THE REALITIES OF A GROUP OF YOUNG ADULTS AFTER AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE IN NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

by

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Abstract

Youth age out of the foster care system in British Columbia when they reach 19 years old. At this time, young adults are no longer eligible for many of the services and supports they received while in foster care. This qualitative study explored the experiences and realities of six former youth in care. Content analysis and a deductive approach were used to analyze the data, identifying manifest and latent themes. The findings of the study identified various struggles for the participants, while they were in foster care, and after leaving foster care. Challenges that this group have faced after aging out of care include: lack of stable housing, insufficient food, lack of education, substance abuse, and unemployment. Recommendations derived from the interviews were identified to improve service planning and provision for youth aging out of care.

Table of Contents

Abstract ii

Table of Contents iii

List of Tables v

Acknowledgments vi

Chapter One: Introduction 1
- Purpose of the Study 2
- Research Question 2
- Potential Benefits of the Study 2
- Conceptual Lens 3
- Definition of Terms 5
- Locating Myself Within the Research 6

Chapter Two: Literature Review 9
- General Issues Affecting Former Youth in Care 9
- Legislation and Service Standards 10
- Supports, Control, and Stability 13
- Belonging 15
- Independence Planning 17
- Education 18
- Housing Post-Care 19
- Employment 20
- Criminal Involvement 21
- What Youth Need 23
- Cultural Issues 27
- Recommendations 28
- Summary 28

Chapter Three: Research Methodology 31
- Qualitative Research 31
- Data Analysis: Content Analysis 32
- Research Method and Design 34
- Sample Selection 34
- Participant Recruitment 35
- Informed Consent 36
- Ethical Considerations 36
- Data Collection 38
- Reliability 40
- Member Checks 41
- Reflexivity 42
- Methodology Summary 43

Chapter Four: Research Findings 44
Manifest Themes 46
Latent Themes 56

Chapter Five: Discussion 67
Similarities in the Literature and this Research 68
Strengths 69
Anti-oppressive Social Work 71
Agreements with Young Adults (AYA) 73
Limitations 75
Recommendations 76
Future Research 78
Conclusion 79

References 82

Appendix A: Research and Ethics Board Approval Form 86

Appendix B: Information Letter 87

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form 89

Appendix D: Questionnaire Guide 91

Appendix E: Information Poster 93

List of Tables

Table 1: Identified Themes 45

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Chapter One: Introduction

In British Columbia, youth who were in government or delegated agency care are considered legal adults when they reach 19 years of age. When some youth age out of foster care, they have not only the issues of dealing with the emotional and physical trauma that brought them into foster care, but also the stress and reality of coping as independent, young adults (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, & Brown, 2007; Stein & Dumaret, 2011). As young adults, they are expected to be successful without many of the supports they came to rely on while in foster care. Many other young adults, not from foster care, have the continued support of their parents into adulthood (Clark, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2007). Research has identified that former youth in-care have a higher likelihood, compared to their peers, of: incarceration, substance abuse, homelessness, mental illness, and not completing high school (Drowsky & Courtney, 2009; Freundlich & Avery, 2006; Landvoy, 2009; Stott, 2012; Tweddle, 2005).

Through qualitative interviews with six former youth in foster care, my research explored their in-care experiences and the realities they have faced since they aged out of foster care. The first chapter of my research explains the purpose, goals, and potential benefits of my research and identifies the research question. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework that guides my research. A number of terms that are in the research are defined, followed by a description of my location within this research. The literature review is in the second chapter, which will review studies and articles related to my research. Chapter three includes my research methodology, and methods that were applied in this research. The research findings will form the fourth chapter, followed by the conclusion in the fifth chapter.

Purpose of the Study

The goal of my research was to identify some of the realities of a group of young adults since they have aged out of foster care in Northern British Columbia. In my experiences as a social worker, I have seen former youth in foster care deal with many challenges, including: access to stable housing, employment, and lack of adequate support. In my research, I identified post-care challenges and realities for the group of participants, as well as positive experiences, in- and out- of foster care, and personal strengths. I also identified ways to improve in-care independence planning. This research provided the opportunity to listen and learn from this group of young adults who had been in foster care, and I incorporated their interview responses into my recommendations for service delivery with youth in and post foster care.

The results of this research will be shared with agencies and service providers who work with youth in foster care, in hopes of improving youths' in-care experiences and independence planning, which in-turn could have a positive affect on post-care realities.

Research Question

My research asked the question: What are the realities of a group of young adults who have aged out of foster care in Northern British Columbia?

Potential Benefits of the Study

The potential benefits of this research include highlighting gaps in the services that prepare youth for independence. Through this research, I also identified the strengths of independence plans; what had been successful for youth. I believe that in order to improve independence planning, changes should be reflected not only in child welfare legislature and policy, but also in frontline practice. Increasing awareness can influence positive change in

social work practice. Based on a strengths perspective, this research provided the opportunity for former youth in foster care to share their experiences and insights into their independence planning. Participants also provided suggestions on service improvements for them as adults, and for youth who are preparing to leave foster care.

Conceptual Lens

My research was guided by anti-oppressive theory and a strength based perspective. Anti-oppressive theory seeks to raise awareness about oppression and empower those who are oppressed (Mullaly, 1997). Through my research, I worked to identify oppressions that affected the participants. Oppression is understood as "the domination of subordinate groups in society by a powerful (politically, economically, socially, and culturally) group" (Mullaly, 1997, p. 27). Throughout their lives in foster care, young adults' experiences have been shaped by power structures embedded in the child welfare system. An example of anti-oppressive practice, in the context of my study, includes involving children, youth, community, and family in foster care plan development; versus historical (and sometimes current) child welfare practice of clients and community being told what the plans are (Emmel & Conn, 2004). Sadly, in my experiences in social work, collaborative practice does not occur in all care plans for children and youth. In my research, by exploring participants' opinions of what is necessary to improve independence planning, I attempted to increase their own recognition of the importance of their voice. Through research, "we cannot give voice, but we do hear voices that we record and interpret" (Kohler-Riessman, 1993, p. 8). This research provided an opportunity to listen and learn from participants' knowledge and experiences.

