something this semester, transfer schools and they're learning something different, maybe something you already learned. But what they learned the first semester is something that you missed out depending on the school. But I think going to different schools helps you to become more personable, like, you work on your people skills. It's like an advantage at the same time (M1).

4.2.2. Basic needs

Youth spoke about a heightened awareness of planning for and ensuring that basic needs are met. Some youth focused on maintaining the safety of younger siblings; others focused on the fear of homelessness or food instability. Responsibilities outside of school competed with their ability to be students.

> I was buying toothpaste for myself in middle school and then I really wanted a book, so I was like, "Toothpaste or book, toothpaste?" (F4).

> Like, my first paycheck, I bought myself a pillow… (F2).

> So you're seeing higher dropout rates and younger dropout rates because we have younger siblings or we have somebody that we take care of. …We're gonna want to stay home, and we're gonna want to make sure that they're not gonna hit them or they're not gonna be abused. … I missed a lot of school just due to the fact that I was scared for him [my little brother]… that he was gonna fall down the stairs and those people weren't gonna do anything about it, so I

was like, don't want to really leave because you might die (F4).

> A lot of people are oblivious to youth homelessness, and as soon as you leave foster care, I feel like that's what happens (F8).

> If it hadn't been for my foster parents letting me stay there, I would've been homeless, and I would've had to drop out (F5).

> I dropped out in 12th grade, and it was because I got pregnant and I had two kids. So imagine being pregnant and going to school at the same time is kind of hard. It's basically there's a job or a kid, job or kid. … I was juggling being a mommy and a coworker or employee so … I just never went back for it (F1).

> How am I supposed to succeed when I have nothing? I'm working from nothing (M4).

4.2.3. Internalized messages about education

The youth described how they internalized the messages about education that they received from professionals and programs, from biological and foster family members, and from peers. The interpretation of these three categories of messages reflected a learned belief structure about who they were as students and what they might be able to achieve. Some youth connected these messages to how they represented themselves and behaved, on a continuum of being disengaged from school to driven to succeed.

4.2.3.1. Messages from professionals/programs. Messages from professionals or programs (e.g., caseworkers, teachers, guardians ad litem) included the requirements or perceived expectations for participating in programs that serve youth in foster care. These messages appeared to have become integrated into the foster youths' beliefs about what was possible to achieve as they tried to make meaning and internalize the messages.

> They say, "Okay, we want to get you ready." But they start emancipating at 16. Right, but then everybody drops out of school at that time. They don't realize how much it's affecting students that are younger. I understand normal students have parents to go back to; they have people that love them (F8).

The following quotation is an example of implicit messages that a youth described as salient to her engagement in school.

> That also reminds me of things like people, foster kids, who do exceed and excel in school are not getting the proper recognition for what they do and how they succeed because there was a point where I was excelling and exceeding and nobody noticed in a sense, just put me down, whatever. It made me go the other direction for a little while (F9).

Another message that youth perceived from professionals/programs was confirmation that they were different from other students.

> The newer schools you go to, it's kind of weird for us because they see it in the system. You're flagged as foster care, and they know. Like, they have the mentality, and most of your teachers will kind of act like that towards you, too. But every time you switch a school, the new counselor is like, "Oh, they're in foster care" (F4).

4.2.3.2. Messages from families: biological/foster. The messages from families that shaped the youths' experiences could be either implicit or explicit. Examples of implicit messages are a lack of taking action or not providing information to support the youths' school success.

> Because my foster mother didn't want me to succeed as much as I wanted to. I would say to her, what does it take to go here and do that? She didn't have the answers, and I was wondering why (M2).

Other messages from family could be explicitly negative or positive

in tone.

> My own father, who says he's supposed to be there loving me, and tell me all this stuff. But I get texts from him that say, "You're worthless." … The [foster family] care about me more than you [father] do… I started slacking and I started not caring—I really don't care about myself anymore (M4).

> I had an incredible foster home, and my foster parents cared that I was going to school. … And I had a school counselor tell me that I could only go to community college, and my foster parent went down there and got in her face and was like "you can't tell people that" (F2).

How the youth made meaning out of the messages they received was reflected in their aspirations, expectations for success, and school/education-related behaviors. One participant who persisted to graduation expressed positive meaning-making in the following way:

> Because I see myself as a human being who can make a difference, and me wanting to prove my family wrong because, you know, what they told me I′m gonna do all this negative stuff. Yeah I've done negative stuff, but look at the positive I've done. I've done a load for how old I am and for who I am as a person (M4).

