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"WHO WILL TEACH ME TO LEARN?"

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ABSTRACT: There is little research in Canada that examines how youth in care perceive their educational needs, despite the fact that their school difficulties are well documented. This article describes a qualitative participatory research study in which 100 youth in care from across Canada took part in focus groups facilitated by current and former youth in care. Major themes emerging from these interviews are outlined, as are recommendations for practice, policy and further research.

Children and youth in foster care generally do not perform as well in the educational system as other children and youth. Over the past fifteen years, leaders within the youth in care movement have been increasingly concerned with the high number who do not complete their high school education. There are few studies which directly address the educational needs of youth in the care system, particularly in Canada. How this solution is perceived by the youth is even less apparent.

BACKGROUND

This study was a first step toward understanding and addressing the educational needs of youth in care. Through qualitative participatory research, we hoped to provide adult stakeholders with knowledge of how to better support youth in care throughout their high school education. Our aim was also to provide youth in care with an active voice. A recent study on student engagement in learning and school life demonstrates that youth often do not have a voice in their education, though they are key to understanding the process (Smith, et al., 1998). This may be particularly true of youth in care, for whom many aspects of life are institutionally controlled. As one focus group participant said *"To understand youth, you have to put yourself in our shoes."*

Youth in the child welfare system face additional challenges that other young people do not. They are separated from their families for a variety of reasons (such as abuse, neglect, the death of caregivers or the inability of the caregivers to care for the child). They frequently have difficulty adjusting to the child welfare system (Gerosky & Knauss, 2000) and this in turn can be disruptive to their education (Ryerse, 1990). Once placed in the care of a social agency, youth are frequently relocated to new living situations (Kufeldt, Baker, Bennet, & Tite, 1998; Raychaba, 1993).

This can be especially difficult to cope with when a new school also is involved (Kufeldt, 1995). Youth who have difficulty adjusting to foster care often have school-related difficulty as well (Fitzgerald, 1998). Within the school setting, teachers have lower expectations for youth from foster care (Kufeldt, et al., 1998) and these youth are more likely to be expelled or suspended (Kufeldt, 1995).

It has been shown that children in foster care constantly achieve academically at a level below the national averages for their age groups, even when they are in long-term placements (Colton & Heath, 1994; Colton & Jackson, 1993; Dubowitz, et al., 1994; Fanshel, Finch, & Grundy, 1989; Heath, Colton, & Aldgate, 1994; Smucker, Kauffman, & Ball, 1996; Stein, 1994; Trupin, 1993), and are at a greater risk of dropping out (Kufeldt, 1995). Youth from foster care also are without the luxury that the "boomerang generation" has, which is the opportunity to return to the parental home later in life. Although provincial standards vary, by their early twenties at the latest, youth in care are required to be fully financially independent. This makes it difficult for them to compete in the job market without the required education (Gilbert, 1993).

Despite the many challenges that youth in the foster care system face, some do succeed, and those who do are believed to possess certain protective factors. These are personal attributes or characteristics of their social situation which help them to overcome aversive life circumstances. For youth at risk, stability and consistency within the home can act as protective factors despite multiple life stresses (Hetherington, 1989; Luthar & Ziegler, 1991; Wyman, et al., 1992). A school with a well-defined schedule and discipline can be a protective factor (Hetherington, 1989). A supportive social group also can contribute to the resiliency of a youth who has experienced a high degree of life stress (Garmenzy, 1993; Luthar & Ziegler, 1991; Sandler, Miller, Short, & Wolchik, 1989). Effective support networks outside of the home include teachers and social workers (Garmenzy, 1991). Youth were more likely to succeed in school and enjoy learning when they felt that someone cared about their school performance, regardless of who that person was (DeWit, et al., 1993). Other research shows that if one aspect of a youth's life situation, such as home, /presents many risk factors, another situation, such as school, can provide resiliency factors (Beard, 1991). Participation in extracurricular activities can also improve self-esteem and resiliency (Gilligan, 1999). Non-mainstream schooling environments such as alternative schools have also been shown to help youth to stay in school (Kronick & Hargis, 1998; Ryerse, 1990; Volpe, Clancy, Buteau, & Telleczeck, 1998). School counsellors have been shown to be effective in helping youth to deal with the transition into the foster care system (Gerosky & Knauss, 2000).

