THE IMPACT OF FOSTER CARE ON PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION: AN APPLICATION OF BIOECOLOGICAL THEORY

A Thesis

Presented to the faculty of the Department of Sociology
California State University, Sacramento

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
in
Sociology
by
Tiffany Barker
FALL 2014
THE IMPACT OF FOSTER CARE ON PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION: AN APPLICATION OF BIOECOLOGICAL THEORY

A Thesis
by
Tiffany Barker

Approved by:

__________________________________, Committee Chair
Dr. Ellen Berg

__________________________________, Second Reader
Dr. Jacqueline Carrigan

______________
Date
Student: Tiffany Barker

I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this thesis is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the thesis.

________________________, Graduate Coordinator   ______________
Amy Lui, Ph.D.                      Date

Department of Sociology

iii
Abstract

of

THE IMPACT OF FOSTER CARE ON PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION: AN APPLICATION OF BIOECOLOGICAL THEORY

by

Tiffany Barker

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau, the foster care population currently includes nearly 400,000 children (2013). In 2012, in California alone, over 43,000 students in grades K-12 were in foster care. Research has shown students in every type of placement performed far worse than their non-foster care peers. Furthermore, in high school, students in foster care had the highest dropout rates and the lowest graduations than any other students (Wiegmann et.al 2014). This academic achievement gap demonstrates foster youth are at an extreme disadvantage compared to their counterparts who never experience foster care.

If foster youth perform behind their peers in primary school, this achievement gap is likely to follow them on their path to higher education. Other researchers have found only 20% of former foster youth who meet college entrance requirements actually go to college (Unrau et al. 2012) and less than six percent of former foster youth have a college
education (Fessler 2010). These facts reveal foster care negatively impacts students’ academic performance and their ability to receive higher education.

The present study looks at former foster youth who have graduated from high school and have successfully transitioned into higher education. In-depth interviews with ten former foster youth currently enrolled in a California State University were conducted in order to answer the following research question, “How have former foster youth currently enrolled in college been prepared and challenged on their path to higher education?” The interviews were analyzed and coded. Four themes emerged from the data: 1. Choosing to Take the Road towards Higher Education, 2. Educational Resources and Support Networks, 3. Finding Support and Strength, and 4. Personal Motivation and Self-Reliance. Personal backgrounds, religious beliefs, and past experiences from student’s macrosystems and chronosystems motivated them to pursue higher education. Various support networks, financial assistance, and education resources associated with their exosystem helped prepare students for the academic barriers they would encounter on their path to conquering their academic goals. Lastly, assistance and support from family, friends, teachers, and other microsystems as well as their own personal motivation and self-reliance enabled their dreams of going to college to become a reality. Using the Bioecological Systems theory, this research revealed how different ecological
systems have both negatively and positively affected interviewees’ abilities to become successful college students.

____________________, Committee Chair
Ellen Berg, Ph.D.

____________________
Date
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank my mother for instilling in me the importance of education at a young age and for always helping and supporting me in whatever it may be. I would also like to thank my other family members and friends for their support and blessings. I am thankful to Professor Jackie Carrigan for taking the time and effort to be my second reader and for all of the input and feedback she has given me along the way. Words cannot express enough my gratitude to Professor Ellen Berg for all of her expertise and for pointing me in all of the right directions in order to make this research possible.

I would like to give a special thanks to the entire Guardian Scholars program at Sacramento State University. In particular, thank you Joy Salvetti and Tia Holiday for not only allowing this research to take place, but also for aiding me in the recruitment process and introducing me to ten intelligent, helpful students. Most importantly, I would like to thank the ten Guardian Scholars students who participated in this study. Thank you for sharing with me your time, stories, and unique life experiences. Without all of you this thesis could never have been written. Thank you!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments ........................................................................ vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables ........................................................................ x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures ........................................................................ xi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter

1. **INTRODUCTION** ........................................................................ 1
   - The Current Issue ................................................................. 1
   - Theory .................................................................................. 5
   - Research Questions ............................................................... 12
   - Purpose of Study ................................................................. 13

2. **LITERATURE REVIEW** ............................................................. 15
   - Microsystems ........................................................................ 15
   - Mesosystems ......................................................................... 20
   - Exosystems ........................................................................... 25
   - Macrosystems ....................................................................... 35
3. METHODS, DATA, AND MEASUREMENT ...........................................42
   Sample .......................................................................................42
   Method .......................................................................................43
   Themes .......................................................................................44

4. RESULTS .....................................................................................46
   Macrosystems/Chronosystems: Taking the Road toward Higher Education… 49
   Exosystems: Education Resources and Support Networks ....................59
   Mesosystems: Finding Strength and Support ........................................67
   Microsystems: Personal Motivation and Self-Reliance ............................73

5. CONCLUSION ............................................................................81
   Limitations to the Study ................................................................87
   Questions and Implications ..............................................................89

Appendix A. Consent Form ............................................................93
Appendix B. Written Survey Questions ............................................95
Appendix C. Oral Interview Questions .............................................96
References ...................................................................................101
LIST OF TABLES

Tables | Page
--- | ---
1. Demographic Traits, Descriptions of Foster Care Placements, and Family Relationships | 47
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figures</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bioecological Systems Theory</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Themes</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

Introduction

It is taken for granted every child receives the support, care, shelter, and love needed for healthy development. National Foster Care Youth Statistics reveal growing up in the foster care system increases chances of homelessness, unemployment, and pregnancy before the age of twenty-one. Foster youth are less likely to graduate from high school and fewer actually go on to college. There is a desperate need to improve the foster care system in order to enable healthy development and enhance the lives of disadvantaged youth so they can become successful adults.

The Current Issue

For most intelligent and determined high school seniors, the next step after high school graduation is college. Unfortunately, for high school seniors in foster care, this dream may never become a reality. Many foster youth discuss the lack of encouragement and support from teachers, counselors, social workers, and other adults about going to college. Unrau et al. (2012) note only 20% of former foster youth who meet college entrance requirements actually go to college, compared to 60% of their non-foster care counterparts. Unrau and her colleagues conducted a study comparing self-reported readiness for college students. The researchers found former foster youth show better attitudes toward their professors as well as a greater desire to finish college compared to
the general student body. Moreover, they also have better study skills and a higher
degree of interest in academic activities. Former foster youth are more receptive to
services such as personal counseling and academic assistance and less likely to go to
career counseling than the other non-foster care students in the study. In regards to
general coping, former foster youth did not feel they had as much family support as other
non-foster care freshman.

In addition to measuring self-reported readiness, Unrau et al. (2012) also
measured academic performance by comparing how former foster youth did on their first
semester of college compared to other freshman during the same time. By end of the first
semester, the foster care sample completed an average of ten units while the other sample
completed an average of thirteen units. During the first semester, 47% of foster youth
withdrew from at least one course while only 18% of the other participants withdrew
from classes. Lastly, former foster youth had lower GPA’s than the other students with a
mean of 2.34 compared to 2.85. The results suggest former foster youth who attend
college for the first time do so with an optimistic view and are very motivated to be
academically successful. Unfortunately, despite their positive outlook, they do not
perform as well as other students who have never experienced foster care.

The present study examines the positive and negative factors that influence
former foster youths’ abilities to enter college, be academically successful, and become
self-sufficient adults. According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and
Reporting System (AFCARS), in 2012 there were approximately 400,000 children
residing in foster care. About ten percent of those in foster care age out of the system each year. The term “age out” can be defined as “the termination of court jurisdiction over foster care youths” (Atkinson 2008: 183). Additionally, since the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) and the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act\(^1\) passed in the late 1990’s, the number of children aging out of the system has increased by almost sixty-five percent. With the increase in the number of children aging out of the foster care system, it is necessary to prepare them for the transition into adulthood. Unlike teens who live with their biological parents, most foster youth are not given the necessary tools to prepare them for the struggles they might face as young adults, in this case becoming a successful college student. Fessler (2010) claims less than half of former foster youth are employed and less than six percent have a college education. These statistics imply former foster youth are not prepared to face the academic requirements of higher education. This, I am arguing, is a result of both the poor institutional system, the developmental problems faced by these youth, and the lack of positive support networks.

Although success rates among former foster youth are not very high, it would be inaccurate to assume it is impossible for former foster youth to succeed in college. The present research looks at former foster youth who have graduated from high school and have successfully transitioned into higher education. According to a report from Casey Family Programs, a foundation providing services and striving to improve child welfare

---
\(^1\) The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), passed in 1997, was designed to improve the safety of foster children, to promote adoption and permanent placing, and to offer support for foster families.

\(^2\) The Chafee Foster Care Independence Act, passed in 1999, increases funds aid foster youth in the transition from foster care into independent living, offers funds and other assistance such as Medicaid to former foster youth under the age of twenty-one who have left the system, and allows for more flexibility in designing independent living programs.
practices and policies, over 70 percent of foster youth have the desire to go to college (Casey Family Programs 2008: 1). Unfortunately, studies reveal only 7-13 percent of foster youth actually move on to higher education and compared to 24 percent of the total population, only two percent of foster youth graduate with a bachelor’s degree (Mok 2009: 1). These percentages are not only discouraging, but are heartbreaking. More research needs to be conducted in order to find out how we can make the dreams of higher education come true for those 70 percent of foster youth who wish to go to college. Furthermore, child welfare services, practices, and policies need to be revised so these youth have the preparation they need to become successful college students.

Taking this into consideration, I am seeking to answer the following research question:

*How have former foster youth currently enrolled in college been prepared and challenged on their path to higher education?*

Mok (2009) claims in 2006 there were only two UC campuses that offered special programs for former foster youth. By 2009, eight more campuses created programs to help these disadvantaged youth. Today, more and more college campuses nationwide have implemented programs dedicated to help former foster youth succeed in higher education. These programs offer former foster youth financial assistance, year round housing, counseling, academic advising, and many other forms of assistance. Although there are many different programs designed to help former foster youth through college, the present research will focus on the impact of the Guardian Scholars Program at Sacramento State University.
The Guardian Scholars Program is an inclusive program that offers participants a wide range of assistance and supports them in their struggles to obtain a college degree. In particular Guardian Scholars students receive a financial package that offers them a variety of grants and scholarships, priority housing, academic advising, career counseling, mentoring and employment services, personal and emotional guidance and counseling, and many other services such as child care and transportation. There are over thirty colleges that have created a Guardian Scholars Program on their campuses. Throughout this research, the “Guardian Scholars Program” will refer specifically to the Guardian Scholars Program at California State University, Sacramento. Therefore, this research will not only discuss the ways foster care has prepared and challenged foster youth in their pursuit of higher education, but will also look at the ways the Guardian Scholars Program influences these student’s abilities to be academically successful.

Theory

In order to understand the supports and barriers faced by foster youth, this paper will take a bioecological systems approach. The bioecological systems theory was created by social psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner and was constantly being revised and developed up until his death in 2005 (Tudge et al. 2009: 199). This theory stresses the significance of understanding the relationships between human development and an individual’s immediate environment. In order to comprehend the effects surrounding environments have on human development, Bronfenbrenner designed a four layer model of nested ecological systems. These systems consist of: the microsystem, the
mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. This theory dissects how each ecological system directly affects human development. Using this theory, this paper seeks to describe how each system affects the development of foster youth and their ability to seek higher education. This research will reveal how each ecological system impacts foster children’s development. The bioecological systems theory will help illustrate how various environments positively or negatively influence foster children’s development and their goals of going to college. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to determine what prepares and challenges foster youth in the process of obtaining a college education.

The most developed form of the bioecological systems theory analyzes four main interrelated concepts that influence human development: process, person, context, and time (PPCT). 1. Process: Bronfenbrenner argues proximal processes, or “primary mechanisms” serve as a critical element in human development (Tudge et al. 2009: 4). As Tudge and his colleagues (2009) explain, “Human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment” (4). These interactions are known as “proximal processes” and are only effective if they occur on a regular basis over a long period of time.

2. Person: This theory realizes the importance of the individual and the personal characteristics people present to others when they are in social situations. Personal
characteristics are divided into three categories: demand, resource, and force characteristics. Demand characteristics are referred to as “personal stimulus” because they serve as an immediate stimulus from one person to another (Tudge et al. 2009: 5). Examples of demand characteristics include one’s age, skin color, hair color, gender, etc. Resource characteristics are not usually immediately identifiable, but can be inferred from demand characteristics. Resource characteristics are connected to both mental and emotional resources as well as social and material resources. Therefore, these characteristics may include skill, intelligence, and access to food, shelter, and loving parents. Force characteristics relate to differences in things like personality, inspiration, and determination. This theory reveals how, to varying degrees, individuals play active roles in changing their contexts.

3. **Context:** Bronfenbrenner identifies four nested systems within an individual’s context or environment. These systems are the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem (Tudge et al. 2009: 6). These systems are explained further below.

4. **Time:** The last component of the PPCT model is time which is also referred to as the chronosystem. The chronosystem is “referred to the fact that developmental processes are likely to vary according to the specific historical events that are occurring as the developing individuals are at one age or the other” (Tudge et al. 2009: 6). Time is significant due to the fact all features of the PPCT model can be understood by both consistency and change. Research using Bronfenbrenner’s theory must incorporate all
aspects of the PPCT model in order to be accurate. Using the bioecological systems framework, this study shows how proximal processes, personal characteristics, various environments, and time all impacted the developments of the research subjects and the academic paths they crossed in their route to higher education.

In 2012 approximately 23,000 foster youth age out of the system without emotional or financial support (AFCARS). These young adults are forced to live on their own and are faced with many other challenging situations. Compared to their counterparts who grew up with their biological parents, former foster youth are less likely to find a job, a place to live, or go to college. The purpose of this research is to explore the social relationships, foster care environments, academic resources, personal motivations, and any other factors available to foster youth in preparation for their transition into adulthood and higher education.