4.2.3.3. Messages from peers. Consistent with findings by Sanders and Munford (2016), the fear of and experiences of social stigma from peers were connected to disengagement from school.

> I also felt like in school it was really, really hard, because as soon as I told one person, "Hey, I'm in foster care," kids over here, they made judgments automatically. "Oh, she's in foster care because she's a bad kid. I don't want to hang out with her. I don't want to be friends with her. I don't even want to get to know her." Then there's this social barrier that's like, I don't really want to be at school. All they're going to do is judge me. All they're going to do is stereotype me. All they're going to do is say, "Hey, you're going to do horrible because you're a foster kid" (F8).

Many youth identified stigma related to being in foster care as a reason for disengaging from school, while few referenced positive peer relationships that contributed to school engagement. Changing schools during the academic year was cited as contributing to the social stigma. One participant expressed the stigma in these terms: "And everyone knew that I was in foster care. A black kid coming in the middle of the school year being dropped off by a white lady" (F2).

4.2.4. Educational stability

The domain of educational stability encompassed the emotional and practical implications of school changes, including disruption to instruction on how to progress toward a diploma or earn a GED. The domain comprised five categories: desire for school stability, coordination of school transitions, consequence resulting from disengaging from school, alignment of curriculum and graduation requirements, and recognition that "best interest" is not always feasible to accommodate.

4.2.5. Desire for school stability

Much like the emotional consequences domain, a desire for school stability transcended youths' discussion of the school mobility data. As one student expressed, "A school can be one of those things where it can be consistent. … Stability in a sense is where you feel comfortable. You feel like yourself" (F9). Another youth stated,

> Stability is the biggest issue, because that's your main issue in life and that's the biggest [thing] that you desire. And school is like the most normal it gets for stability. You know what I mean? And for that, I think that's the biggest—if you could figure out something that could work out, I think that would be, like, the biggest change

(F10).

4.2.6. Coordination of school transitions

The second category of educational stability captures youth perspective on how the lack of focus on preparing the youth and the receiving school affects students' school stability.

> I feel like a lot of kids don't really like change, and it is really, really, really hard going from one school to another to another, and especially if nobody's preparing you for it…and then you're kind of lost in the dust. You're just another particle that is just there. Nobody really knows what to do with you, but it's just there (F8).

4.2.7. Consequence is disengagement

Youth who changed schools multiple times during middle and high school described the natural consequence of feeling removed and disengaged from their education.

> You're going from school to school, you're finding new social people. It causes you to not care about school. I might care about school. I ain't here to learn, I'm here to make new friends. I mean, I'm not going to be here long enough to see what I can do, so I have fun as opposed to learn. I don't care to learn. I'm not even going to have the chance to learn. I'm going to be going to a different school, so who cares …Why should I care to graduate when you're not caring to keep me on a stable level so that I can get that education I need? (F11).

4.2.8. Alignment of curriculum/graduation requirements

Other participants described gaps in learning and repetitive learning that resulted from differences in curricula across the schools attended.

> I don't know division or subtraction or addition because I've never had the chance to learn it, because each school I've moved to has taught me just multiplication (F11).

> You can't just take somebody in the middle of chemistry and then throw them in the middle of another chemistry class, and they're learning two completely different things at two completely different levels. It might be the same class, but it's different where their learning and where their skills are at (F11).

> And so when I went to the new school, I was already re-learning what I had already learned the first semester, so it was always just like repeat. So I went through the American Revolution probably like 13 times. It was just over and over and over again (M3).

Variations in course offerings and graduation requirements were described as barriers to graduating high school on time.

> My sister moved three schools in one semester, and two were in the same school district. And at the end of the semester, all she had was English and math. Those were the only two that translated through all three schools. She was in German and the second school didn't have German so that didn't transfer, and it's like, if the school you transfer to doesn't have that exact class that you were in… then they can't count it (F5).

4.2.9. Recognition that "best interest" is not always feasible to accommodate

Youth acknowledged that, at times, staying in the same school was not practical; however, they also noted the negative impact of school changes on their ability to graduate from high school.

> Other parents will move during the summer so that their kids' schools don't get interrupted. Other parents will move somewhere else and then drive their kids to school so that they can finish out their last couple weeks after they move (F2).