Youth who are in less restrictive placements such as foster homes fare the best academically, while those in more restrictive placements such as group homes are less likely to succeed (Mech & Fung, 1999). Fewer

moves to new placements is related to more positive educational o utcomes (Courtney & Barth, 1996). Participation in independent living programs that teach life skills has also been related to increased chances of obtaining a high school diploma (Kronick & Hargis, 1998; Scannapieco, Schagrin, & Scannapieco, 1995).

Despite evidence indicating several ways in which it is possible to help youth in care succeed, resources are still inadequate (Coulling, 2000). In an analysis of high school dropouts, many of the youth who dropped out were described as "invisible" (Kronick & Hargis, 1998), that is these youth had not been identified as being "at risk" of leaving school. In particular, there appears to be a lack of integration and communication between child welfare agencies and educational institutions (Kufeldt, 1995; Matherson & Charles, 1990). Cooperation is necessary so that personal and educational needs of the youth can be fully understood and met. We must recognize that all things that occur in the lives of youth are related (DeWit, et al., 1993). Educational needs cannot be effectively separated from personal and social needs.

Further, youth often do not have input into their educational needs (Smith, et al., 1998). They are also often uninvolved in the plans that are made for them within the social agencies and when present, their input is not considered (Thomas & O'Kane, 1999). The role of the professional should be to respect the decisions of the clients, in this case youth in care, in order to empower them (Labonte, 1993). Youth must be provided with opportunities both in educational settings and within the child welfare system in which they can take responsibility for their own decisions. Through increased involvement in life and educational planning, these youth will learn how to plan for their own future, rather than relying on someone else to make decisions for them. They will acquire personal management skills that are necessary in order to become fully independent and successful.

In this project, 100 youth from the child welfare system have spoken out and asked to be empowered. They have shared their thoughts and ideas about problems at hand and possible solutions. They have shared their lives and experiences, some happy and some painful, in the hopes that they would be heard.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

Youth Participants

Approximately 100 youth participated in this qualitative research project designed to understand the educational experiences of youth in care. Focus groups were conducted between February and June, 2000, at thirteen sites across Canada. The trends we see in this sample reflect the national and geographical diversity of the youth in care population in Canada: for example, there was a Native only group, a female only group, an under 16 group, an over 16 group, a francophone group, and a minor-

ity only group. Attempts were made to balance the groups between rural and urban centres. Youth participants provided demographic information and answered seven open-ended questions related to education. Participants were recruited by regional facilitators through youth in care networks, child welfare agencies, youth drop-in centres, and schools.

Methodology and Analysis

In keeping with the mandate of the National Youth in Care Network, all groups were led by youth currently or previously involved in the child welfare system. The group leaders identified themselves by name, age, and gave a brief description of their involvement with the child welfare system. The National Youth in Care Network and its mandate were described to the youth by the lead facilitator. These descriptions served not only to further explain the purpose of the project, but to put the participants at ease with the group leaders.

Focus group information was analyzed and reduced by themes. The analysis focussed on a number of features of the data: the emphasis placed on a given topic, the number of times it was mentioned, and the energy and enthusiasm generated by participants in the focus groups around a given topic.

RESULTS

Not all demographic questions were answered by all participants. It is important to note that for this reason, results never represent a 100% response rate. The information presented may differ from national figures regarding youth in care and is reflective only of the participants in this study. There was a relatively even gender split, with 40 percent male participants, 56 percent female participants and four percent who did not indicate their gender. Participants ranged from 12 to 23 years in age, with the average age being 17 years.

Some participants indicated more than one ethnicity and thirty percent of the respondents did not indicate their ethnic background. Of those who did, 25 percent identified themselves as Canadian, 30 percent as White or European, 10 percent as Native, 10 percent as South American, 4 percent as Black and 3 percent Latino. Sixty percent of the respondents spoke English as their first language.

Sixty-three percent of the sample were currently enrolled in school, 13 percent were not and 24 percent did not respond to this question. The average grade completed was grade 10. For those who were in school, grade 11 was the average level, although grade levels ranged between grade six and university.

The average age for entry into the child welfare system was 12 years. At the time the focus groups took place, 17 percent of the respondents lived in foster homes, 10 percent with relatives, 27 percent lived independently and 22 percent lived in other situations such as groups

homes or semi-independent homes. The average number of moves since entering the child welfare system was five times.

Ten percent of respondents indicated that they had or were expecting a child of their own. Thirty-four percent indicated that they participated in extracurricular activities, 40 percent indicated that they did not and 26 percent failed to answer the question. Jobs were held by 21 percent of the youth. One quarter of the youth had also been involved in the correctional system as young offenders.