Bioecology is a new field that studies the interactions plants and animals have with themselves and with their environments (White and Klein 2008: 260). This theory argues one’s development is strongly influenced by the ecosystem they are exposed to. This theory suggests there are five levels of an ecosystem: 1. Microsystem, 2. Mesosystem, 3. Exosystem, 4. Macrosystem, and 5. Chronosystem. Figure 1 illustrates the bioecological systems theory and how the five levels influence human development.
Figure 1: Bioecological Systems Theory

- Macrosystem
  - Social Attitudes
  - Religious Beliefs
  - Basic Ideologies
    - Culture

- Exosystem
  - Legal Services
  - Financial Services
  - Health Services
  - Welfare Services

- Mesosystem
  - Interactions/
    Interconnections
    between two or more
    Microsystems

- Microsystem
  - Family
  - Friends
  - Neighborhoods
  - School

The Individual

- Significant Life Events
- Historical Circumstances
- Important Life Events
The microsystem refers to the social interactions one has within their most immediate social settings. The microsystem includes one’s home, school, family, peer group, etc. It is where the individual spends the most time interacting with people closest to him or her such as parents, siblings, teachers, best friends, etc. The mesosystem involves the connections or interrelations between two or more microsystems. It is how multiple or simultaneous interactions with people closest to the child affect the individual’s development. For example, the effects of parental visitation on a child in foster care might lead to emotional or behavioral problems in a child. The exosystem consists of systems that indirectly affect one’s microsystem and/or mesosystem but do not directly affect the individual. For instance, how particular social services or laws indirectly impact foster youth. This might include financial aid services, family planning services, availability to counseling, etc. The macrosystem is a broader context that impacts groups of people. It consists of the cultural contexts the individual is exposed to, including their race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, values, cultures, beliefs, etc. Lastly, and most recently incorporated into this theory, the chronosystem encompasses the patterns, events, and life transitions such as experiences and significant occasions in one’s life. Examples of the chronosystem might include the impact of the death of a family member, entering or exiting foster care, or becoming a college student. In order to answer the primary research question, How have former foster youth been prepared and challenged on their path to higher education?, this study will attempt to determine how these five ecological systems have supported and challenged Guardian Scholars’ success in college.
In previous research, Whitling and Lee (2003) also use an ecological framework in combination with a social constructionist perspective to conduct semi-structured interviews and to comprehend foster children’s stories of their experience growing up in the foster care system. Using a qualitative ethnographic research method, Whitling and Lee were able to achieve the goal of their study by allowing twenty-three pre-adolescents currently in foster care to tell their autobiographical stories. Four key “domains” appear from the data collected: (1) culture and ecology, (2) experiences with biological and foster families, (3) characteristics and emotions of foster children, and (4) the children’s stories from the past into the future (Whitling and Lee 2003: 291). There is a desperate need for “empathic intervention” and for practitioners to communicate with and inform foster children of the reasons for their placement (Whitling and Lee 2003: 292). Taking an ecological approach combined with communication, allows people to fully understand the dynamics of foster care and the lives of foster youth. Many foster parents, biological parents, and child welfare workers believe they know what is best for foster children; however, it is important to hear the children’s voices as well. There is strong need for better communication between foster youth and the adults who ultimately decide their future. Better communication will allow youth to have a say in their future and will better prepare them for difficulties they will face later in life after foster care. Within the foster care system especially, as suggested by Whitling and Lee (2003), communication coupled with taking an ecological systems approach is extremely important because children do not always have the ability to speak and make important decisions for themselves.
It is crucial for foster youth to be heard and to use an ecological framework in understanding and assessing the dynamics of their lives. Using an ecological theory enables teachers, counselors, child welfare workers, and researchers to not only learn about the individual foster child, but also all of the people, places, and things affecting his or her development. Similarly, the present study is based on in-depth interviews with former foster youth currently attending a four year university. Taking an ecological approach, the researcher allows for these students’ voices to be heard in order to evaluate how foster care has both prepared and challenged their progression into college life.

*Research Questions*

There are five primary research questions for this study. First, (Question 1) how has the Microsystems foster youth were exposed to positively and negatively influenced the academic success of Guardian Scholars? Second, (Question 2) have relationships with others in their Mesosystems positively or negatively impacted Guardian Scholars’ paths to academic success? Third, (Question 3) have connections with their Exosystems positively or negatively influenced former foster youths’ abilities to become academically successful? Fourth, (Question 4) how have various Macrosystems positively or negatively affected Guardian Scholars’ successes in higher education? Lastly (Question 5), how have the circumstances and patterns in former foster youths’ Chronosystems both positively and negatively influenced Guardian Scholars opportunities for success in college?
In order to answer these research questions, in-depth interviews with ten members of the Guardian Scholars program were conducted. The interviews attempted to answer the following questions: How have social relationships with their biological parents, foster parents, siblings, teachers, etc. prepared and challenged them in achieving academic success? How have various private and public environments prepared or challenged them (such as placement settings, types of schools they attended, etc.) for the experiences of college? What other resources were available or not available to them as they transitioned into the realm of higher education (including counseling or financial aid/support)? Furthermore, how has their participation in Guardian Scholars been supportive or challenging? See Appendix C for the interview questions.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this research is to understand the ways former foster youth are prepared and challenged for college in order to increase their opportunities for success in academia. In-depth interviews are the best method for this research because it allows people to express, justify, rationalize, and explain their personal viewpoints and opinions about the child welfare system and their experiences in it, as well as any other feelings they have about education and their paths to success. The lack of preparation and support given to foster youth are revealed ultimately putting them at a disadvantage when they apply for and first enter the world of higher education. It is crucial to shed light on ways to overcome these academic challenges and show other foster youth that going to college is possible. Additionally, this research is intended to find ways to enhance academic
resources as well as job training skills so former foster youth are given equal opportunities for success. Better preparation, the availability of financial and academic resources, and the maintenance of positive social relationships, will decrease the amount of high school and college drop-out rates among former foster youth. This will also increase their chances of being successful college students and members of society.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Previous research on foster children has tended to explore emotional and behavioral problems developed by foster youth and has paid less attention to the problems existing within the system that influence foster care experiences. It is important to understand the lack of preparation for the transition into independent living is a result of both developmental problems of the youth and the lack of resources provided by the system. The following literature review discusses the negative outcomes for foster youth and the negative effects of the foster care system.

**Microsystems**

The first part of the literature review touches on aspects of the microsystem. The microsystems are the most direct and immediate interactions, relationships, and settings in a person’s life. It involves the interactions and relationships one has with the people and places closest to the individual, such as one’s closest family members including parents and siblings, friends, teachers, home settings, etc. The microsystem is the most important system of one’s human development. The following part of the literature review will discuss the importance of supportive microsystems and stable and nurturing home environments, personal perceptions of foster care, network disruptions and psychological distress, and family characteristics.

Past studies have shown the negative experiences taken place before the child enters foster care can result in both negative short term and long term outcomes. Harden
(2004) found the majority of foster youth have been exposed to both physical and emotional maltreatment, violence, poverty, family instability, and many other risk factors that often lead to decreased physical and mental health, academic achievement, and cognitive development. Exposure to these risk factors also typically leads to attachment disorders which can damage a child’s overall social skills. By analyzing existing research, primarily from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well Being (NSCAW), Harden (2004: 36-37) discovered foster children experience more detrimental developmental outcomes compared to children not living in foster care. These outcomes, however, may not be due entirely to the actual foster care experience, but may also be due to the maltreatment these children are exposed to before they enter foster care (Harden 2004: 37).

Although developmental problems usually arise from maltreatment before entering foster care, the placement type and the stability of placement also influence developmental outcomes (Harden 2004). This suggests it is essential for a child to be placed somewhere suitable for their needs in order to promote healthy development. According to ecology theory, it is crucial for the child welfare system to provide foster youth with “supportive Microsystems” (Harden 2004: 39). Harden (2004) proposed a “twofold strategy” to increase positive development for foster youth (40). This strategy entails an enhancement of both policy and practice to meet foster children’s’ needs for healthy development and to encourage family stability. Harden concluded a “stable, nurturing family environment” can protect foster youth from the negative effects of previous experiences (2004: 44). She also stressed the dire need for the child welfare
system to secure stable and safe environments for foster children, which can be attained by providing support and training to foster parents, generating a “model of care” to increase positive development, and establishing services that meet both child and family needs (Harden 2004: 44). This research showed a safe, stable, and loving environment can protect foster youth from previous negative life experiences and can promote healthy development. If every child grew up in this kind of environment, they would have fewer developmental problems, be better prepared for academic challenges, and increase their chances of performing successfully in school.

Despite the positive intentions of foster care, research reveals foster care can also negatively affect a child’s well-being. In her study, Kools (1997) used dimensional analysis to examine adolescent foster youth’s perceptions of the impact long-term foster care has had on their lives. The sample consisted of seventeen teenagers in foster care between the ages of fifteen to nineteen years old. Kools conducted in-depth interviews with foster youth, observations in group-home settings, and analyzed a number of case records. She determined foster care negatively impacts the development of identity. A number of factors lead to the negative impact of identity development experienced by foster youth. The author found the structure of group-home foster care, the youths’ lowered status, the negative stereotype for foster children, and the impact of both interpersonal relationships and independence all lead to “devaluation of the adolescent’s self by others” (Kools 1997: 270). Kools includes recommendations for medical practice and program enhancements which could improve the development of adolescents in foster care.
Emotional problems can have devastating effects on people which make it nearly impossible to live normal, healthy lives in both childhood and adulthood. Perry (2006) studied psychological distress as a negative outcome among foster youth. Perry examined the effects that different levels of network disruption have on the psychological distress of foster youth. There are different types of foster care placement that create different levels of network disruption. Perry used data from telephone surveys with adolescents from the Midwest. In examining relationships of adolescents in foster care compared to the general population, the author found a variety of influential relationship factors. These include levels of network disruption, psychological distress, strength of bonds within the biological family, foster care, and social networks, and other factors (Perry 2006: 371). Perry concluded the power and structure of the network may clarify the variations of distress that come from network disruption. He also determined the higher the levels of network disruption, the weaker the network; thus, continuing and reoccurring network disruption can be extremely problematic. The author suggested new networks that are strong and supportive can replace old networks by protecting adolescents from psychological distress and other negative outcomes. Positive social networks are paramount to a child’s emotional well-being and development. It is important for a child to engage in positive social relationships with others in his or her environment in order to become a happy and successful adult. Network disruption and psychological distress can also negatively affect a student’s education. If foster youth are frequently distressed and lack positive support networks, it will make it difficult to perform well in school and make it nearly impossible to ever continue on to college.
Low levels of network disruption coupled with strong support networks are crucial for successfully transitioning out of foster care and becoming high school graduates, college students, and someday successful members of society.

Although negative outcomes can stem from experiences before entering foster care, other researchers have sought to examine the negative outcomes triggered by experiences within foster care. For example, Orme and Buehler (2001) conducted a review of studies focused on family factors leading to behavioral and emotional problems experienced within foster care. The researchers reviewed thirty-four studies; seventeen were on fewer than fifty-three families while twenty-three studies incorporated fewer than one hundred families. Orme and Buehler (2001: 12) found the foster family characteristics that influence their foster child or children’s well-being include parenting quality, the quality of the home environment, the function of the family, marital functioning, family demographics, child temperament, the mental health status of parents, and support. The authors also found a link between foster family characteristics and behavioral and emotional problems of foster youth. The lack of information on the topic makes it impossible to accurately report the connection. Lastly, the authors discovered contrasts between different foster care environments; however, due to the lack of research on this topic it is difficult to study various environments. Future research is needed in order to better understand the dynamics of the foster family to enhance the lives of foster children and both their biological and foster parents. This study revealed a number of different factors that influence a foster child’s well-being. It is important for foster youth to be exposed to positive family characteristics and environments in order to limit
the development of behavioral and emotional problems. Behavioral and emotional problems in foster youth serve as educational barriers and will make it more difficult for them to do well in school.

The microsystem involves the people, interactions, and other elements that most directly impact a person’s human development. It is important for a child to be exposed to positive microsystems in order to promote healthy development. The more network disruptions, psychological distress, poor family characteristics, unstable family environments, etc., the more difficult it will be for foster youth to perform well academically. The worse they perform in school, the harder it will be for them to make it to college and obtain a college education. A student’s microsystem is crucial to his or her success in higher education. Although the students in the present study may have experienced network disruption or unstable environments, suffered from distress, or been exposed to poor family characteristics, they were all fortunate enough to have at least one, if not multiple, supportive microsystem. They were able to overcome the negative aspects of their microsystems and still perform well in school and pursuit higher education.

Mesosystems

The mesosystem is the interconnections or linkages between one or more microsystems. For example, one’s mesosystem might be the connections between one’s biological family and foster family. Another example could include the relations between one’s parents and teachers. Research relevant to this area has examined parental
visitation and conflict allegiances between biological and foster families as well as parental visitation and levels of familial attachment.

When a child enters foster care, their biological parents usually have lost their rights to custody of their child, but their parental rights are not always terminated. Therefore, it is not uncommon for children to receive parental visitation during their time in foster care. Leathers (2003) studied behavioral problems of foster children in relation to parental visiting and conflict between allegiances to biological parents and to foster families. Leathers (2003) questioned the relationships between parental visits, emotional and behavioral problems, allegiances to both biological and foster care parents, and loyalty conflict (Leathers 2003: 55). In answering these questions, the researcher took a random sample of 199 adolescents twelve to thirteen years old who had been in foster care (with non-relatives) between one to eight years. Leathers (2007: 55) tested three hypotheses. The first hypothesis claimed it is difficult for children to maintain good relationships with both their biological parents and their foster parents. The second hypothesis was how biological parental visitation indirectly leads to loyalty conflict with the child’s foster parents. Lastly, Leathers (2007) hypothesized loyalty conflict is connected to emotional and behavioral problems in foster youth. Data was collected from foster parents, caseworkers, and datasets from the state child welfare agency. The research revealed a high level of allegiance to both biological families and foster families was correlated with loyalty conflict. Moreover, the association between parental visiting, allegiance to biological families, and loyalty conflict is significant. Also, the relationship between loyalty conflict and emotional and behavioral problems is significant. Leathers
(2007) found the amount of parental visiting is not directly correlated to behavioral and emotional problems in foster youth, however, Leathers did find parental visitation made it harder for children to maintain good relationships with both their biological and foster parents. The author concluded youth who experienced higher levels of loyalty conflict developed more behavioral and emotional problems. She also suggests loyalty conflict itself might create a form of distress which can also create negative long term outcomes for foster children. In the present study, eight out of the ten participants claimed they maintained good relationships with both their biological and foster families. However, the vast majority of those eight did not have consistent or frequent contact with their biological parents. The other two participants did not have any contact with their biological parents. This implies the former foster youth in this research did not experience large amounts of loyalty conflict or distress which positively influenced their academic successes.