And we understand that there's not a lot of foster homes, but there should be more foster homes that have openings so that when you're going to [an urban city] High School and you have to move foster homes, the closest foster home isn't 40 miles away. There should be one close enough that you could still be in the same school if you chose to get yourself there. They should give [the option of remaining in the same school] especially [to] high school students. But they should do something to keep us in our schools so that we can graduate (F2).

Participants' opinions of when and how foster youth exit from the K-12 educational system reflect their recognition of the uniqueness of the foster care experience The youth perceived a pervasive lack of support among the school system, foster parents, and child welfare system that significantly influences completion.

4.3. Research question two: perspectives on GED rates

Why do more students in foster care earn a GED than a diploma?
Youth perspectives on the relatively high proportion of students in foster care earning a GED, rather than a high school diploma, are reflected in three domains: *consequences of school mobility, fastest or easiest positive exit from the K–12 system*, and *encouraged to take GED*. During the coding process, the research team coded each statement into only one domain, such that the frequency ratings reported in similar domains are not duplicative (Table 4).

4.3.1. Consequences of school mobility
Youth described the consequences of school mobility, such as low credit accrual: "My credits are way too low nowadays, because I moved so much, because I moved constantly all the time; I always moved. You can lose one semester within one move" (F10). Moving to a district with substantively different graduation requirements can make it impossible for a student to graduate on time.

When I started, I started out at [high school] in [city], and then I moved down to [city], and then I moved back my senior year of high school. When I came back, they changed it, and you needed like 22 credits to graduate, but then you needed like some 200-odd hours of class time or whatever. I had 53 credits, but since I didn't have the class time, I couldn't graduate on time (M3).

4.3.2. Fastest or easiest positive exit from K-12 system
Expediting the timeline for exiting the education system was a consideration for youth, and many described a GED as the fastest or easiest way to accomplish that.

I know personally, I have to get my GED because I'm too old now; and because I can't find any programs that will help me go back to school…I want to go to a college that does high school. But the funds, let alone the age limits (F10).

Table 4
Summary of domains and categories.

Research question 2: Why do youth believe substantially more students in foster care are earning a GED than a high school diploma?	
Domain/category	Frequency
Consequences of school mobility	Typical
Fastest or easiest positive exit from K–12 system	Typical
-Encouraged to take GED	Variant

Note: the *general* category applied to 15–16 of 16 cases; the *typical* category applied to 10–14 of 16 cases; the *variant* category applied to 4–9 of 16 cases; and the *rare* category applied to 3 or fewer of 16 cases.

I'm sitting there thinking I still have seven months left of high school. I just took the GED and aced it. I could be done if I want to be. I didn't do that, but I think that's fed to us as an easy way out (F5).

It's easier. You'll be done quicker. Get your GED. Some [people], they actually pressure you a lot, being a foster kid. They actually even in middle school, they honestly tell you like, "you know, you could get a GED" (M1).

4.3.3. Encouraged to take GED
The majority of the youth described specific times when they were encouraged to take the GED by professionals or program participation requirements. The context for such encouragement was not always clear in the data. Thus, it was not possible to discern from these data whether the encouragement constituted practical guidance from individuals toward the best possible exit from the K–12 system, or unwarranted discouragement from pursuing a high school diploma. Some youth suggested that students in foster care received consistent, systemic messages encouraging them to pursue a GED over a high school diploma.

I wanted to finish high school. It was my senior year. I had a 3.4 throughout all high school. I got accepted to all the colleges I wanted to. And then it was because I couldn't get along with the foster family I ran away like two weeks before I turned 18, and my caseworker was like, "No, you're not going back to school. You're getting a GED." So I had no choice… It wasn't because I chose to get my GED. It's because my caseworker was like, "No, you're getting your GED and we're gonna get you out" (M3).

They were like, "Well, everyone has to take the GED test just to be in our program." And I wanted the money for college, but I didn't want the GED, but they made me take it anyways. And then I could've just been like, submit that and I'll just take my GED and be done, which is the easy way out… and I was like, this isn't gonna count, right, because I don't want to get a GED. I want to graduate with a diploma (F5).

I did see a lot of my fellow foster sisters and brothers, they were pushed to do that. They were pushed pretty hard to do that, too, now that I think about it. And it's kind of sad now that I sit back and realize we were told to do this [GED], versus you can do high school diploma. You can do it. Just let's set you up right. No, they were just like, you're in your situation. Let's see what you can do with that and get a GED. Yeah, that's exactly right (F4).