Stability and Safety

Many of the youth in this sample expressed concerns about stability and safety both at home and at school. Stability refers to the consistency of one's environment, while safety refers to the youth's feelings of personal security in any given situation. These two issues were linked in the youth's responses. In order to feel safe, the youth must be able to assess their environment. However, when the environment is not stable youth are either unable to assess the environment before change takes place or feel unsafe in anticipation of change. Movement to an environment that may be safer also involves a disruption in stability as the youth is removed from their current environment.

Transiency

One major obstacle to stability is that youth in foster care frequently move from one placement to another. This can cause a disruption in school life, particularly when changes of school are involved. The average number of times a youth in this sample had moved since entering the child welfare system was five. Each move required adjustment to a new foster family or group home setting and perhaps to a new school or school board, which may have affected their ability to focus on school, both academically and interpersonally.

> *"I changed schools three times so friends were hard to keep. I had a lot of conflict at school. I felt isolated and alienated."*

> *"You need a stable environment both at home and at school to graduate. You get emotionally affected when you are always moving around."*

Some of the youth indicated that school provided the consistency that was missing in their home lives. School would serve as an escape from the turbulence that they experienced in other areas of their lives.

> *"School was the most consistent thing in my life. I moved around a lot and I went to nine different elementary schools, but I always knew that my teacher was going to be there when I got there every morning and I didn't have that at home."*

Teacher Support

Many youth in care experienced problems at school. Many felt that teachers were not empathetic towards them and complained about discrimination against students who were wards of the child welfare system. Minority youth often spoke of the double stigma of being a minority and being a youth in care.

"A lot (of staff) hold prejudice against kids from custody. They watch (youth in care) a little more closely."

"Teachers should be taught that we are not bad people...be more sensitive. I have two kids and constantly feel like I have to prove myself. As long as I am pushing and proving myself I have absolutely all of the teacher's support, but if I slip up and miss a week of school because my kid is sick or I am, I lose it all."

Violence

Some youth were afraid of violence, in the form of threats or fights at school. They were stigmatised as "trouble makers" and blamed for altercations in which they were involved. Given the opportunity to explain themselves many youth felt they were not believed by school authorities.

"In grade five and six I was always getting in fights because I was always getting picked on. Once after gym class, some boys took all of my clothes while I was in the shower. I was crying and naked. I tried to run home but they (school authorities) thought that I was streaking so they kicked me out (of school)."

"You can't worry about your grades and worry about your life or who is going to challenge you to a fight next....You can't get high grades and do really well if you're worrying about what's going to happen next or what kind of violence there will be....It's unrealistic."

Youth from violent homes may be particularly at risk of becoming involved with violence in the school system, and felt that empathy and support are required to deal with the problem. Several participants cited courses such as anger management as being useful to them. One participant describes her experience as a school bully and subsequent guilt for her actions:

"When you've got troubles at home you don't really feel stable in every day life so when I was going to school I was more of a bully... I'm not a mean person, it's just that the environment that I grew up in was pretty harsh and violent so I guess I took it out in school.... I'm kind of worried now because I see these girls that I went to school with and they're like 'don't hurt me!' Oh my God I'm so sorry..."

Resources and Choice

Awareness of, Access to and Availability of Resources

Many youth said they were not aware of the options or the resources available when facing a decision about their education. While some were aware they needed help in certain areas they did not access the resources that were available because: they did not have the confidence to ask for help; they believed that help would be offered if their problem were serious; they were unaware of the resources that were available; or they had always dealt with things on their own, and did not like to be dependent on others. They were able to access resources only after someone had taken note of their difficulty and helped them. Others who did ask for help felt that there was an inability or an unwillingness to provide the needed assistance.

The need for increased funding in the form of scholarships, bursaries, and loans for education was mentioned repeatedly. Information is not readily available and is difficult to understand. Often, the youth felt that guidance counsellors, social workers, or teachers expected them to know more about their options than they did and to be able plan for their education with far little assistance.

> *"I had a lot of trouble with my math. I never asked the teacher for help. I thought that he would have come to me."*

> *"Counsellors don't know much about kids and what they want. I wanted to be a massage therapist and no one could tell me what I needed or anything like that. I finally went on the internet, where I found out about the program and what I needed."*

> *"A lot of us don't know the way and there is no one there to show us."*

Engagement and Involvement

The youth felt they were not given the opportunity to be active participants in decisions regarding their schooling. Several participants explained that choice of schools, courses and extracurricular activities were made for them. These participants expressed the need to be treated as competent individuals, and wanted to play an active role in making important decisions about their lives.