While Leathers claimed parental visitation led to loyalty conflict and ultimately emotional and developmental problems, other researchers argued parental visitation actually has a positive effect on children. McWey and Mullis (2004) study the quality of attachment is influenced by supervised parental visitation. This research is based on observations of parent-child interaction that took place in supervised visitations with the child’s biological mother. The sample consisted of 123 foster children ranging from eight months to almost six years of age (McWey and Mullis 2004: 296). The researchers found children who have more regular and consistent visitations with their biological mothers have stronger attachments compared to children who do not see their biological
parents as often. These results, however, are only applicable to children who plan to eventually return to live with their biological parents. This study also revealed increased levels of attachment in children who have lived in fewer foster homes. Additionally, children with lower levels of attachment may experience “insecure attachment behaviors” which often leads to more placements (McWey and Mullis 2004: 297-298). Foster children with higher degrees of attachment are less likely to be diagnosed “developmentally delayed” and are less likely to be prescribed psychiatric medication (McWey and Mullis: 2004: 298). The results showed if foster children are able to maintain a healthy and positive relationship with their biological parents after they enter foster care they have a higher chance of adapting to their placement. Therefore, this research suggested regular supervised visitations are crucial to the well-being of foster children and enable them to achieve high levels of attachment. This study, compared to Leathers’ study, revealed supervised visitation is vital for enhancing a child’s well-being implying children should receive parental visitation as long as it does not create loyalty conflict. Countering Leathers’ study, McWey and Mullis found parental visitations actually lead to higher levels of attachment and is linked to being more developmentally developed. Therefore, arguing against Leathers’ claims, this research suggests parental visitation is better for a foster youth’s well-being and will positively affect their academic performances as well as their ability to achieve a college education.

It is found entering foster care before or during high school can lead to behavioral problems, depression, and psychological issues that all negatively affect students’ academic performance and abilities. Poor academic performance leads not only to an
education gap but an opportunity gap as well. Snodgrass (2012) found foster youth are academically unprepared. She clarified “‘unprepared’ means foster students may have no stability with their birth families, a lack of schooling due to multiple placements, low levels of self-efficacy, and confused self-identity” (Snodgrass 2012: 2). These barriers lead to a lack of academic preparation. Snodgrass (2012: 3) determined foster students perform about six months behind their peers in school. Moreover, Snodgrass (2012) reported depending on the state, foster youth only have a 30-50 percent high school graduation rate compared to 70 percent nationwide. The multiple risk factors caused by familial separation, multiple placements, and a confused self-identity, create academic setbacks for graduating high school and going on to college. Moreover, this report revealed foster youth are not only unprepared for academic challenges, but their hardships are often ignored and students are forced to deal with these challenges by themselves lacking the knowledge to do well and succeed. Snodgrass shed light on the barriers foster youth face and recommended “best practices” tools in order to promote academic success within the foster care community.

The mesosystem encompasses the connections or linkages between two or more Microsystems. In this literature review, it involved the connections between one’s family or home life and one’s school or academic performance. The present study also reveals how students’ mesosystems have influenced their academic success. Thus, the various connections students have with their parents, siblings, teachers, counselors, and friends have both positively and negatively impacted their academic life.
Exosystems

The exosystem involves the agencies, settings, structures, systems, etc. that indirectly influence a person and his or her development. The exosystem will indirectly affect one’s microsystem and mesosystem, but has no direct impact on the individual person. This part of the literature review touches on elements of foster youth’s exosystem including child welfare agencies, the foster care system, the education system, independent living structures, laws and legal services, and other aspects that work simultaneously to indirectly impact foster youth and their development into college students.

True, for many children foster care provides a better and safer environment than the environment provided by their biological parents; however, as previously discussed, foster care does not always promote healthy childhood development. Doyle (2007) also conducted research on the effects of foster care on children. Doyle wanted to find out if abused children benefit from entering the foster care system or if they were better off remaining in their abusive homes. Doyle discussed the effects foster care has on long-term outcomes of children in the system. Placement decided by child protection officers is the main variable used to discover the causal effects foster care has on children. He found the effects of foster care lead to negative outcomes. Additionally, Doyle concluded child protection investigators have an influence on long term outcomes of foster youth due to their placement tendencies. Investigators who have higher removal rates negatively affect the children they are assigned to. These children have higher rates
of teenage pregnancy, more delinquency, and lower incomes. The results revealed children on the “margin of placement” are less likely to be positively affected by foster care placement and suggest they are more likely to experience better outcomes if they remain living with their biological parents. This study suggested for some children, it would be better for them to remain in abusive homes rather than in foster care. Doyle found foster youth exhibit more negative long term life outcomes compared to youth who remained living in abusive homes with their biological families. Youth who have higher rates of teenage pregnancy, delinquency, and lower socio-economic status are less likely to go to college and pursue higher education. Therefore, Doyle showed the foster care’s negative effects on academic outcomes and youths’ abilities to become college students.

Calix’s (2009) work also revealed negative influences of foster care on educational outcomes. In order to conduct her research, Calix used child welfare data coupled with educational data to examine the effects foster care has on a student’s academic achievement. Specifically, she analyzed math test scores from four cohorts in North Carolina. She found on average youth who experienced time in foster care scored lower on the math test and were less likely to pass the test compared to their peers. Moreover, the study showed characteristics related to the foster care experience including race, number of placements, age, and time spent in foster care are all associated with negative educational outcomes for foster youth. Therefore, compared to their classmates, many foster youth suffer from poor academic achievement. If foster youth consistently perform lower academically than their peers, the achievement gap will continue to widen and their ability to pursue higher education will continue to falter.
Previous research suggested foster youth are not given equal opportunities for academic success compared to other students. In his article, “Foster Children Need More Help After They Reach the Age of Eighteen,” Vacca (2008) reviewed a plethora of research revealing the injustices faced by foster youth. He discovered most foster youth are unfamiliar with advanced placement classes, extracurricular sports or clubs, or other special programs. Vacca (2008) determined, “They are one of the most educationally vulnerable populations in our schools” (p. 487). Additionally, many of these students lack proper support networks. Vacca found three main reasons why foster youth perform lower in school than their peers. First, it is common for foster youth to move frequently from one placement to the next which forces them to attend several different schools. This makes it difficult to maintain friendship and build relationships with school counselors and teachers. This also interferes with their academic performances. According to academic achievement tests in Washington, foster youth scored fifteen to twenty percentile points below other students in their grade level (2008). A second finding is many foster youth lack educated foster parents or support networks who are able to help them with their school work. Lastly, teacher’s lack of knowledge, or lack of support, for foster youths’ backgrounds hinder students’ performances in schools. Many teachers are unaware of their student’s home situations and do not offer adequate help and assistance. If foster youth do not perform as well as their peers in primary school, they will have a harder time competing for college admittance. Therefore, although students may have equal desire to go to college, foster youth do not have equal ability levels to compete for higher education compared to their non-foster youth counterparts.
The participants in the present study can be seen as a unique sub-population of foster youth who overcame the statistics and academically surpassed the majority of other foster youth. They were fortunate to receive personal, financial, and educational support to help them become successful college students.

At the college level, Day and her colleagues (2011) conducted a study at Michigan State University and used administrative data to determine if former foster youth had higher drop-out rates from a four-year university compared to first generation, low income students who had never experienced foster care. Both study groups came from similar socio-economic backgrounds. Logistic regression models showed 21% of former foster youth had dropped out of college before the end of their first year compared to 13% of the non-foster care group. White students who had previously been in foster care were also more likely to drop out than the other white students in the study. Females who had previously been in foster care were significantly more likely to drop out compared to the other females in the study who had never been in foster care, however, these between group differences were not seen for men. Some students lasted longer than one year in college, but eventually dropped out. The research reported over a third of the students in the foster care group dropped out of college before they completed their degree compared to 18% in the non-foster care group. In general, despite race and gender, former foster youth were more likely to drop out of college than the first generation, low-income students who never experienced foster care. This study showed educational inequalities follow former foster youth not only in primary school, but
throughout college as well. This research showed foster care negatively impacts former foster youth’s higher education.

Better communication within the foster care system and child welfare agencies would enhance the well-being of the children who live within it and their families. Bass et al. (2004) found the foster care system currently suffers from lack of communication and coordination among agencies as well as a lack of funds and morale, resulting in insufficient services and support needed by children and families within foster care. This article examined the challenges of the child welfare system and poses recommendations within policy and practice that would improve the experiences of foster care both for children and families. The authors recommended health assessments, quantitative measures of well-being, specialized services, cultural competency, services for birth families, services for foster families, support to preserve permanency, enhanced accountability, flexible financing, coordination of services, and transformation of frontline practices (Bass et al. 2004). The article concluded by emphasizing the need for better interaction, communication, and coordination among the agencies involved in the child welfare system in order for foster children to receive the support they deserve. Improvements to the child welfare system would enhance academic opportunities for foster youth and increase their chances of obtaining higher education.

Research showed many problems exist within the foster care system and there is a strong need for change. Fortunately, several researchers have conducted research in order to find ways to improve the lives of foster youth. For example, Leon and her
colleagues (2008) believed the incorporation of an ecological systems theory into the child welfare system would be one step towards making improvements for foster care. Using Florida as a case study, Leon et al. (2008) showed the difficulties child welfare workers face preventing them from using an ecological approach at work. In 2003, Florida had one of the highest child victimization rates in the country. The same year, Florida reported approximately 250,000 cases of abuse and neglect (2008: 153). The child welfare system in Florida has been criticized for poorly tracking children in foster care. Florida’s Department of Children and Families (CDF) suffers from poor salaries, a surplus of cases, and employee exhaustion. The child welfare system in Florida is also burdened with many organizational problems. Child welfare workers are often blamed for these organizational problems. For example, many were charged with inaccurate or lack of documentation, losing records and files, lying about home visits or not performing as many home visits as they should, and lack of training. Other problems include large caseloads and a deficient computer tracking system. According to the National Association of Workers, each worker overlooked approximately 24-31 cases. Some workers reported having up to 100 cases (2008: 154). These large caseloads made it difficult to sufficiently track children in the system. The CDF’s computer tracking system, HomeSafe.net, also created monitoring problems. This system did not work with other computer systems in different states. Therefore, if a child moves to another state, Florida is unable to keep an accurate account of the child and his or her ecological systems.
These researchers suggested implementing an ecological framework to improve the child welfare system. Leon and her associates stressed the need to not only understand each child workers are assigned to, but their ecological contexts as well. Workers need to focus on child maltreatment and the functionality of each family. Taking an ecological approach would allow workers to more efficiently assess and treat children suffering from abuse and neglect. The authors concluded with a list of recommendations for child welfare workers. Although Florida may be an extreme example, this article revealed the complexities and the insufficiencies of the child welfare system. If the child welfare system is suffering, so are the children within it. Implementing an ecological framework would improve the child welfare system and benefit foster youth as well as their educational outcomes.

Although adolescence would be the most crucial time for development and influencing one’s ability to go to college, it would be wrong to ignore the stages of early adulthood and how it impacts one’s path to higher education. Morris (2007) researched foster youths’ transitions into independent living and suggested the need for better preparation. The objective of her research was to recognize the characteristics that lead to the lack of preparation and self-sufficiency required for foster care youth (FCY) to enter the adult world and to successfully live independently. Using grounded theory as the basis of the study, Morris conducted both structured and unstructured interviews with sixteen adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five currently living in San Diego County who had “aged out” of the foster care system. The interviews were audio-taped and lasted on average between 40-90 minutes (Morris 2007). During the interviews,
Morris observed both verbal and non-verbal behavior using a symbolic interactionist perspective. Morris used comparative analysis to code and label themes and relationships that came from responses to open-ended questions. Demographic information was coded by using SPSS. Five themes emerged from the research: (1) “It’s From My Past,” (2) “No Place to Call Home,” (3) “Broken Promises,” (4) “The System Failed Us,” (5) and “Ideas for Change” (2007: 422-426). This study found there is a lack of preparation offered to foster youth that would help them in the transition into independent living.

Morris declared a strong need to better supervise and assess services that provide independent living skills. If former foster youth are not prepared for independent living, they will not be prepared for the challenges of higher education. Students need to be prepared for the challenges of adulthood so they can become successful college students.

Once foster youth age out of the system, many are forced to take on the challenges of adulthood on their own, sometimes overnight. In her article, “Aging Out of Foster Care: Toward a Universal Safety Net for Former Foster Care Youth,” Atkinson (2008) called for a universal safety net for former foster youth offering support and services during the transition from foster care into independent living. She suggested these services be available until the individual is twenty-four years old despite being able to meet current state requirements. A universal safety net would not discriminate; instead it would be available to any former foster youth who needed it. Furthermore, it would allow for errors and still be accessible to those who have made mistakes or poor choices along the way. This program would help former foster youth with financial planning and housing support including assistance with finding and sustaining employment, finding
housing, and training in money management. It would also offer educational opportunities. At both the state and federal level, the government would offer financial assistance to inspiring foster youth seeking the path of higher education. If former foster youth are uninterested in obtaining a college degree, they should be encouraged to seek vocational school and job training programs so they learn how to find and maintain employment. Atkinson called for more inclusive and intense job training programs. Atkinson also believed this safety net should extend court jurisdiction promoting autonomy past the age of eighteen. Lastly, former foster youth need to have their own voice and take on their own responsibility. Each person has their own unique interests and needs that need to be tended to. However, Atkinson encouraged these young adults to take an active role in establishing their futures. In a sense, the current system abandons foster youth once they age out of the system leaving them without any support as they attempt to transition into adults and college freshman. If this universal safety net was implemented, foster youth would be better prepared for the challenges they will face on a daily basis. It would also increase their opportunities to gain a college education because they would be prepared to do so. This would alleviate the stress and difficulties of independent living and would promote academic success.

This literature review discussed the negative outcomes experienced before a child enters foster care as well as the negative effects the foster care system itself has on foster children. Additionally, several articles offered suggestions for improving the foster care system in order to better the lives of disadvantaged foster youth. Unfortunately, there is limited research that analyzed the amount of preparation foster youth receive for the
transition into higher education. It is necessary to understand the ways in which foster youth are prepared, or not prepared, for college in order to offer them an equal opportunity for success in the adult world.

Another element of the exosystem that indirectly affects foster youth are various acts and laws. For example, in his article Nixon discussed the impact of the Multiethnic Placement Act (2008). The report suggested the Multiethnic Placement Act be revised to allow agencies the ability to consider race and ethnicity pairing parents with foster children. The Multiethnic Placement Act, passed in 1994, takes a colorblind approach and prohibits agencies from delaying or denying adoptive or foster placements due to either a child’s or parent’s race, skin color, or ethnicity. Additionally the law prohibits denying foster or adoptive parents’ approval for adoption based on race or national origin. Lastly, the law requires agencies to promote racial and ethnic diversity among foster and adoptive parents. The report found minority children who are adopted by white parents deal with more challenges than their white adopted counterparts.