As mentioned previously, it is not possible from the data to determine the purpose or intent of the messages participants received about earning the GED instead of a diploma. However, the data does reveal that these participants received the message that as foster youth, the GED was their best, or at times only, alternative. Participants suggested that the youth desired the fastest way out of the K-12 system, and that this desire was reinforced by the perceived push to choose a GED.

4.4. Research question three: youth's recommendations to improve outcomes

What do former foster youth recommend to improve educational outcomes for students in foster care?
Youth offered recommendations in three domains: *closing the high school graduation gap, promoting success in school*, and *increasing educational stability*. Youths' recommendations were contextualized in their recognition of the limitations of the system, their sense of the emotional consequences of separation and disengagement, and their desire for stability (Table 5).

Table 5
Summary of domains and categories.

Research question 3: What do youth recommend to improve educational outcomes for students in foster care?	
Domain/category	Frequency
Recommendations from youth	General
Closing the high school graduation gap	Variant
Promoting success in school	Variant
Increasing educational stability	Rare

Note: the *general* category applied to 15–16 of 16 cases; the *typical* category applied to 10–14 of 16 cases; the *variant* category applied to 4–9 of 16 cases; and the *rare* category applied to 3 or fewer of 16 cases.

4.4.1. Closing the high school graduation gap

Youth recommendations to close the high school graduation gap were grounded in cross-system collaboration and school stability.

> Something that's missing in the system is that the foster care system and the education system don't really work in collaboration… They need to do something to keep us in our schools so that we can graduate (F5).

Recognizing that school stability was often not possible, youth spoke to the importance of consistent, statewide graduation requirements with flexibility for unique populations like highly mobile foster students. Recommendations regarding consistency were focused on minimizing the impact of school changes. Flexibility with class options and opportunities to "learn practical things" were discussed in concert with statements relating to the theme of *basic needs*.

Specifically, the participants expressed the desire for their learning to have practical application to the challenges they face; they considered it important that their learning be grounded in the practical and real. Similarly, youth spoke to the importance of accessible (e.g., online) and non-traditional academic programs (e.g., vocational). Some youth noted that such programs were available, but suggested that youth, families, and schools are not always aware of these resources.

As noted in Section 4.2.9, youth believed that messages from adults and programs influenced how and why students in foster care exited the school system. Youth recommended that all students in foster care have an adult in their life who expresses a specific interest and investment in the student finishing high school. Participants believed that this person could facilitate consistency, persistence, and access to opportunities.

> Well, why don't you think in your mind of ideas, solutions? Why don't you sit down and talk to me instead of just saying "I don't have a solution"? It would help if someone acknowledged, "Hey, I know you're going through a tough time. How can I help?" Instead of "I can't help you," or "There's nothing to do to help you." (F8).

4.4.2. Promoting success in school

Youth also shared their perspectives on how to promote success in school in general. Many of the recommendations were tied in some way to increasing school personnel and teachers' understanding of the child welfare system and building their skills to work with youth in foster care.

> The teachers and staff need to be trained, and a lot of young people experience a lot of trauma, and so I think it's important to have, like, trauma-informed care training so that they understand when kids are behaving in a negative way or they're acting out instead of trying to discipline them (F5).

Some youth shared very concrete examples of assignments or class participation requirements that brought up shame, embarrassment, and trauma responses for them in the classroom.

> We watched a movie about a little girl whose mom died, and I had

like a mental breakdown right there in class because the little girl was so upset that her mom died and she wanted her mom to be there. Like, my mom's alive and doesn't want to be around me, and so I had a mental breakdown in the middle of class in front of everybody, and they just don't know how to respond to things like that. Obviously, something like that's going to trigger me, obviously (F2).

Youth also recommended more coordination among the school, child welfare system, and home, such as using frequent progress reports. Foster youth noted the importance of having foster parents in the system who are invested in school and in foster youths' school completion. The participants stressed the need for foster parents to emphasize good grades and attendance.

> I also think that something that's missing in the system is that the foster care system and the education system don't really work in a collaboration (F5).

> Maybe, like, parent–teacher conferences will create an opportunity to kind of have the foster parents in the school come together for people. … That's an opportunity where you check in on your child, any child, and kind of communicate those fears, achievements (F9).

Youth also spoke to the benefits of positive reinforcement. Some indicated that youth could be motivated by incentive programs that reinforce test-taking or good grades. Others valued encouragement from school staff and messages that were positive and inspired hope.