> *"I played volleyball until I went into the group home. I don't play anymore. They always say that they will look into it and never do."*

> *"I switched schools this semester because I wanted a fresh new start. I went into grade ten and the principal chose all of my courses for me... I am doing co-op and I had a placement lined up at CIBC... Instead of that they asked me how working with kids sounded and pushed me towards that."*

"If you have certain things on your mind that you want to do they should help you achieve that instead of offering other suggestions."

Personal Supports

Respectful treatment, motivation and encouragement were emphasized as important aspects of support. A wide range of potential sources of support were identified, including teachers, family members, foster parents, principals, police officers, guidance counsellors, social workers, therapists and friends. Youth emphasised the connection between school and personal life and the need for stability, self-esteem and a strong support network in order to be successful in school.

"The principal at my school was the best. He helped me to get out of a negative relationship with a guy who was hitting me. He took the time to listen to me and to understand what I was going through."

"The only positive thing that ever happened to me in school was when I was on the cross country team and I was really determined. We had made it to the provincials and my brother came to see me and it was like the only thing that I've accomplished in my life. He was like 'You can do it! You can do it!'... The whole time I was running I was basically doing it for him... I got to the finish line and I won first place... It was the most outstanding thing that ever happened to me at school."

"You need friends and family to motivate you for self-esteem. If you are constantly told that you will amount to nothing then your confidence will go down,"

Preparation for Independence

Older youth expressed a great deal of concern over leaving the child welfare system, living independently and obtaining funding for their post-secondary education. Participants expressed a need for life skills programs that emphasise education. Many of the youth in this study were already living independently and often found it difficult to balance the daily chores and necessities of their living situation with the demands of education. Several youth who were not currently enrolled in school emphasised the need to sort out their personal affairs before returning to school, in order to be successful.

"It has nothing to do with school... When you leave you are looking for a place to get money, a place to stay, where to get food or how to support your child... When I get home the first thing on my mind is not homework."

"We need more scholarships and bursaries within the communities. X (a rural town) does not have anything like that."

Educational Supports

Many youth expressed that non-mainstream educational programs (such as alternative schools, correspondence courses, accelerated learning programs, schools with day care programs and home schooling) had helped them. Some participants said that they needed to work at their own pace while others expressed a desire for more hands-on practical learning; in other words, for more diversity in programs and a better fit between them and their learning environment.

"High school needs more diversity in the programs. Subjects like music, sports, cosmetology, woodworking, etc. The more diverse the school is, the better because the students will find their own vocation."

Many youth were unaware of the types of post secondary programs as well as the scholarships and bursaries available to them. In a "regular" home setting, many of these questions might have been answered with the help of parents or relatives. In the foster care setting, there may be many people involved with the youth, all of whom believe that someone else is helping with these decisions. The youth, then, are left to search for information, and make sense of it, on their own.

Empowerment

Preparation for Independence

Through respectful treatment, encouragement and support youth eventually become empowered to make decisions that are right for them. For this to occur, youth need life skills that include basic self care, study skills and self-management skills that allow them to juggle the demands of living independently and attending school.

Leaving Care

Many youth fear the loss of their support networks once they have "aged out," or become to old to be supported by the child welfare system. The youths' emotional and financial support often comes from the child welfare system and that support is minimized when they leave the system. Financial resources such as extended care and maintenance plans, in which the child welfare agency assists the youth with basic living costs, are also removed once the youth has left the child welfare system. Youth find the prospect of being on their own without resources and support to be a frightening prospect.

"You only have yourself to depend on. Those supports aren't always going to be there so you shouldn't come to depend on them."

Personal Determinants

The youth emphasised motivation, determination, goal setting and self-reliance as important factors. Prejudice, past experiences and discouragement could all be overcome, stated many youth, but not without some inner force driving them towards success.

Goal setting, both long and short term, was emphasized as a necessary component of success in all areas of life. The prevalent attitude was that those who had set goals would succeed despite daunting circumstances. Many did not believe that they had an adequate support network, in part because they have become too old to be part of the child welfare system and because they may be afraid to become dependent on resources which are temporary. Their support network may also be more limited than that of other youth: family contact may be limited, reducing the amount of support that can be provided; foster families and group homes may not provide the same range or type of support a natural family would; and transience may affect the number of long-term friendships and relationships with adults who can help.