The report showed non-white children adopted by an all-white family often experience social and psychological problems as well as many other problems as they try to cope with being seen as different. Since the Act was passed, there has been an increase in the number of transracial adoptions. Data from the Department of Health and Human Services showed the amount of African American children adopted by white parents has gone up every year since 1998. Moreover, the passing of this law has led to a decrease in the amount of time spent by minority children in foster care as they are
waiting to be adopted. Therefore, it would seem the Multiethnic Placement law has positive short term outcomes by increasing the amount of adoptions of minority children, but also has negative long term outcomes by not preparing families for the racial issues they might face as the child attempts to assimilate to its new environment. The Multiethnic Placement Act is just one example of how laws can indirectly affect foster youth within the child welfare system. The exosystem is very broad and wide ranging. It is all the existing systems, structures, laws, etc. that indirectly affect a person and his or her development. This literature review touched on a few of the elements of foster youth’s exosystem that exist to indirectly impact their development. In the present study, many students spoke of how their exosystems have indirectly impacted their access to and success in college.

**Macrosystems**

The outermost layer in the ecological systems theory is the macrosystem. The macrosystem refers to the cultural perspectives, environments, and backgrounds the individual is exposed to. This might include the individual’s ethnicity, socio-economic status, religious beliefs, and so forth. Previous studies imply how race and socio-economic status impact foster youth and their opportunities for higher education.

Jennings (2006) conducted a qualitative analysis of transracial adoption and takes an in-depth look at the problems associated with this law. In order to conduct her research, Jennings observed an infertility support group for approximately one year supplemented with in-depth interviews. Jennings found race thinking influenced the
choice to adopt transracially. She also discovered the choice to adopt transracially was shaped by certain ethnic and racial preferences. Last, Jennings determined race influenced how women situated themselves to their minority adopted or potentially adopted minority child. Jennings concluded the majority of the women who adopted a biracial child took a colorblind approach to the situation, while only a small few had an accurate understanding of race relations. Although the colorblind approach appears to be an anti-racist approach to race relations, in reality it is not. Taking a colorblind approach actually claims white superiority as normative and simply ignores racial differences.

With the current laws in place, minority children will continue to be the majority in the child welfare system and will be at a disadvantage compared to their white counterparts. Moreover, as the previous research in this literature review has shown, foster youth have higher rates of delinquency, teenage pregnancy, and higher school drop-out rates compared to their non-foster youth peers. This suggests with higher rates of minority children in foster care, they are less likely to do well for themselves than all other groups. The current laws enforce inferiority among minorities and foster youth. Political changes need to be implemented so minority foster youth have a fair chance of both educational and occupational success.

Supplementing the previous finding, Snodgrass also implied there is a disproportionate amount of minority children in the foster care community, primarily African Americans and Alaskan Native Americans. This can lead to feelings of a double minority status identity which further promotes challenges in school. According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau and the Population Reference Bureau, African American
children made up 41 percent of the foster youth in the United States while African American children only account for 15 percent of all children in the United States. African Americans, especially, are overrepresented in the foster care community and are forced to deal with more barriers than their counterparts. Statistics show an African American student is suspended from school every seven seconds. Furthermore, these same statistics revealed an African American student drops out of school every 49 seconds of the school day. Taking this into consideration, one can understand the educational risks African American foster youth are faced with.

Past research showed there are racial disparities in life outcomes among former foster youth. Therefore, this further reveals the importance of taking race into consideration within the child welfare system. In their research, Harris et al. (2009) examined a sub-sample from the Casey Foster Care Alumni Study that included 21.9% African Americans and 78.1% white adult foster care alumni. The researchers conducted bivariate analyses for education outcomes and income and employment outcomes. For education outcomes, there is a large difference between graduating high school with a diploma compared to a GED. African Americans completed high school with a rate of 84.1% compared to 86.5% of their white counterparts. However, the biggest difference is 69.8% percent of white completed high school with a diploma compared to only 60.6% of African Americans. Larger disparities were seen in the bivariate analyses of income and employment outcomes. More whites had income levels above the poverty line than African Americans. 80.5% of whites had an income level above the poverty line compared to 67.1% of African Americans. Furthermore, 31.9% percent of whites owned
a house or apartment compared to 15.9% of their fellow African American alumni (Harris et al. 2009). This study further supports the argument race needs to be addressed within the child welfare system so people of color can be given equal opportunities for success and fair treatment while in foster care and after they become foster care alumni. Foster youth, primarily minorities, are not given equal opportunities to receive a college education which limits their occupational and financial opportunities in life and hinders their financial potentials.

In addition to race, socio-economic status also affects an individual’s development. It has been found non-traditional family structures negatively affect both behavioral and cognitive outcomes in children. Since the majority of foster youth have experienced living in non-traditional settings such as single-parent households, kinships, and group-homes, they are at risk for developing behavioral and intellectual problems. By examining survey data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Carlson and Corcoran (2001) study the effects of family income, mother’s psychological functioning, and the quality of the home environment on children aged seven to ten years old. In particular, this research used four mechanisms—economic status, parental socialization, childhood stress, and maternal psychology to examine how family structure could impact child development. Carlson and Corcoran claimed children forced to live in poverty are faced with a lack of resources necessary for a healthy development including proper shelter, food, and other material resources. Family income also determines the neighborhoods children are raised in. Children from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to live in poor communities where exposure to negative social
interactions are more common. Likewise, economic stress can also lead to ineffective or poor parenting. In regards to socialization, a child’s home is the primary spot where socialization begins to take place. Therefore, the quality of the home and what takes place inside of it are key to a child’s development. A home filled with love, support, guidance, and ample learning spaces will promote healthy growth in children. Homes that do not provide this can negatively impact children by creating behavioral and cognitive outcomes. According to stress theory, changes in family structure or situations create stress among young children. This stress can cause children to distance themselves from the home and family involvement and might be more likely to be influenced negatively by their friends and peers. Previous research suggested greater family transitions create greater negative family outcomes for children compared to any other family structure. The last mechanism, maternal psychological well-being, also affected children’s behavior and over-all development. Children whose mothers have poor mental health often show signs of behavioral problems. This can be linked to poor parenting styles or even the exposure of negative attitudes about life and their kids.

The results to this study were quite striking. Carlson and Corcoran (2001: 789-790) found compared to children who grew up in a traditional family structure, a two-parent household, children raised in all other family structures showed lower levels of cognitive test scores and higher levels of behavioral problems. This research also revealed family income strongly predicts many behavioral and cognitive outcomes among children. Parental socialization also played a role in behavioral and cognitive outcomes. Children raised in “higher quality” homes showed less signs of behavioral
problems and higher test scores than other children (2001: 790). Surprisingly, stress did not appear to have any effect on children’s behavioral and cognitive outcomes. Lastly, maternal psychological well-being was only associated with behavioral outcomes and not cognitive outcomes. Children whose mothers suffered from depression or other psychological disorders showed more behavioral problems compared to their counterparts. Taking this study into consideration, foster youth are at risk for developing negative behavioral and cognitive outcomes. The majority of foster youth come from low socio-economic backgrounds. Most of them have not lived in “high” quality homes. Additionally, many of them have mothers who exhibit poor psychological well-being or some might not have any contact with their mother’s at all. Therefore, foster youth are very likely to develop poor behavioral and cognitive outcomes. These poor behavioral and cognitive outcomes make it difficult for foster youth to perform well in school and limit their opportunities to achieve a college education.

Taking these articles into consideration, it is clear how the macrosystem influences foster youths’ developments and their academic opportunities. Race and socio-economic status are both indicators for educational performance. Minority status and low socio-economic status are associated with poor educational outcomes. Therefore, foster youth are at a disadvantage compared to their non-foster youth counterparts. The majority of participants in the present study self-identified as minorities and over half came from low socio-economic backgrounds. Unfortunately, many elements of foster youth’s macrosystems put them at an academic disadvantage and negatively impact their opportunities for higher education.
The bioecological systems theory reveals how each sub system, the mico-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems, all affect foster youth’s human development. This literature review touched on each sub system and suggested how each element affects a foster youth’s development as well as their educational outcomes. For the majority of foster youth, the elements in each of their bioecological systems negatively affected their academic development and their opportunities to receive a college education. The current study examined how each ecological system has influenced participants’ academic developments and their pursuit of higher education. Although participants in this study were faced with many challenges, interviews explored how they were able to successfully reach a four year university.
Chapter 3

Methods, Data, and Measurement

Sample

The Guardian Scholars program is a program that supports former foster youth in their attempts to gain higher education at a university, community college, or trade school. In order to recruit participants, the researcher met with the Outreach Coordinator of the Guardian Scholars program to discuss the intent and purpose of the study. The Outreach Coordinator recruited Guardian Scholars members by individually asking people if they would be interested in participating in the study. Interested participants were contacted to set up dates and times for interviews. In order to be eligible for participation in this study, students must have spent at least one year in the child welfare system, must be enrolled in college at least half time, and must be at least eighteen years old. The resulting convenience sample consisted of a total of ten students.

All participation was completely voluntary and confidential. In the analysis, pseudonyms are used in place of participants’ real names. Before the interviews, each participant signed an informed consent form (Appendix A). After the consent form was collected, the interviewees were asked to fill out a seven-item survey form of basic background information such as their name, age, sex, race, occupation, etc. (Appendix B). After this was completed, the interview process started. The interviews consisted of thirty-three questions (Appendix C). The shortest interview lasted fifteen minutes while
the longest interview lasted fifty-four minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and detailed notes were taken.

Method

In-depth interviews are the best method for analyzing the research at hand. Interviews allow participants to tell their own stories and voice their own opinions. Research pertaining to foster youth and their education is lacking. Therefore, this study enables researchers to learn about former foster youth’s educational struggles and successes from their point of view. Interviews allow researchers to take on a different lens and try to see things from their interviewees’ perspectives.

In order to answer the main research question how have former foster youth been prepared and challenged on their path to higher education? In-depth interviews were conducted with ten former foster youth from the Guardian Scholars Program at California State University, Sacramento who were at least eighteen years old and currently enrolled in college. The interview questions were designed based on the bioecological systems theory. The questions were broken down to pertain to each nested system in the theory starting with micro-related questions moving into broader, macro level questions. The final set of questions asked students how the Guardian Scholars program itself had impacted their lives and their education. The interview questions were intended to find out how each system in the student’s life positively and/or negatively affected his or her development into becoming a college student.
After all data were collected, all ten interviews were transcribed and imported into Atlas.ti, a computer software program designed to organize and analyze qualitative data. The transcriptions of the interviews were reviewed and analyzed until the point of saturation. From the data, the researcher went line by line, phrase by phrase, and found a total of forty-two codes from the interview responses. A code is “most often a work or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, or evocative attribute for a portion of a language based or visual data” (Saldana 2008: 3). Some codes appeared more frequently than others. Key codes included: supporters, distractions, finding strength, positive experiences, negative experiences, and struggles. Some of the key codes were broken down further into sub codes or categories. For example, the code “supporters” was broken down further into “educational supporters,” “support from friends,” and “support from family.” “Positive experiences” were broken down to “positive experiences at home” and “positive experiences at school.” Another example is “personal struggles” and “educational struggles” for the code “struggles.” The most common code was “educational supporter” which was coded 108 times. This was followed by “educational resources” with a total of 53 and “personal motivation” with 50.

**Themes**

After the coding process was completed, the researcher developed themes that emerged from the codes. The researcher came up with four primary themes. The first theme was titled “Taking the Road towards Higher Education.” Despite the hardships
each student faced, every interviewee was accepted into the University and successfully adapted to college life. At the time of the interviews, all students were maintaining good academic standing, performing well, and were involved with extracurricular and campus activities. Taking this path has increased their chances of creating a better life for themselves. The second theme was “Educational Resources and Support Networks.” Each interviewee was a dedicated and successful college student, however, their access to education and ability to do well academically did not come easily. The students frequently spoke of the educational resources and multiple support networks they turned to on their journey through higher education. The third theme was “Finding Support and Strength.” This theme reviewed the ways students were able to find help, guidance, and other forms of support throughout their lives. It also included how students found strength to overcome the obstacles life threw at them. Lastly, “Personal Motivation and Self-Reliance” was the fourth and final theme that emerged from the data. Being a foster youth was not an easy way to spend time during childhood. Every student discussed the multiple struggles they faced throughout their development and how they were able to deal with such barriers and difficulties. Throughout the interviews students frequently spoke of what motivated them to do well and reasons why they desired to go to college. They also frequently spoke about having to rely on themselves to get the results they desired. These four themes are discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Four, the results section.
Chapter 4

Results

Ten active members of the Guardian Scholars program, four men and six women, were interviewed. Participants ranged from 20-24 years of age, with a mean age of 21.6 years old (Men 21.75 years and Women 21.5 years). Six participants, three men and three women, identified as African American, or Black. Two participants, one male and one female identified themselves as White. One female self-identified as Hispanic or Mexican. And one female did not know her racial/ethnic identity. Five (50%) of the former foster youth had been placed in kinship settings either with grandparents, aunts, uncles, or older siblings. The other five participants were placed with foster families. Out of those latter five, one African American male had just one foster family while the remaining four experienced multiple placement settings. Only one participant, a white male, spoke of living in a group home setting. Six students reported being in long term foster care while three reported being in short term foster care. One student did not mention the duration of his foster care experience. Two of the students in short term foster care were in kinship placements while the other student who experienced short term foster care was adopted by a non-biological foster mother while he was in high school. At the time of the interview every participant claimed they had a good relationship with at least one of their foster families. All participants were unmarried, although some reported having a girlfriend or boyfriend. Only one interviewee, an African American male, had children. Additionally, all but one participant, a White
male, enrolled in college directly after graduating high school. Table 1 lists demographic traits, descriptions of foster care placements, and family relationships.