> Make the best of it, and maybe we need more encouragement in that way in the schools. Maybe that's what the teachers can do (F9).

4.4.3. Increasing educational stability

Youth spoke to school stability on two levels: how to increase it and how to maintain it in the event of a school change. Youth participants recommended that their voices be central to decisions about where they attended school. They emphasized that an individual's maturity and willingness to travel should be a part of determining whether it was possible to remain in their school of origin; this consideration is rarely made when youth are placed in foster care or change placements. The youth noted that decisions about where they will go to school after a placement or change of placement are made based on the needs of the fostering family, not the needs of the youth. Other youth spoke to the general need for practical transportation solutions and more foster homes so that more placement options could be available within reasonable proximity of many schools. These youth also noted that current school enrollment should be a consideration when a foster placement is made. One youth suggested identifying respite families to offset short-term school changes in particular:

> Wouldn't it be cool if there were a couple teachers that were certified foster families, like, to do emergency placement… it would be anonymous, and no one would know but them. But that kid would still be able to go to the same school, and then the teacher would work closely with the [foster] family to kind of support the family. Or even if it wasn't a teacher or it was like your PTO [parent teacher organization] came together and decided to identify five respite families (F2).

This participant reflected on the several occasions when she had been placed in respite care with a family in a different school district, forcing her to change schools for a short period of time while her foster family was traveling. This was a significant school disruption that could have been prevented if a respite family had been available in her original school district.

Finally, in addition to the youth's recommendations for preparing the students and the school for the latter's school changes, as described above, the youth also recommended placement testing at the new school when school changes were necessary. The youth believed this testing would provide opportunities to identify strengths and potential

gaps in foundational knowledge, and this information could be used to identify how to support each youth's progress toward a high school diploma.

5. Discussion

This study offers a unique contribution to the foster care and education literature by inviting foster care youth to review accountability data and research findings, to share their own experiences as students in the foster care system, and to offer practical recommendations for accommodating students in foster care. The educational attainment outcomes were proportionally similar to those of the statewide population of students who experienced foster care during high school. Outcomes included dropping out of high school, GED acquisition, and obtaining a high school diploma.

Many of the domains align with the existing literature base. For example, through the emotional consequences domain and in the youth's recommendations for practice, the youth emphasized the important role of trauma-informed school personnel who understand the impact of trauma on learning and behavior and use that knowledge to inform instruction and practice (Adams, 2010; Cole, Eisner, Gregory, & Ristuccia, 2013). A second commonality with the literature was that youth echoed the practical challenges associated with school mobility, such as difficulty accruing credits toward graduation and gaps in learning (National Working Group on Foster Care & Education, 2014; Weinberg & Luderer, 2004). Third, youth's recommendations for improving communication between child welfare and educational systems to support educational stability and academic progress align with prior research and best practice recommendations (Clemens et al., 2016; McMillen et al., 2002; Weinberg & Luderer, 2004).

This study also extends the literature base through its focus on the interplay among the domains and core ideas; these domains are not separate factors, but interconnected. The overarching domain of *emotional consequences* and the topically related domain of *internalized messages* may form the lens through which other experiences are interpreted. Youth in this study shared concrete examples of such messages, both supportive and discouraging, and linked these messages to their individual level of engagement in school. Another factor in students' expectations was evidenced in youth's explanations of why students in foster care earn an equivalency diploma instead of a diploma. The core ideas of *fastest or easiest way out* and *encouragement to take the GED* illustrate how, for some youth, the interplay between messages and educational experiences may lead to low expectations for educational attainment. These findings provide an initial empirical connection between the general education literature on the importance of expectations and aspirations (e.g., Khattab, 2014, 2015), and the experiences of youth in foster care and school mobility. Thus, as child welfare and education agencies change their practice and implement policies to improve the circumstances that are barriers to educational success of students in foster care, the expectation that these youth can succeed must also be adjusted upwards.

6. Applications to practice

Students who experience foster care may have barriers to educational attainment that are both real and perceived. The domain of *emotional consequences of being in foster care* suggests that, in addressing these students' barriers to educational attainment, a trauma-informed lens must be used. Such a perspective "includes reinterpreting behaviors that were previously seen as being caused by a mental illness or behaviors exhibited by a 'bad kid' as the potentially reversible consequences of trauma" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015, p. 4). The responsibility to embrace a trauma-informed perspective does not just fall on educators, though; there is a call for all systems serving youth (e.g., education, child welfare, justice) to recognize and address the impact of trauma (Redd, Malm, Moore, Murphy, & Beltz, 2017).

