

EXPERIENCES OF AGING OUT OF THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM IN CAPE TOWN

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Introduction

The foster care system within South Africa, and foster care systems around the world take care of some of the most vulnerable members of society, yet the transition out of these systems into adulthood is often overlooked. Therefore this study aimed to understand the specific challenges faced by youth currently aging out of the foster system in South Africa in order to deepen the understanding of how to assist youth age out of care successfully.

The research was situated in an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA). Within this approach semi-structured interviews with 9 youth in foster care were conducted as well as a semi-structured focus group with 6 foster mothers.

Research was conducted in collaboration with a non-governmental organization, Home from Home, which is currently facing the challenges of assisting youth age out of care.

Transitioning out of care

A definition: A successful transition out of care can be characterized by interdependence rather than independence as youths go from adolescence into young adulthood, and be complemented by assisting youths to become resilient, self-determined individuals who are able to take their place in their community. The key point of this definition is to place a realistic goal for youth aging out of care.

The **characteristics** of those who have successfully transitioned out of care, according to literature both from South Africa and elsewhere, are:

- **Resilience** in the face of adversity.

- It depends on the **presence of a mentor**, an older person to rely on and turn to
- Psychological maturity seen in decision making skills, self-sufficiency, self-determination and healthy attachment patterns
- A social support network to assist with financial needs, accommodation, employment and the skills needed for independent living

Findings of the study

Five main themes emerged from the interviews and focus group:

1. Independence.

The desire for independence was expressed overtly by some participants which shows a level of engagement with developing into adulthood, while still clinging to childhood. Other participants expressed this more subtly, through wanting to be able to go exploring or a desire for her “own things” when speaking about the future:

To have my own house, own car, everything on me. To not rent. To have my own. No kids. Because no time for kids and no dogs because I don't like pets eh just to have my own house, car, yah. (Anathi, youth)

A foster mother saw her role as a mother as completely essential in imparting independence. This independence seems to be very much rooted in being able to look after oneself physically, being able to provide for oneself. The pressure to be financially independent and find employment is felt even at this stage.

Interdependence, in terms of building social networks and helping youth access available resources, is something stressed by HfH but it seems as if this has not fully trickled down to the lived realities and experiences of the youth.

2. Centrality of physical care and material resources.

Taking care of the physical needs in terms of nutrition, education and clothing was seen by youth in foster care as a main component of foster care and one that would end. This was not mentioned by the foster mothers, and yet it was the discontinuation of this particular type of support that caused the most anxiety among the participants. It was expressed in this and similar ways:

When you are out of here, you are out of here. I don't, they don't provide for. They don't give – um - money or anything, they don't even go and see you. You are out. (Buhle, youth)

As extended care has been shown in international literature to be a good indicator of positive outcomes, the fear and possibly the reality of an abrupt change and sudden lack of material resources could be harmful. Many interventions focus on assisting youth with material resources in the form of housing, grants and employment and many of these interventions have been successful to a degree.

3. The continuity of emotional care.

There was some understanding of continued support in various ways but particularly with regard to emotional support, thus separating financial independence from psycho-social independence. For the youth in foster care, the security of trusting the continuity of emotional care was not strong but when prompted or asked directly if their foster mothers would continue to be an emotional support they generally agreed.

In addition, there seemed to be a desire for family which was expressed in different ways from desires for their own children to characterizing their foster mothers and social workers in their lives along familial terms (as Mother, Aunty).

The continuity of emotional care was expressed most strongly by the foster mothers. They seemed to have a clear sense of identity that came from being a foster mother to the youth. There was a huge emphasis on motherhood, and much like biological motherhood this is something that will continue even after the youth leave their care.

Research has shown the importance of a social support network, of having role models to look up to and rely on and these familial bonds will hopefully provide that as these youth age out of care. Having older adults in their lives to assist them with their difficulties, both emotional and practical, is therefore incredibly important. The interdependence that is the result of being part of a community is achieved through these foster mothers and social workers.

For young people whose childhoods have been characterised by the instability that brings them into foster care, healthy attachments to parents or parent figures is difficult. This is important as previous experiences and attachments pave the way for attachments and relationships in adolescence and adulthood.

4. Contextualized responsiveness within foster care.

In describing what will happen in the future, as they transition out of care, almost all of the youth in foster care spoke about how the opportunities and support were offered but how it required them to take an active role in their future. For them to respond to their environment and opportunities in a positive and constructive manner.

Another participant expanded on what was expected of them, and the direct relationship between the amount of support offered and their behaviour or engagement with the opportunities offered.

The foster mothers expressed this same connection between the support given by the foster mothers, and more broadly HfH, and the child's behaviour or engagement with these opportunities. For the foster mothers, this was expressed as a challenge in parenting youth as they grow through adolescence into adulthood. They can put opportunities and support in place, but it is the responsibility of the youth to take those opportunities and make the most of them.

This decision to engage with the opportunities offered, and the growth in self-determinism that is seen in these youth is promising. Both are elements that have been shown to be important to successfully aging out of care, however they are difficult to develop directly. The flip side of self-determinism, of putting the emphasis of responsibility on themselves rather than the social context

adds an additional pressure to succeed. Although expressed in relation to the opportunities and support offered, this pressure could become overwhelming.

5. The pressure of “normalcy”.

A strong desire to be “normal” and to be seen as “normal” emerged through the various accounts, and increased in importance as the youth grew older. The stigma of being in foster care is complex, and the desire not to disclose their foster care status to peers was strongly expressed

So we don't look like we are foster children from... you see? So I take myself as normal kid. Like other kids are my friends. All my friends so I don't see anything wrong. (Lethabo, youth)

Other participants really stressed that there were no differences between their family and other families, and these similarities were very much based on going to the same school, eating the same food, living in the same area as peers. The differences, where they emerged, were based on getting material things from parents.

The pressure to be “normal”, to fit in, was also expressed by the mothers. One mother expressed it in terms of peer pressure. They, themselves, feel the judgement of their communities in their parenting.

This desire to be seen as “normal” fits into the struggle for identity generally felt by adolescents at this age. Not wanting to be seen as a “child in foster care” reveals that there is some sort of stigma attached to being in foster care and perhaps exacerbates the desire to be “normal”. Although unstudied in South Africa, the stigma attached to being in foster care seems to be very much focused on being “different” or “devalued” by others.

In conclusion

Overall, the findings from this study provided some insight into the experience of aging out of care as the youth and foster mothers are actively engaging with this experience despite the many challenges they face.

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