Table 1: Demographic Traits, Descriptions of Foster Care Placements, and Family Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Placement Setting</th>
<th>Time in Foster Care</th>
<th>Relationship with Biological Family</th>
<th>Relationship with Foster Family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Multiple Settings</td>
<td>Long Term</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good and Bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Kinship</td>
<td>Short Term</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Multiple Settings</td>
<td>Long Term</td>
<td>No Contact</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teresa</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Kinship</td>
<td>Short Term</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>1 Foster Home</td>
<td>Short Term</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Kinship</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenifer</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>1 Foster Home</td>
<td>Long Term</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Kinship</td>
<td>Long Term</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Multiple Settings</td>
<td>Long Term</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Kinship</td>
<td>Long Term</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From the interviews and analysis, the researcher gathered a unique story and point of view from each participant’s answers. The interviewees had many different foster care experiences. Each student had their own standings on their relationships with their biological and foster families. Despite past circumstances, some students expressed having close relationships with their biological parents, while other students admitted to never meeting their biological parents. Many students claim to have a very close relationship with their foster families and others described the pain and suffering they experienced from their foster care experiences. Some students reported their biological and foster families were supportive of their education while others found no support from home life. Although each one of the interviewees had different life experiences, they all stressed the importance of their education and their desire to succeed. Each student had their own reasoning for pursuing higher education. Many just simply did not want to be another drop-out statistic, while others wanted to show the world what they had to offer. Statistics show how a large percentage of foster youth do not graduate from high school and even fewer graduate from college. Taking this point into perspective, this research explores how former foster youth in the present study have relied on their personal strengths as well as structural support networks in order to avoid “becoming another statistic.”

Figure 2 shows the four main themes that emerged from the data and were reflective of the bioecological systems framework the interview questions were based upon. The four themes consist of: 1. Taking the Road to Higher Education (Macrosystem/ Chronosystem) 2. Educational Resources and Support Networks
(Exosystem), 3. Finding Support and Strength (Mesosystem), and 4. Motivation and Self-Reliance (Microsystem).

Figure 2: Themes

Macrosystems /Chronosystems: Taking the Road towards Higher Education

The first theme emerging from the data, Taking the Road towards Higher Education, reflected elements from both the macrosystem and the chronosystem within Education, reflected elements from both the macrosystem and the chronosystem within
the bioecological systems theory. First, the macrosystem refers to the individual’s culture. More specifically it is how ideologies, beliefs, and values affect one’s culture, sub-culture, or social class which ultimately impacts one’s human development. For instance, someone who grows up in a more politically liberal environment will have different views and perspectives on life than someone who grows up in a more conservative family or community. Additionally, people with different religious beliefs will have different outlooks on life. The macrosystem plays a crucial role in people’s thought processes and their human development. In the interviews, the most talked about elements of the macrosystem were neighborhoods and religion. Many students spoke of how these two aspects in particular fueled their desires to go to college.

Some of the students interviewed came from low-income or poverty stricken neighborhoods. Many of those students spoke of their low socio-economic status and how it has played a role on their lives. Some even described their living situations as unsafe or dangerous. Others admitted to the stress of not being able to afford food, clothes, and other basic necessities. Growing up under such conditions and being forced to live under tough circumstances taught these students particular values and beliefs. These particular respondents felt they learned to be thankful for what they had and to strive for a better life. Growing up in unstable settings had an indirect impact on the people they are today. For example, when asked, “How did the neighborhood or neighborhoods you grew up in influence your school experiences?” one student, Christopher, a father of one, responded, “Oh I think this was probably one of the biggest influences ever. Growing up with six, seven people living in a two bedroom house. You
know. I always knew I didn’t want that ever. For me or my kids. So I was gonna do whatever I had to, to not let that happen. To make it.” Growing up poor made Christopher strive to do better for himself and his children. He wanted to be able to give himself and his kids a better life than he had. His sophomore year of high school he was introduced to his track coach who later became his foster mother. With her help, guidance, and encouragement, Christopher was able to take the necessary steps to get into a University. Christopher hopes taking the road toward higher education will enable him to provide his family with a safe and comfortable life. His original upbringing, and the community he was exposed to, indirectly affected him and his goals. He hopes getting a college education will allow him to climb the socio-economic ladder so his own children can grow up in a good neighborhood. Various elements from his macrosystem and past experiences from his chronosystem had an indirect impact on his development. With help from teachers and family members, particularly his foster mom, he was able to give his family a better life than the one he experienced.

Coming from a low socio-economic status, Teresa learned to become a fighter and to work hard to reach her goals. She answered, “Um, I know um that coming from a low socio-economic background, um, you could say I was below the poverty line. Um, it is a little bit harder because you have to fight for more financial resources for your education.” Teresa’s social class motivated her to become strong and independent. She felt she needed to fight for the things she wanted. In her case, the culture she was immersed in, an element of her macrosystem, encouraged her to want to climb the social ladder. In her opinion, taking the first step would be going to college and getting her
degree. Taking her past into consideration she was able to “fight” for the resources to get her where she is today. In response to the same question given to Christopher, Teresa, answered,

I would say that they [the neighborhoods] motivated me even more to stay in school because a lot of the neighborhoods that I grew up in. Not everybody was educated. Um, most of the parents were either working, working poor, or they were just, um, weren’t simply working. So that was another motivation to not be another statistic. And just pretty much trying to figure out what is going on with these communities to where people just, they are not prospering. Like, I just wanted to see something else for myself. Yeah.

The community Teresa came from was a working, or working-poor community. Most of the members in her community were uneducated. She saw the struggles her friends and family were faced with and realized she did not want to experience those same struggles. Growing up in such a setting, fueled her desire to go to school so she could open up opportunities to do something better with her life. She did not want to be another statistic, of a working class, African American woman struggling to make ends meet. She found solace from many of her teachers, primarily from African American faculty. With this assistance and her “fighter” demeanor, she prospered in school, is currently working towards getting her bachelor’s degree, and will continue her education in graduate school.

In a similar discussion, another student Steven, talked about things most people take for granted such as having his own bed. He spoke of the hardships he was faced with growing up in an urban area in southern California,
You know who grew up in you know a parent, or a single parent home or whatever the case may be, but they had the same circumstances. It’s like a bed is something that is supposed to be; it’s a given. Like everybody is gonna have a bed. You know, or everybody is gonna have a place to stay without having to worry about getting evicted. Like nobody has ever come home and, you know, had to worry about not having to go into your own house and go home and all of your stuff is sitting on the side. Nobody else has had to. Most people have not had to deal with that.

The things most people do not have to deal with, he had to deal with on a daily basis. Growing up in a low-income, single parent household Steven “came to the mentality that, uh, you know, work hard, work hard, work hard. You know, you are gonna face adversity, but you gotta work, you gotta overcome them and, you know, keep on.” The neighborhoods he grew up in and the hardships he faced taught him “if you keep stopping every time something happens, you are never gonna finish.” Steven believed his “work hard” attitude was instilled by the macrosystem he was associated with. This coupled with aid from his Auntie and Uncle, once he entered foster care, enabled him to take the road toward higher education and become a successful college student.

For many of the students interviewed their development was indirectly affected by the neighborhoods they grew up in. Growing up under difficult circumstances encouraged them to want to create a better life for themselves. It gave them the drive to overcome their struggles and not become “just another statistic.” These types of neighborhoods incidentally motivated and encouraged these students to do want to do well in school, go to college, and become successful adults.
Similarly, Jennifer also had a rough upbringing but claims it positively influenced her development. She remarked, “I grew up in pretty tough neighborhoods. A lot of killing and stuff, so. So, I don’t know, it just motivated me to just be somebody. Go somewhere in life and not settle for that life. And positively, I think it affected me.” She claimed the macrosystems she was exposed to encouraged her to strive to get herself out of her harsh social settings and do better for herself. Although she was subjected to difficult times, she believes her macrosystem ultimately affected her in a positive way because it made her want to do something better with her life. She did not want to stay in her current neighborhood and saw college as a solution to her dilemma. Through hard work and help from family she was able to go to college. She hopes obtaining a college degree will open up more job opportunities enabling her to climb the social ladder away from the “tough neighborhoods” she was exposed to growing up.

Moreover, religion, another aspect of Jennifer’s macrosystem, also kept her on track with her academics. It helped her to stay strong during times of weakness and motivated her to always do well, especially in school. She added, “Um, I don’t know like, the morals and the values that we learn, that I learned in, in my religion. I think it has been a great help in learning how to deal with an academic setting and the people. So, I think it has played a really big role. It keeps me sane. And it keeps me humbled and willing to be just open to learning other things.” Religion taught her morals and values to deal with academic struggles. Her religious ethic has kept her, as she says, “sane,” or on track, and enables her to accept academic challenges she would normally be opposed to. Religion has allowed her to open up her mind and learn about things she was
not necessarily accustomed to growing up. From the interviews, it was clear various components of Jennifer’s macrosystem strongly influenced her development and academic success.

Amanda also mentioned how religion has helped her with her struggles, both personal and academic. She was not exposed to religion growing up. Instead she was recently introduced to it and already sees the positive influences it has made in her life.

So like for religion to come in and it was just so random for me to just like. I was just going through my life, struggling really hard, like relationships. And I was literally just at the bottom. And then it [religion] was just like ‘I am here for you’. You know that now. Just give it all up to me. So I finally did and it has just been such a journey so far and it’s only been, I don’t know, how many months. And, um, it just gives me that much more of a reason to do good. Especially in school since I know if I do good in school, I’m gonna do good in life. So, like, so far it has been really helpful. I mean (Sigh) uh its priorities. So, like, God is number one in my life. School is second. And it’s, like, that’s how big it’s up there. So they really work hand in hand with or for me.

Amanda finds relief from religion. It helps her in her times of struggle. She knows now if she is having trouble with something in life, including school, she can turn to God for help. Additionally, religion motivates her to do well in both her personal and academic life. Her religious morals and values, a few key elements of her macrosystem, encourage her to continue to be successful with whatever comes her way.

In general, throughout the interviews when students spoke of issues pertaining to their macrosystem, (i.e. social class, neighborhoods they grew up in, religious morals and
values, etc.) it was often things negative that turned positive. In other words, the negative social settings or social circumstances they were faced with, they made positive by working hard and always trying to better themselves. The neighborhoods, values, customs, and beliefs these students were accustomed to, as well as personal, educational, and financial help from family, friends, school faculty, and other forms of assistance, have allowed them to take the road towards higher education. All the interviewees understood college as their gateway to becoming a successful adult. They all had extremely high expectations for themselves and strived to be the best they can possibly be. Most of them have dreams to become doctors, lawyers, or even social workers. Through various support networks, personal and structural, coupled with internal strength, the former foster youth in the present study were able to not only graduate high school but are on their way to graduating from college as well.

Second, certain events associated with students’ chronosystems also triggered desires to go to college. The chronosystem includes transitions and events that have occurred throughout an individual’s life. Examples might include divorce, death of a parent, entering or exiting foster care, graduating from high school, or transitioning from community college to a university. If an event or transition strongly impacts the development of the individual, it is part of one’s chronosystem. For the students interviewed, many incidents within their chronosystems did in fact have profound effects on their development.
Richard discussed the death of his mother and his sister and how losing them has motivated him to want to be successful. He responded, “I would say my sister and my mom. ‘Cause you know, they was, they were there the majority of my life. But then they’re both deceased now, and I’m just doing it for them at the end of the day.” Richard’s mother and sister were two important figures in his life. Now they are no longer with him, he works hard in both his personal and academic life because he believes it is what they would want him to do. Therefore, the passing of both of them has encouraged him to take the road toward high education and try his hardest to be academically successful.

Although she was not in foster care for very long, the transition into foster care was a stressful event for Teresa. This life transition created an academic challenge for her she had to work very hard to overcome:

The biggest obstacle for me was when I had to transfer from one high school to the next and just, um, the counties having to different requirements for graduation. Um, I was behind five units for one and for two I had to take a computer class and Driver’s Ed so. It was, like, I had to make up those five units and also make up those two additional requirements and then on top of that, I went from a semester system to a quarter system…So that was something just very hard for me. Um, having to have to retain all of that information. And, um, making new friends. That was something I had to. Just being surrounded by people that I was familiar with for three years and now all of the sudden having to make new friends. That was something that was hard.

Teresa entered foster care her senior year of high school. The transition created a plethora of academic struggles. She had to attend a new school and meet new friends.
She also had to learn the quarter system which moves much more rapidly than the semester system, take a driver’s education class, and get caught up on new graduation requirements. Her senior year was filled with many different types of obstacles and curveballs; however, Teresa did not let these barriers deter her. She was determined to succeed and with assistance from teachers, mentors, and family, she is now a successful college student motivated to continue to get her Ph.D. Although many different events and transitions can occur within a foster youth’s chronosystem, Teresa like many other of the interviewees, continued to strive to conquer their academic goals.

In another scenario, Michael, spoke of his employment with the United States Marine Core. His deployment to Afghanistan marks an event in his chronosystem that has had a direct impact on his life and his academic career. He admitted, “My deployment to Afghanistan, I did a deployment to Afghanistan in 2009, helped me appreciate school a lot more. I wasn’t sure if that was going to get covered anywhere, so, it definitely made me appreciate my civilian life a lot more. Um, it made me actually want to go back to school and not be an enlisted troop anymore.” His deployment made him realize how much he enjoyed school. Michael was nineteen years old and enrolled in his second semester in college when he was deployed. He recalled, “So, I’m like freaking out because it is a deployment and school and I’m like half way through my second semester and so I had to do a military withdrawal.” His deployment was an event he learned a lot from including how much he needed to put his academics first. When he got back from Afghanistan he went back to Sac State and turned to the Guardian Scholars to help him get back on track with his education. “They were really helpful with helping
with all that and so. I was able to come back with their help.” This traumatic life experience, as well as assistance from the Guardian Scholars program, enabled Michael to return to college and continue pursuing topics he was actually passionate about. Since his return, Michael has been able to focus primarily on his academics. At the time of the interview he had just one more year of school left until he would graduate with his bachelor’s degree and was debating joining the police academy after getting his diploma.

The students in the present study spoke of many different specific events or transitions from their chronosystem and how it affected them and their academics. Some of the circumstances were negative; however, for the most part the students gained something positive from it. Various elements from both macrosystems and chronosystems have not made life easy for former foster youth by any means. However, the students in the present study did not allow environmental challenges stop them from pursuing their goals. They reached out and found resources, accepted help from family, friends, and support networks, and have worked hard to try to make a better life for themselves. The next section will take a closer look at how specifically educational resources and various support networks have impacted their development into successful college intellectuals.