Where the youth felt that support networks were inadequate, their ability to make decisions on their own and fend for themselves was emphasized. Perhaps because youth in care often feel they lack support, they have learned to be extremely self-reliant. Many of the youth cited themselves as a source of support or as the person who helped them the most with decisions in their lives.

> *"I realize where I don't have my family, I have to focus all of my attention on school because it's helping me. If I don't help myself, no one is going to help me. I can prove myself through school."*

This self-reliance does not guarantee that the youth will make appropriate and informed decisions and may cause them to close themselves off to possible sources of support.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What follows are recommendations for improved practice and research based on these findings.

The nature of the foster care experience inherently involves transition. Planning that minimizes the number of transitions is useful. In cases where transitions are inevitable it is important to understand the nature of such changes and the effects that they have on youth. Further study that examines the reasons for moving, number of moves, youths' input into the moves, and the effects of these transitions on youth is necessary in order to effectively meet the needs of youth in transitory situations.

Greater youth involvement in life planning may be one strategy for increasing stability and safety. In such a strategy, the youth would have more input into their living arrangements and schooling with an

emphasis on choosing placements that maximize the potential for safety and stability. It is important to note that what was perceived as a safe learning environment by social workers or teachers may have been seen differently by the youth, and it is important that the youths' perception of their environment be respected. To such an end, sensitivity training for school and social work staff may be useful.

Youth from violent homes may be particularly at risk of becoming involved with violence in the school system. Efforts must be made to provide coping strategies for these youth, which may involve removing them from the situation if that is what the youth feels they need. Several participants cited courses such as anger management as being useful. In cases where school itself was seen as the source of frustration, a different type of school is an option that should be discussed with the youth.

There is a difference between what the youth believe that they need in order to be able to make decisions and what they are being provided with. The youth interviewed demonstrated a strong desire to succeed and to be active participants in decisions about their own lives. Many of these youth felt victimised by a system that does not allow them to do this.

Almost all of the youth involved in the focus groups expressed their intention to complete high school and most planned to pursue some form of post secondary education. In order for this to occur, personal and financial support is required both in the home and school setting. A wider array of educational options and sensitivity training for school staff working with youth in care could help optimize the school experience. Again, it is vital that the youth are given an active voice in their educational planning.

Many youth felt that social agencies should be more involved in helping the youth to cover the rising costs of education. Several high school students stated that book fees, lab fees, and transportation costs, particularly in the rural areas, were not consistently paid by the social agencies. Where costs may not be covered directly by the agencies, teaching financial planning skills may be useful.

Teachers play a valuable role in mentoring and supporting students. More information should be provided to teachers about the nature of the child welfare system as it is experienced by the youth involved. Teachers, if they understand the issues and living situations of youth in care, can support and advocate for the youth's education.

The traditional high school may be less effective for youth in care than non-mainstream educational programs, such as alternative schools, correspondence courses, accelerated learning programs, etc. Additional research must be conducted to explore the varying dynamics and effectiveness of these alternative educational programs for youth in care. In addition, youth in care must be given the opportunity by social workers to advocate for alternative educational programs to ensure that there is an appropriate fit between their needs and their learning environment.

Consistency can help youth gain confidence in their abilities. It is important that long-term supports are in place and that youth are aware of what will be available after they have left the child welfare system. Minimizing the number of transitions in order to promote long-term friendships is one way to help the youth to develop a long-term support system. Planned discharge from foster care that involves the youth and includes a gradual removal of resources may be useful. The process and effectiveness of gradual discharge should be explored in more depth by child welfare researchers.

Independent living training focusing on both basic life skills and personal management must be made available to youth. Youth in care must be involved in the planning and delivery of these programs to ensure that the courses are relevant. Resources must be made available to these agencies by provincial ministries to be able to provide these programs.

CONCLUSIONS

This research study was qualitative and exploratory in nature. Implicit in our recommendations are some overarching requirements: for example, national standards of care in which the youth themselves have a voice; a comprehensive and consistent tracking system of youth in care that includes cooperation and coordination among agencies and departments across jurisdictions; and a strong voice for youth in welfare policy decisions.

This study is a first step in understanding how to support youth in care throughout their high school education. At this time additional research much be conducted in several areas (for example, transiency, inter-agency cross-jurisdictional coordination, teacher support, sub-population specific issues) to deepen our knowledge of specific issues. An open, inclusive discussion needs to occur across federal/provincial/territorial governments with the involvement of child welfare agencies and youth in care to build these recommendations into comprehensive action plans. Youth in care have shared their personal experiences with our research team, both their struggles and successes, in the hopes of beginning this discussion.

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