Youth participants in this study frequently referred to the emotional and traumatic consequences of the events leading up their placement in the foster care system, their separation from siblings or other family members, and their on-going involvement in the system. Individuals involved in the comprehensive care of foster youth should seek to understand the intellectual, behavioral, and emotional consequences of traumatized youth (Cole et al., 2005; Widom, 2013). It is well-established in the literature that educational barriers increase with traumatization, and that trauma symptomatology has a higher incidence in foster youth (Salazar et al., 2013). The youth participants in this study echoed the need for those in education to take a trauma-informed approach to working with and conceptualizing youth behavior and emotional presentation. Participants emphasized that much of the behavior of foster youth that may be deemed problematic or defiant could in fact be better addressed through trauma-informed interventions.

The implementation of the educational stability protections in the Every Student Succeeds Act and the Fostering Connections Act may also reduce some of the barriers to educational attainment. Youth in this study further recommended that instead of encouraging foster care youth to take the GED or another high school equivalency test, caseworkers and educators should focus on transcript reviews and comprehensive assessments of what courses, credits, and skills are needed to progress toward graduation. In addition, caseworkers and educators might raise youth's expectations by addressing the real educational barriers they face, such as ensuring basic needs are met by identifying available resources and supports (e.g., extended foster care and credit recovery programs).

Another recommendation for practice, based on this study, is that clinical mental health care providers or school counselors might address foster care youth's irrational beliefs or perceived barriers associated with low aspirations or low expectations. Youth in this study spoke about the substantial impact that negative messages from family, in particular, had on their sense of self-worth and educational aspirations. Finally, the peer relationships at school also require attention. Youth who experienced significant school instability spoke about prioritizing making friends over learning. Others highlighted how the stigma of being in foster care was a barrier to making friends and at times influenced the decision to leave a traditional public school environment and dropout, transfer to a GED preparation program, or enroll in an online school.

7. Limitations

The potential limitations of this study pertain to transferability, participant bias, and focus group dynamics. The transferability of this study may be limited by the fact that the sample consisted of 16 youth who were reflecting back on their educational experiences. Although the sample size is consistent with Hill et al.'s (2005) recommendations for CQR studies, youth in the study had primarily experienced the school system in a single metropolitan area and were responding to data points specific to foster care in one state. Variability exists in the foster care system at the state and county level, and even across schools within a single district. The researchers attempted to maximize the transferability of the findings, recognizing that the school achievement gap exists across multiple domains in most states across the United States.

A second potential limitation of this study pertains to the possibility that there may be something unique, and not easily identified, about the experiences of the youth who chose to respond to the request for participation. The participants were recruited through agencies that work with youth currently in the foster care system and those who have aged out of the child welfare system. Despite the diversity of the participant group, in terms of number of years in foster care, diploma/GED/dropout, gender, and overall experience, it is important to acknowledge that there may be a unique aspect to those who chose to participate, which potentially limits transferability.

Finally, although there are inherent limitations to the use of focus groups for data collection as opposed to individual interviews, the research group determined that for this population, the benefits of a focus group far outweighed the limitations (e.g., the opportunity for participants to be exposed to and respond to diverse experiences and to make meaning of those experiences). Though efforts were made to reduce the impact of the limitations, it is important to acknowledge that in focus groups it cannot be assumed that each individual participant is actually expressing his or her own individual view. A related limitation is that member checking did not yield substantive participant feedback; only one out of the sixteen participants responded with additional information or clarification.

8. Conclusion

Students in foster care graduate from high school at rates well below their peers (Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2014). In the coming years, the educational attainment gap for students in foster care will become increasingly visible because states are now required to report the graduation rates of students who experienced foster care during high school (ESSA, 2015; U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The findings from the current study illustrate some of the emotional consequences of being a student in foster care, as well as how these students' expectations of educational success may be shaped by their struggles to meet basic needs, by the practical challenges associated with school mobility, and by messages received from adults. Given these findings, child welfare and education partnerships might consider not only how to mitigate systemic barriers but also how to communicate to youth how it is possible for them to reach educational milestones. As former Administration for Children Youth and Families Commissioner López (2016) aptly stated, "Behind every single data point is a child who has hopes and dreams of a better life" (p. 1).

Acknowledgments

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