**Exosystems: Educational Resources and Support Networks**

The next theme, *Educational Resources and Support Networks*, is associated with the exosystem. The exosystem does not directly affect the individual. Instead the exosystem involves the links between social structures such as social services, school
systems, mass media, the child welfare system, health care services, etc. Ultimately, these social structures influence the social settings and situations students find themselves in. For example, the links between financial services and the school system affect a student’s ability to afford college, take out loans, etc. Exosystems play a crucial role in these individuals’ social settings by influencing their educational resources and other support networks.

As students at the University, there are plenty of resources and support networks available to students which, whether they know it or not, make up elements of their exosystem. Resources such as the WELL and the health center have helped students with their overall well-being and health care needs. The WELL at Sac State is a resource for the campus community that offers services, programs, and facilities to promote lifetime wellness for its users. Directly connected with the school, this resource provides many benefits to students. Michelle discusses how the WELL has benefited her: “I definitely appreciate the WELL on campus. Like, if I don’t feel well I can go make an appointment and I can go make an appointment and go get checked out and everything will be fine. I go through the WELL and the programs on campus to get my birth control. I, um, really, really appreciate the health benefits that come with (yawn) excuse me—with going to Sac State.” Here, she can see a doctor if she is sick or needs a check-up. She is also able to get birth control from this resource. Her membership at the WELL is paid for through her tuition and student fees. Thankfully, due to her status as a former foster youth, Michelle was able to apply for financial aid which pays her tuition, academic fees, and living expenses. Therefore, her membership at the WELL and all of her healthcare needs
are also paid for which is a nice incentive and one less thing to worry about while juggling her coursework at the University. These healthcare services coupled with educational services provide her with the ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle while gaining a college education.

Other students also briefly spoke of the benefits of the health center on campus. Amanda notes, “We have a free health care center so like I can go get a check-up without a co-pay or anything like that. So it’s nice that I will have that once my medical coverage stops. But uh, its, its um a security, knowing that is one less thing that I know that I have to worry about. Paying insurance for medical coverage. It’s nice I don’t have to worry about that. I can focus on my studies, so.” This health care privilege is not “free” as Amanda claims it is. However, it is paid for by the financial compensation she receives for going to school. Like Michelle, Amanda also receives financial aid and her tuition and living expenses are paid for due to her status as a former foster youth. Both students appreciate the health care services they receive for being a student. Although they do not always have to take advantage of it, it is nice to have the luxury available to them. As Amanda states it is one less thing to worry about while she is balancing her studies. The health care services provided through the University, included in the price of tuition, guarantees good health. Many people without health care have to worry about getting sick or injured. Having these types of services available gives students more time to dedicate to their studies rather than worrying how they can afford a visit to the doctor’s office. Health care is just another example of how the exosystem impacts these particular students and their education. Not all foster youth are aware of the financial services and
resources available to them. Applying for and receiving such aid has put the participants in this study at an advantage compared to other former foster youth who do not know such services exist or do not know how to take advantage of the resources available.

Due to their former foster youth status and their involvement in the child welfare system, many students have been awarded scholarships, grants, and other financial aid that helps them with their financial obligations such as tuition, textbooks, rent, food, etc. Therefore, the child welfare system and financial aid services work together to help these students obtain a college education. Throughout the interviews, many students spoke of their gratitude for the money they have been provided.

For instance, Richard remarks, “Financial aid I guess. Just. I don’t know. The legal services…just having that type of background or that type of status allows me to get stipends or financial aid to be inside of a program.” Due to his status as a former ward of the court, the state and other financial services have given him stipends and financial aid in order to go to college. Therefore, his drive and desire to get a college education coupled with structural support from the child welfare system, financial aid services, and the education system has enabled him to prosper in higher education. Many of the exosystems encompassing Richard’s life have worked together to impact his ability to go to college.

Similarly, when asked, “How has the child welfare system impacted your ability to become a college student?” Michelle explains, “Definitely helps incredibly, being that I don’t have family to rely on. College. The state is kinda, like, ‘we took thirteen years
of your life, here have college’ [laughs].” She then quickly adds, “And so it is extremely helpful. I would say about sixty percent of my living expenses are paid by financial aid.” Although she is joking, Michelle sees the financial assistance from the state as a compensation for the hardships she faced growing up in foster care. She was in foster care for thirteen years. Due to her status as a former ward of the state, like Richard, she was granted money and other stipends to enable her to get a college education. In times of need, many non-foster youth receive physical, emotional, and financial support from their parents and/or relatives. However, growing up without those supports, these students do not have many people to turn to. So, as Michelle sees it, instead of turning to her parents or relatives, some of whom could not offer any assistance, she relies on her financial aid to help her get through tough times. The financial services she receives pays for approximately sixty percent of her living expenses including rent, utilities, tuition, text books, clothes, food, etc. The remaining forty percent she comes up with herself. Although the assistance she does receive is helpful and she is thankful for, she is still faced with financial struggles and works hard to make her college education a reality. Like Richard and Michelle, the other students interviewed expressed similar stories of financial assistance and their gratitude for the aid they are given.

When asked about educational resources and support, every single student mentioned the Guardian Scholars. This is a program within the education system that both directly and indirectly influence its member’s lives and success as college students. The Guardian Scholars Program serves as an educational resource as a well as a support network for former foster youth who are eligible for the program. Financial services and
the educational system take a large toll on how this program runs, which in the end, affect
the students within this program. Students expressed gratitude for the Guardian
Scholars program and the support networks they have gained within the program. Every
student praised the program and all it has done for them.

When asked “How has the Guardian Scholars program influenced your ability to be a successful college student?” Jennifer commented, “They, they provide you with academic support, financial support, uh personal, like in your personal life. All of the things that you are doing. If you need food, clothes, shoes. You know anything that you need. If you can’t afford it and you can’t get it yourself, you can go there and they will bend arms, bend legs, whatever the case is, they will get you what you need. So they’re like a big support system to all of us, so.” Guardian Scholars is a universal resource that students can turn to for almost any type of assistance. Guardian Scholars offers academic support such as counseling and mentoring. They also try their best to offer financial support to help provide students with anything they may need including food, child care, rent, or gas. Furthermore, this program offers emotional and personal support as well. Many students spoke of visiting the Guardian Scholars office on a regular basis, simply “just to talk.” They feel comfortable speaking with the staff members and talking about their daily lives, their problems and their achievements. It is both an educational as well as a personal resource every student involved is completely grateful to be a part of.

Christopher also spoke of his gratitude towards the program,
Um, well they definitely provide us with some financial, um, resources. But it’s also like, I always tell everyone this, it’s a place where you can just go into and everyone is so warm and welcoming. Um, like I said I love talking to [Anne], even though she is super busy. It’s just a place where you know you can just pop your head in and hang out for a little bit. It is nice to have that on campus. People that know that what you have been through and they are just there to help you because they really want to.

From his statement it is obvious Guardian Scholars is not only an educational resource, but is a general support system for its members. They are there for students whenever they need them and are glad to be of assistance. They serve as a family and provide for their students as much as possible. The Guardian Scholars does not only serve as an educational resource within the University, but it also serves as a support network. It is a place where students can turn to whenever they are in need. Unfortunately, Guardian Scholars is not offered at every campus or University and students must be eligible to receive services. This puts the students in the present study as well as all members of the program at an advantage compared to students who do not receive such services and support. The Guardian Scholars is a prime example of how educational resources and support networks are critical to students’ academic success.

When students were asked how particular systems, such as the child welfare system, financial services, the education system, and the legal system affected their path to college, many students seemed unsure of how to answer the questions. Many of them asked for clarification or for examples to help them understand the questions before they decided how to answer. This was because many of the systems at hand did not have a
tangible, visual, or even direct impact on the students’ day to day lives. Instead many of the services, although extremely beneficial and appreciated, were almost taken-for-granted. In college, the students have been accustomed to the services they receive. These services have become almost automatic in a way. Most students know their tuition will be paid for and they will receive a check for their textbooks and so forth. It is because these services, as part of their exosystem, indirectly affect them, they sometimes forget how different systems work together to enable their development into a college student, and soon-to-be college graduates. This suggests how the various exosystems, such as financial services and the child welfare system work together with the current University system to indirectly influence these students’ lives and have made it possible for them obtain a college education.

From the interviews, it is apparent there are many different services, systems, and networks that work with one another to directly and indirectly impact former foster youth’s lives. Although some are more apparent than others, they all make a difference in one way or another. It may be less evident to the participants how these invisible forces help them on a day-to-day basis, but when looking back their influence can be seen and understood. The interview responses regarding educational resources and support networks provided evidence for how the exosystem affects these students and their development into college educated individuals.
Mesosystems: Finding Strength and Support

The mesosystem is made up of the interconnections between different microsystems. More simply put, it is the connections and actions between the most important, closest people in a child’s life. The third theme found from the data is focused around an individual’s mesosystem. Although the participants in this study claimed to have mostly relied on themselves to accomplish their goals, some goals were unobtainable without some assistance from others. These students knew they needed to stay strong and focused, but some also had to figure out how to ask for help. In times of struggle or hardship, some of these students felt the urge to give up. During these times, they had to give into their stubbornness and ask for assistance when they realized they could not tackle certain tasks alone.

Many students listed teachers, counselors, and friends as their top supporters. For instance, Amanda went to her teachers, both in high school and college, when she needed help with educational and personal issues. She says,

Like, I got a really good connection with my teachers more than my foster families. Just ‘cause they would see my school work and my foster families wouldn’t care about my school work…. So teachers would see my grades and they would know…. They knew I was a foster youth and they would praise me and just be just so baffled by the things that I was doing. They would be, like, ‘are your scholarships in order’? ‘Are you applying for colleges’? And, like, ‘you should get into this program and this program’. And it was a lot of help from my teachers…. I still get letters of rec from them!
Amanda’s teachers helped her with scholarships, college applications, and program guidance. Even now she is in college she maintains contact with former high school teachers and still receives support from them through letters of recommendation. Additionally, now as a college student, she has also found support from her professors. She continues, “I got a really good relationship with my math teacher my freshman year and I still go to his office hours and I talk about life, I talk about academics. It’s like everything. He writes me letters of recommendation. And it’s really encouraging too, just this past month, I got all of my scholarships and I was reading over his letter of rec for me and it was touching that he sees that much hope in me.” She maintains her relationship with her math teacher because he offers her the guidance to succeed. She finds strength within herself from the praise her math teacher gives her.

Amanda also spoke of the effects of foster care on her academic motivation. Bouncing from one placement setting to the next, Amanda never felt her foster families cared about her academic achievements. She was unable to find academic support in any of her home settings. She noted, “My foster families wouldn’t care about my school work.” Furthermore, one placement in particular, and unfortunately, the family she spent the longest time with, was even detrimental to her academic performance. She admitted to being subject to both emotional and sexual abuse. She reflected on her experiences, It was always just like thriving, thriving, thriving in school and home life sucked so bad, but I, like school was my getaway. And I didn’t want to do negative in, cause, like, school was like. I went to school to show that, like, whatever is happening at school. That is not who I am. That they are not going to change who I am. Like, school. I am a bright student. I am going to be involved in
sports. And other different things. And that is what I did. So yeah, they did a lot of things that should have deterred me from going to college, but it didn’t…. I was not gonna let them mess with my academics. It means a lot to me, but I was not gonna let them mess with my academics. It means a lot to me…. So my experiences in school really brought me a positive light into this like dark home.

Amanda’s negative experiences in foster care made her appreciate school and motivated her to do well. She did not let her home life interfere with her academic life. Fortunately, Amanda received positive attention from her friends and teachers at school which further persuaded her to focus on her education. Instead of dwelling on her home life, she turned all of her attention to her academic life which allowed her academic progress to flourish. School was her escape from home. For other foster youth, they may not be as lucky as Amanda. Many foster youth do not receive positive attention and praise at school as Amanda did. Instead many are faced with negativity and hardship at both school and home which can further hinder their academic performance. Therefore, Amanda’s story is almost unique in that she was able to break free and find solitude at school. In a way, her negative foster care experiences enabled her academic success to prosper because it was what she dedicated all of her time and energy into. Despite the negativity and unfortunate events that took place while she was in foster care, Amanda was able to find relief through school and it is her ongoing interactions with her educational environment that has allowed her to continue conquering her academic dreams.
Teresa, another student, also spoke of the support she received from her teachers in college. Her teachers would push her giving her the strength to continue to do well. When asked who offered her support and guidance throughout her education she responded, “A lot of my teachers. Um, especially the teachers within the African American community. Especially here at Sac State. I feel like the community of African American teachers here are very strong and they tend to push their students more. Like, if you miss class, they will be like, ‘Hey, where were you?’ Like, ‘what were you doing? Don’t fall behind.’ Like, don’t be another statistic”. Teresa, an African American female in her third year of college, finds most of her educational support from the close knit community of African American professors on campus. These teachers make her feel guilty for not attending class and push her to work hard. Teresa finds strength through the pressure of her teachers. She does not want to become another bad statistic so she pushes herself to go to class, keep up, and do well.

Besides teachers, Teresa also finds support from her friends. Her friends are always there to help her whenever she needs it. This help enables her to continue to stay on track and achieve her goals. She replies, “Friends. Of course friends always like... They have been there for me, um, providing emotional support to get through situations. And, um, very rarely I have financial issues; but, even—I know if I did, they would be there to help.” When she is in need of assistance, she knows she can turn to her friends for a lending hand in pretty much any situation. Having friends to turn to enables her to get through the tough times she is faced with.
Another student, Jennifer, found significant support from her counselors. She states, “I wanna say, our, our counselors. Cause they’re always there. They talk to you like a regular person. Like if you have problems, you can go to them and they will try to find an option for you to help you with whatever you are dealing with.” When she finds herself in a dilemma, she knows she can rely on her counselors for assistance. She feels comfortable talking to them about her issues or struggles and they always seem to find a solution for her problems. Whether it is personal or educational, she knows she can count on her counselors to help her get past whatever she is dealing with.

When asked, “Who has offered you support and guidance throughout your education?” the most popular response was Anne, the director of the Guardian Scholars program. Throughout the interviews, at some point, every single student spoke of the support, guidance, and assistance they have received from Anne. Some students spoke in more detail than others and some received more help from her than others. However, every single respondent mentioned in one way or another how Anne had positively affected their lives and academics. One example is from Lisa:

Um, but [Anne], even if I don’t need to see her, I’ll just pop in even for like five minutes just to tell her how things are going with me. Just follow up with stuff. If I have issues and you know I talk to her about it. I don’t feel judged in there… Um, you know, any, any problem that I’ve had she’s had, she’s come up with something, a solution or if I’ve kinda got an idea of a solution, she’ll help me figure it out. And she’s kept me out of debt for four years for god’s sake! (laugh) Like, like she’s a great person…. I go to her for everything!
Later on in the interview Lisa spoke of Anne again. She elaborated, “She. She’s my go-to. She knows everybody and anybody. Um, yeah, it. It’s the people that I feel like are resources to me that I go to”. Guardian Scholars students, like Lisa, feel comfortable turning to Anne for support. They know she will not judge them and she is always available to offer guidance or maybe even just an open ear. She helps them with their personal, financial, and academic problems. For many students, she is their go-to person.

Similarly, another student Steven, responded,

Uh, I have to say [Anne]. Who is you know the program director. Uh she, she has helped out a lot cause you know she’s been through a lot. It may not seem like it, but you would never guess it when you first see her, but when you actually have a conversation with her and you go to her to say something and you know that you need someone to talk to. She has always been very helpful. Uh like I call [Anne] my school mom.

These students feel comfortable talking to Anne because she has had similar life experiences. She understands their struggles and can teach them how to overcome them. Steven calls her his “school mom.” She is a mother figure in his academic life and can rely on her for support and guidance. Other students have similar names and recognitions for her.

Throughout the interviews students spoke of different people within their mesosystems who influenced them and their abilities to stay focused, stay on track, and be successful, both in and out of school. These people in particular were individuals who offered support and guidance. They gave them strength and enabled them to help achieve their goals. For the most part, the people in students’ mesosystems were teachers,
friends, counselors, and program affiliates. These people are the ones who students are closest with, most comfortable with, and the people they turn to in times of need. The interactions with such important figures have helped these students become the successful college students they are today.

**Microsystems: Personal Motivation and Self-Reliance**

Within the bioecological systems theory, the microsystem is everything, including people, places, things, etc., that directly affects an individual’s development. In this particular study, most of the participants described themselves as extremely independent. Therefore, in connection with the last theme that emerged from the data, *Personal Motivation and Self-Reliance*, the individuals themselves can be considered part of their own microsystems. In other words, these individuals’ thoughts, mindsets, actions, skills, will power, and so forth, are ultimately impacting the person they are growing up to be. The majority of the interviewees described themselves as self-motivated. Lacking support and guidance most people take for granted, these students learned at a young age if they wanted to get something done they would have to do it themselves.

American culture values hard work and self-motivation. Therefore, despite the hardships faced by former foster youth, it is still plausible they are independent and strong willed. Many Americans believe if you work hard and have a positive attitude you will be successful in life. Additionally, most believe you get as far as your own merit takes you (McNamee and Miller 2004). Unfortunately, the myth of meritocracy is literally a myth. It is deceiving. The idea of the American Dream is sold to people and
has become a reinforced idea ingrained into the heads of millions, while a “rags to riches” story is reality for a very rare few. Sadly, it is more common for wealth to breed wealth, and for the majority, they can work as hard and fast as possible, be strong willed and self-motivated, but still never attain the merit they dream of. Like so many other Americans, the former foster youth in this study, understood college as their key to success in life and worked hard to get where they are today. Most of the students interviewed were low-income and/or first generation college students. Going to college was not a given, but instead a goal they personally needed to make a reality. Throughout the interviews, every student mentioned how they relied on themselves to get the results they wished to see but faced many obstacles during their pursuit of higher education.

Lisa spoke of her academic interests and desires but admits she has poor study habits. Although she performs well in school, she also struggles. She confessed, “I’m the worst studier ever. I don’t know what it is about me. I think in my head I’m just like, ‘uh I heard them. It’s in there.’” Although she tries her best in all of her classes, it does not come easily. She really has to work hard to get good grades.

Jessica also discussed some of her academic obstacles. She used the analogy of having a devil and an angel on her shoulders:

So you have the devil on one side that says, ‘party all the time.’ And the other angel that says, ‘maybe you should study.’ So I have those you know, party all the time friends. And I had those you know maybe you should calm down and study. Um and stuff. So um. It was hard for me to find a balance with the two of course because I was always like, you know, on the devil side, ‘like let me go party, party, party, party, party.’ But that is what actually led to some academic
problems that I had. But, um, they, they’ve just influenced me in, in different ways. Now I find myself, um, having more positive experiences.

Jessica struggled with balancing her academic life with her social life. After making some poor choices and finding herself in poor academic standing, she was able to pull herself back up and get back on track. She is now in her final semester of college and on track to graduate.

On another note, Michael also talked about some of his personal struggles. He acknowledged, “Um first, I had to fix myself um. I had a lot of anger issues, but then after I got done with that, I wanted to help people.” His anger held him back from the things he wanted to accomplish in life. He realized his anger was holding him back and found ways to alleviate his issues. The desire to help himself fueled his desires to help others. Now, he enjoys helping others in any way possible and plans to secure a position in law enforcement so he can continue assisting others. Although all of the respondents claimed they relied mostly on their selves to get the results they wished to see, even their self-reliance has often been challenged.

When asked who has been there for them particularly during times of trouble, one student Richard, a twenty-one year old African American male replied, “I don’t know. I struggled a lot, so half the time, it’d be myself by the end of the day.” From this response, it is clear Richard has been faced with struggles frequently throughout his life and has had to overcome such struggles alone. This has taught him to rely on himself to handle difficult situations when he is faced with them.
Another student, Jessica, an African-American in her senior year of college, also spoke of self-reliance. When reflecting on the process of getting into college and who helped her to get there, she responded, “That is an interesting question. I would honestly have to say myself.” She mentioned her aunt had also offered some support and motivated her to go to college, but she felt she “was the one to push it more.” Even though Jessica did receive some support and motivation from her aunt, she believes it was her own will and efforts that got her where she is today.

Although some former foster youth received some support and guidance from family and friends, ultimately, most of them believed their academic successes are attributed to their own efforts. One student, twenty-two year old, white male, Michael remarked, “Even though I had all of that support, it was basically me who chose to continue to do better.” Michael is fortunate to have multiple support networks throughout his youth, but he attributes his own success to his own personal work ethic and actions. Responses such as these were common throughout the interview. All of the participants expressed their own abilities and desires to become successful adults and college students and relied on themselves to get the results they wished to see. True, without their hard work and self-determined efforts they would not be as successful as they are. However, as seen from the previous findings, these students would not have been able to accomplish all they have without the other supporting factors within their bioecological system.
At some point in all of the interviews, all ten of the respondents discussed their own personal motivation. Eight of the ten described themselves as being highly motivated. One student described their personal motivation as “fluctuating” while the other student briefly mentioned examples of his personal motivation. Lacking support and guidance from others, they motivated themselves to be successful. Often no one was there to tell them what they need or should do. Instead they told themselves to go to school, study, get good grades, and earn a college degree. They found motivation within themselves. In response, to “How would you describe your own personal motivation,” Michelle, a joyous, talkative, twenty-year old, replied,

I am an extremely motivated person. It occurred to me, um, I think my sophomore year of high school that if I want to get somewhere, I have to get myself there. And, um, I am constantly reminded of that because I don’t have a car. So it’s like (laugh) if I want something I have to make it happen. And sometimes that means I bite off more than I can chew and sometimes that means that I do nothing, but, um, if I want it bad enough I know that I have to work for it and I do.

During her sophomore year of high school, at approximately fifteen years old, Michelle realized she only had herself to rely on to get the results she wished to see. Therefore, she decided to motivate herself. From then on, she took matters into her own hands and figured out a way to make it to college and make her dreams come true. She chose to take action and can look back on things now and see all of her accomplishments. Currently, she is saving money to purchase a car and will hopefully be a first time car owner soon.
In response to the same question, another twenty-year old student, Amanda, remarked,

Um. I’m really like self-determined, so I do things that, uh, usually for myself, but I really. From a young age, I have enjoyed positive attention instead of negative attention. So I just strive for good grades or just something that I have done good on, but, and I want to show, ‘look what I did’! And as you grow it changes in the way you do things, but I definitely just uh gotten to the point where it’s like these are my goals because I know what I want in life and I want to show everybody that, ‘Who cares if I was a foster kid’! Like it’s a really large statistic of foster kids that don’t go on to college and become homeless and I just don’t want to be that statistic, by any means.

Like, Michelle, Amanda also motivated herself to do well. However, Amanda also wanted to receive good grades impress friends and family in order to receive positive attention and praise. She wants to do well in school in order to show others despite the hardships she has faced as a former foster child, she can do well in her academics and earn a bachelor’s degree. She does not want to become a college drop-out or homeless—both situations that are far too common for former foster youth. She wants to demonstrate to everyone who ever doubted her throughout her life she can do whatever she puts her mind to.

Another student, Chris, a twenty-three year old African American student, responded to the question by stating, “I just feel like I’m determined… I’ve always wanted to just push myself higher and higher and really see how far I can go. Um, because I really want to be the best that I can be. And so that is my motivation. Just
that.” Chris pushes himself to be the best he can be. He does not want to simply settle for average or take the easy way out of things. He wants to see how far he can make it and pushes himself the entire way. After he graduates from college, he plans to attend graduate school. He stays motivated and continues to push himself further and further.

From these responses, it is clear former foster youth perceive themselves to be self-reliant and personally motivated. Unlike many children growing up with their biological parents, these former foster youth did not receive as much support and guidance. Instead, they became highly attuned to their own personal motivation. Throughout the interviews, participants repeated how they personally stayed focused, went to school, got good grades, and accomplished their dreams one goal at a time. They continued to push themselves. They worked hard in order to show others they are not just another statistic. They believe they can accomplish anything they set their minds to and will continue to do whatever it takes to make their dreams a reality.

The last theme, *Personal Motivation and Self-Reliance*, implied foster youth’s own desires, actions, and efforts can be considered elements of their own microsystem. These students have been bombarded with struggle and challenge throughout their entire lives and have pulled themselves out of it. Their interview responses revealed self-determination, independence, and strong work ethics. Michelle’s comment, “I have to work for it and I do,” is just one example of how these students have become so successful. All of the students demonstrated, as Chris quoted, “[They] want to be the best [they] can be.” It is more important to note that despite the students’ perceptions of
relying “solely on themselves”, the value of the bioecological systems theory is that it illuminates the many other influences of family, friends, teachers, support networks, educational systems, financial services, child welfare agencies, socio-economic statuses, community values, religious beliefs, etc. These elements of the various systems work hand-in-hand to impact individuals’ development and life outcomes. As seen from this current study, despite the barriers and challenges these former foster youth faced on a daily basis, the positive elements of their bioecological systems enabled them to overcome such challenges and develop into successful intellectual adults.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

For the majority of foster youth, life has directed them down a bumpy path full of barriers and challenges. As the literature review reveals foster youth endure numerous hardships. Some are plagued with behavioral and emotional problems while others suffer from academic deficiencies. As Harden (2008) discovered placement type and stability greatly influence developmental outcomes. In order to promote healthy development the child welfare system needs to provide foster youth with supportive microsystems, primarily supportive foster families, as well as stable home environments.

Additionally, research has consistently revealed that former foster youth perform worse academically than students who have never experienced time in foster care. Snodgrass (2012) unveiled the lack of stability as prime reason for poor academic performance. She then recommended a list of “best practices” geared towards parents and teachers. She suggested specific ways parents, teachers, and other support networks should show love and understanding towards foster youth. Similarly, Vacca’s (2008) study coincided with both Harden’s and Snodgrass’ findings. He claimed multiple placement settings trigger poor academic performance and found foster youth lack educated parents and/or support networks to help them with their homework and school affairs. He also determined teachers’ lack of knowledge about foster students and their backgrounds hinders their abilities to properly support their needs. Vacca (2008) explored possibilities for improving academic opportunities and success for high-risk
students. He called for a more enhanced curriculum focusing on problem solving and thinking skills as well as better teaching methods. He also encouraged a universal education where all students are taught together rather than pulling under-achieving students out of their classes for durations of the day. Vacca felt students need stronger administrative support. Teachers need to stop showing favoritism towards high achieving students. All students should be treated equally. Moreover, foster youth need to be informed about services available to them such as tutoring, career counseling, guidance counseling, college prep courses, tuition waivers, grants, scholarships, etc. In order to better prepare foster youth for a successful transition into independent living and for college life, Vacca called for more policies to be implemented on the national, state, and local levels. If these suggestions were incorporated into the curriculum and education system, foster youth would have better chances of competing with their peers and be more likely to gain a college education.

Similarly, Calix (2009) detected foster youth perform worse on tests than other non-foster care students. She attributed this finding to foster children’s characteristics including race, age, amount of time in foster care, and number of placements. The present study supports past findings that foster youth need stable, loving placements in order to promote healthy development. Moreover, the research at hand corresponds to previous research implying foster youth need more supportive microsystems such as parents and teachers in order to help close their academic achievement gap.
The literature revealed the inequalities, injustices, and lack of support and opportunity given to both present and former foster youth. There is a desperate need for change. More service, funding, and support should be available to former foster youth to aid them in accomplishing their educational, occupational, and life goals. Although limited research and reform recommendations do exist, they are often over looked and ignored. This information needs to be brought to society’s attention and taken seriously so foster youth in the past, present, and future, can gain access to the services, help, and academic possibilities they deserve. More research and policy reform is still needed in order to enhance the lives of these children and young adults.

Using the bioecological systems theory the present study showed how, despite the barriers and challenges that come with being a foster child, the ability to achieve a college education can still be attainable. Furthermore, this study suggested that while foster care negatively impacts the ability to achieve higher education, students in the present study were able to take advantage of various supports and resources. Fortunately for those who participated in this research, the majority of them experienced stable foster care placements and had supportive microsystems to help them with their academic struggles. The five nested systems in each students development have worked together simultaneously to mold and form each former foster youth into the adults they are today. Through the interviews it became clear how important the bioecological systems theory is to human development and academic success. Using this theory, the present study
identified how different aspects of their lives and development have both prepared and
challenged former foster youth in their path to higher education.

Microsystems are the people, places, and things that have the most direct impact on an individual’s development. The interviewees themselves served as examples of their own microsystems. Lacking the support and guidance from other microsystems, these students took it upon themselves to get the results they wished to see. Jessica claimed she helped herself get through college. Another student, Michelle mentioned in the interview, “I have to work for it and I do.” Life challenges, both personal and academic do not come easy for former foster youth. From their past experiences these students have become “the best [they] can be.” Although the participants felt they had relied mostly on themselves, they did receive assistance and guidance from other microsystems that attributed to their academic success as well.

Throughout the interviews, students acknowledged the other people who offered support and mentoring throughout their academic careers. The mesosystem consists of the links, interactions, and other types of connections between two or more microsystems. Some examples of this were friends, teachers, and counselors. Teresa spoke of the influence her teachers, primarily the teachers in the African American community, had on her and her academic performance. They encouraged her to “stay on track” and not to become “just another statistic.” Additionally, Jennifer discussed the importance of her counselors and how despite the situation, they were “always there for her.” Each and every student included their relationship with Anne, the director of the
Guardian Scholars program, as an important microsystem in their lives. She became the most popular response as an individual who offered support and guidance in these students’ lives. Her influence was paramount to their academic success.

The exosystem is the indirect impact various social elements have on a student’s life. Due to their indirect effect, some students were unsure or not as aware of their influence. However, throughout the interviews, it became apparent that different resources and support networks greatly impacted former foster youth’s academic abilities in college. Some students spoke of the benefits of the WELL and health care services that enabled them to maintain healthy lifestyles while juggling their school work. Most of the students included the insurmountable ways the Guardian Scholars office, as both an educational resource and personal support network, aided them throughout their college career. Other former foster youth determined how financial assistances from child welfare agencies, financial aid offices, and government grants “made it possible to go to college.” Michelle claimed “sixty percent of her living expenses are paid for by financial aid.” Therefore, the multiple elements that made up the students’ exosystems, including educational resources and other support networks, have indirectly made a positive impact on the higher education of the individuals interviewed.

The present study has revealed the rough and challenging life experiences of foster youth. The macrosystem includes the cultural contexts of an individual such as one’s socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, religious preferences, values, and beliefs. This study discussed how low economic statuses as well as growing up in rough
neighborhoods made life for these former foster youth extremely difficult. Some students spoke of living in great poverty. For example, Steven elaborated on the fear of getting evicted from his house as a child. He also described the pleasure of having his own bed for the first time when he entered foster care. In another instance, Jennifer spoke about living under the poverty line in “rough neighborhoods.” She grew up in a neighborhood “with lots of killing.” Despite the hardships these former foster youth faced as children, the macrosystems they were exposed to influenced the person they have become today. They decided to take action and with the help of friends, family, teachers, and financial assistances, they were able to work towards creating better lives for themselves. For example, Christopher remarked, “I always knew I didn’t want that ever. For me or my kids. So I was gonna do whatever I had to, to not let that happen. To make it.” They found their solace through school and saw higher education as the primary way to open up economic opportunities and climb the social ladder.

Different events and experiences have occurred throughout these student’s lives that have also had a paramount impact on their development and academic careers. The chronosystem includes events or transitions over one’s life that has had a lasting impression on who they have become. One student spoke of the death of his mother and sister and how those events motivated him to do well academically. Another student spoke of entering foster care for the first time and the challenges of the transition. She chose to take on the challenges and not to give up. She was a “fighter” and was able to gain acceptance to college despite the difficulties she was faced with. The present study
demonstrated how former foster youth can still make it to college despite the impact of negative macrosystems and chronosystems.

The five systems within the bioecological theory were apparent throughout all of the interviews. This study indicates time in foster care can have distinct negative impacts on the pursuit of higher education; however, the educational resources and support networks available to former foster youth can also aid them throughout their academic careers. Although it may be difficult, this study showed how self-determination coupled with external factors can enable success despite the challenges brought about by foster care.

Limitations to the Study

Despite the significant findings, this study also has its limitations. First, the interviewees were all members of the Guardian Scholars program; therefore, this is a very specific population within the former foster care community. The participants made up a convenience sample and offered the researcher a window into a very specific and relatively successful group. The individuals who agreed to participate were all more involved students within the Guardian Scholars program who were willing to offer their time and stories. Thus, they are not representative of all former foster youth. Instead they are only representative of a sub-population of former foster youth who are now enrolled in a University. In addition, the fact that all participants were University students means community college students and students taking online classes were not represented in this study. Additionally, college graduates who spent time in foster care
were also excluded from this study further limiting the scope of this research. Overall, the main limitation to this study is it is only representative of a sub population of former foster youth who are now University students and is not representative of the entire former foster youth community as a whole.

Furthermore, since the current study only focused on former foster youth enrolled in college, it also excluded former foster youth who never made it to college. Considering a large majority of former foster youth never go to college, this is significant limitation. It would have been beneficial to include interviews with former foster youth who did not go to college, or even did not graduate high school in order to compare subgroups within the former foster youth community. It also would have been helpful to interview former foster youth who chose to take an occupational route as opposed to the educational path and compare the two as well. Another factor to take into consideration is a large majority of former foster youth have children. Only one participant from the current study had a child. Therefore, the lack of parents interviewed also serves as a limitation to the study.

Finally, placement settings and number of placements are critical to foster youths’ developments. The larger amount of placements a child is placed into, the more detrimental it is to their development. Also, children placed into kinship care or placed in a home with a single loving, caring foster family are more likely to experience a healthy development compared to a child forced to live in multiple group homes. In the present study, half of the interviewees were placed in kinship settings and only three out
of ten experienced multiple placements. Thus, the majority of the participants were at an advantage compared to other foster youth, also creating another limitation to the study. Although this research illuminates the experiences of a sub-population of former foster youth currently enrolled in the University, it is not representative of former foster youth as a whole. Having a larger and more diverse sample would have been beneficial to this study.

Questions and Implications

Although the students interviewed in this study are considered a unique sub-population in the foster care community, these findings highlight two important questions. First, what encouraged these students to take an educational route rather than other paths? The idea of the American Dream persuades people to believe the more education one has, the better off they will be occupationally and financially. These students bought into the myth of meritocracy and saw success through higher education. Additionally, for some, they were influenced to get a college education by friends, family members, teachers and/or counselors. Throughout the interviews, many of the students spoke of specific individuals who encouraged and pushed them to go to college. Each student had at least one person help guide them through the educational process. Whether it was an older brother or sister, a foster mother or father, or school counselor or teacher, someone was there to help them personally and financially with applying to college, taking exams, filling out paper work, and/or giving them encouragement and praise throughout the way. The students interviewed were fortunate to have helping
hands throughout the way to enable them to get where they are today. Further research could explore what it is specifically about those relationships that contributed to the participants’ success in reaching the university.

Second, what kept these students going during times of struggle compared to giving up and “becoming just another statistic?” Many former foster youth never graduate high school, are unemployed, and some are even homeless. What made these students succeed compared to the majority of their counterparts? There are many contributing factors. One is, most of them had a family member, teacher, or other support network who kept them going and motivated them to stay on track. Compared to other foster youth, many of these students lived in kinship settings. Therefore, rather than being placed in group homes or with strangers, many of these students remained with biological family members. For those who were not in kinship placements, they stayed in one setting for an extended period of time and did not experience multiple placement settings. Lastly, many of these students were not in foster care the majority of their lives. Many were only in foster care for short periods of time. Taking these facts into consideration, compared to foster youth who spent the majority of their lives in foster care, jumped from placement to placement, and did not have strong support networks, the students interviewed were more likely to be successful than other foster youth.

These two questions stimulate implications for the foster care community. First, foster youth need stronger, more loyal support networks. It is important for struggling
youth to have someone to turn to for help and guidance for day to day life and particularly in times of struggle. Second, it would be beneficial for efforts to place foster youth in kinship placements and permanent settings to be strengthened even further. Current resources and policy do appear to be helpful, but if anything can be done to further promote safe, permanent settings with biological family it should be implemented. Stability is important for development. Third, educational resources need to be made available to foster youth. Foster youth need to have easy access to resources so they can take advantage of them. The participants in the current study spoke of the difficulties of finding educational resources. If more resources were made available, it might increase the numbers of foster youth who are able to pursue higher education. Last, financial resources need to be made more available as well. Due to their status as foster youth, many students are given grants and other forms of financial assistance for college, however, many students are unaware these financial resources exist. If more students were made aware they could afford college, more foster youth might be interested in taking an educational path as opposed to an occupational path.

Despite being a unique sub-population within the former foster care community, each participant has a success story. Each student should be proud of themselves and should be praised for their accomplishments. The stories told within this study give researchers and other readers a better understanding of how foster care both prepares and challenges students for college. These interview responses gave a more personal touch and firsthand accounts made these findings come to life. These are true stories of
struggle and success. Implications need to be made so future foster youth can be better prepared to take the path towards higher education.
Appendix A

Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a study of former foster youth that are now college students. The purpose of this research is to assess the impact of obtaining a higher education on former foster youth’s lives, and specifically explore how they navigate the strengths and weaknesses faced along this path.

By signing below, you agree to participate in a one-on-one interview that will take up to 1-2 hours of your time. The questions pertain to your college experience, your communication and relationship with your family, friends, and other influential persons, as well as challenges you may have faced in these areas.

While your participation in this study may not directly benefit you, the results will ideally help further our understanding of how former foster youth balance their pursuit of higher education with other areas of their lives, including personal relationships. If this interview brings up any negative memories or feelings, you are encouraged to contact Sacramento State Counseling and Psychological Services to discuss your concerns with a counselor (916-278-6416); http://www.csus.edu/psysrv/.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You can choose to stop the interview, or to not answer a particular question at any time. Your participation will be kept completely confidential. The researcher will not discuss your participation with anyone outside of the project. Published results of this study will contain only aggregate information and no individual identifying information will be included. Whether or not you participate will have no effect on your status in the Guardian Scholars Program in any way.

You are asked to mark below whether you agree to be audio-recorded. No names or identifying information will be connected to the audio recording, and pseudonyms will be used in any reference to quotes. Only the researcher, Tiffany Barker, will have access to the audio recording and/or notes. The recording will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home, until transcription is complete, at which point the file will be erased.

Thank you for your time. If you have any concerns or questions about this research, please contact me, Tiffany Barker, XXX-XXX-XXX, XXXXXXXXXXXX@gmail.com or my adviser, Dr. Ellen Berg, CSUS, Amador Hall 453A, 916-278-7577, berge@csus.edu.
I acknowledge by signing this form I am consenting to participate.

Date: ________________________________

Name of participant (please print): ______________________________________________

Signature of participant: ______________________________________________________
Appendix B

Written Survey Questions

Basic Background Information:

1. What is your first name?
2. How old are you?
3. What city do you currently live in?
4. When did you graduate high school or receive your GED?
5. When did you first enter college?
6. Do you have any children?
   6a. If so, how many?
   6b. If so, what are their ages?
7. What is your current relationship status? (Single, Married, Divorced, etc.?)
Appendix C

Oral Interview Questions

Basic Information:

1. What year are you in school? (1st-Freshman, 2nd-Sophomore, 3rd-Junior, 4th-Senior, 5th, Graduate Student, etc.?)

2. What is your major?

3. When do you hope or plan to graduate with your Bachelor’s degree?

4. What are your plans or goals for after you graduate from Sac State?

5. Are you currently employed?

5a. If so, what do you do?

In relation to your experience in foster care:

6. What age did you first enter foster care?

7a. How many times were you placed into foster care?

7b. If you had multiple placements, did you have to move around a lot?

7. When you were in foster care, what type(s) of placement(s) were you in? (Did you live with a foster family? Where you in a relative placement where you lived with a relative? Did you live in a group home? Etc.)

8. How old were you when you exited the foster care system?

Microsystems:
1. When you think about being in college, who is the first person that comes to mind who has helped you get here?

2. In what ways has this specific person helped you and/or motivated you to be successful as a college student?

3. Who else has offered you support and guidance throughout your education?

4. Specifically, how has this person helped you become the person you are today?

5. Is there anyone else that comes to mind that has been there for you and helped you through your times of struggle?

  5a. If so, how has this person helped you when you were struggling or losing motivation in school or even outside of school?

6. How would you describe your own personal motivation?

  6a. Academically, do you rely mostly on yourself or others to get the results you wish to see? In what ways?

Mesosystems:

7. Does your biological or extended family support your choice to go to college?

   (Such as parents, siblings, grandparents, etc.?)

   8a. If so, in what ways do they show support or not show support?

8. While you were in foster care, was there anyone specific that encouraged you to finish high school and go on to college? (Such as a foster parent, distant relative, child welfare staff, another foster child, etc.?)

9. On the other hand, was there anyone that discouraged you from going to college while you were in foster care?
10. How have your relationships with certain teachers, school counselors, tutors influenced your academic experiences? For example, was there any specific teacher in high school that encouraged you to go to college or anything like that?

11. In what ways have your peers (friends/neighbors/etc.) had an impact on your college career? Did they encourage and support you to go to college or have they made it more difficult to be successful in school? In what ways?

12. In what ways were your experiences in school affected by your experiences living in foster care?

13. How did the neighborhood(s) you grew up in influence your school experiences?

13a. What was the neighborhood that you grew up in like?

14. In what ways have your friends influenced your academic achievements in school?

15. Has religion played any role in your academic success?

15a. If so, how?

Exosystems:

16. How have extended family, support networks, etc. (indirectly) affected your development into becoming a college student?

17. In what ways has the child welfare system influenced your ability to become a college student? (Access to financial aid, counselors, tutors, etc.?)

18. What roles have legal services or community health care services impacted you and your college career? (The ability to exit foster care, access to health care, etc.)
19. How have your occupational experiences influenced your educational achievements?

18a. Has your job ever gotten in the way of your ability to do well in school?

Macrosystems:

20. Have any of our laws negatively or positively impacted your ability to go to college? (For example, emancipation laws?)

21a. If so, how?

21. How have social attitudes about foster care impacted the person you have become today?

22. How has your socio-economic status, influenced your opportunities for success in higher education?

Guardian Scholars:

23. How did you find out about or first hear about Guardian Scholars?

24. What kind of influence has your mentor had on you throughout your time here at Sac State?

26a. Is he or she helpful, not helpful, etc.?

25. How have the other members of Guardian Scholars impacted your academic success so far?

27a. Do you guys create study groups together or motivate each other to do well, etc.?
26. Is there anyone else from Guardian Scholars that comes to mind that has really made a difference in your life and your academics?

27. Overall, how has the Guardian Scholars program influenced your ability to be a successful college student?

Additional information:

28. Is there anything else you would like to discuss or talk about that was not touched on by the interview questions?
References


November 16, 2012.


*Urological Nursing.* 27: 419-427.


http://www.stuartfoundation.org/NewsAndReports/ReportsandResearch