Anti-oppressive theory not only guided my research, but was reflected in my interactions with participants. An anti-oppressive stance includes recognizing that as researcher, I could be perceived as being in a position of privilege, (based in part on my education and my role in social work) and because of this, participants might have felt a power difference (Kobayashi, 2003). Given this realization, I tried to create a more egalitarian relationship with the participants by emphasizing the importance of their input. I explained that they were the experts on this topic, and through their stories, we would be able to create awareness of their in- and out- of foster care struggles.

I also referred to the strengths perspective throughout my research. As a social worker, I am aware of how child welfare policy, service standards, and legislation can affect my social work practice, and in turn, the successes of youth aging out of foster care. I know from experience that children are removed[1] from families and brought into foster care at a young age, and often age out of foster care as adults. If children and youth are not adopted or returned to family care, what is needed while they are in foster care to better prepare them as adults? The mandate of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) includes protecting children (Child, Family, and Community Services Act, 1996) yet the word "protection" needs to be more holistic. Safety should not only include their physical and emotional safety; the lens should be broadened to include connection, satisfaction, feelings of caring, and love. Safety should not only be provided for children while they are in foster care; a support network should be developed to transition with them into adulthood.

The strengths perspective focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses. Despite the hardships that former youth in-care have encountered, they have in some capacity shown resilience, and these areas of strength will be highlighted in my research. A strength based

1 Removed—to take a child into the care of a director under section 30, 36 or 4 of the CFCS Act (1996).

perspective aims to enhance personal and developmental growth; focusing on abilities and personal power and identifying ways to reach goals (Saleeby, 2002). In this research, the need for growth for social workers, youth, and the child welfare system as a whole is discussed.

The philosophical principles behind the strengths perspective include liberation and empowerment (Saleeby, 2002). This research identifies some areas of how, or if, youth felt empowered in their independence plans and since becoming adults. Principles of the strengths perspective include: the belief that everyone has strengths and the capacity to grow and change within their environment; and the value of collaborative practice (Saleeby, 2002). From an anti-oppressive and strengths based perspective, I hope that participants' research involvement was an empowering process for them; in part by acknowledging the value of the information that they shared.

Definition of Terms

In my research, there are six major terms that emerged: realties, youth, foster care, young adults, aged out, and Northern British Columbia. The reality refers to the young adults' day to day life since becoming an adult and independent from the child welfare system. Their reality was explored through qualitative, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix D), which covered topics such as supports, education, housing, and employment. Foster care is defined as a child or youth being in the custodial care of a government or Aboriginal agency, under a Temporary Custody Order (TCO) or a Continuing Custody Order (CCO) under the Child, Family and Community Services Act (CFCSA) (1996). I referred to the definition of youth that is used in the CFCS Act (1996) as "someone who is 16 years of age or over, but is under 19 years of age" (p. 6). An adult in Canada is based on the age of

majority in that province. In British Columbia, the age of majority is 19 years old. I referred to young adults in my research, as someone who is between the age of 19 and 25 years old. In British Columbia, youth who are in foster care exit the child welfare system when they are 19 years old; they are no longer eligible for services and support under the CFCS Act (1996). The term "aged out" in my research then, refers to when the youth has turned 19 years old, and exits the child welfare system.

The definition of Northern British Columbia varies and can (among other definitions) be based on geography, population, and geographic location. Perceptions of the North include remoteness and isolation (Schmidt & Klein, 2004). For the purpose of my research, I referred to the Northern Health Authority definition of Northern British Columbia as: "British Columbia's landscape, bordered by the Northwest and Yukon Territories to the north, the BC interior to the south, Alberta to the east, and Alaska and the Pacific Ocean to the west" (Northern Health, The Northern Way of Caring, n.d.).

Locating Myself Within the Research

In my research, I explored the outcomes of former youth in foster care, and what services were provided to prepare them for their transition to adulthood. My personal experiences, values, and beliefs have shaped my research interest and approach. As a social worker, I have experienced various roles within the profession. I worked for the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) as a child protection social worker. In this role I was involved with initial removals: "to take a child into the care of a director under section 30, 36 or 4" (CFCS Act, 1996, p. 8). I later moved to a Guardianship position with a delegated agency, Carrier Sekani Family Services (CSFS). This role involved working with

children and youth who were in foster care under a Continuing Custody Order[2]. Part of my role involved developing plans with youth to prepare them to age out of foster care. Currently, I am a resource social worker, working primarily with foster parents and group homes, providing support and monitoring their service contracts. From my resource experience, I have learned that as teenagers become more rebellious and more defiant of authority, it often means the beginning of the end to their foster home placement[3] and the beginning of their involvement with group home placements. In my experience, both foster homes and group homes lack the necessary supports and opportunities for training to prepare youth for independence. In some instances, what would be deemed as "typical" teenage behaviours can lead to foster home placement breakdowns, causing more placement changes and instability for youth.

In all three of my roles in social work, I have witnessed children and youth who have had numerous and unstable placements. I have been made aware of the lack of services to prepare youth for independence and the few services that transition with them when they age out of foster care. I continue to be informally involved with former youth in-care. This contact is generally through transport, including to and from their communities, texting, phone calls, and advocacy. I have found self advocacy is one of the many skills that some of these young adults were not taught in foster care. Young adults continue to contact me for things that I would have contacted my parents for when I first left home. Many young adults, not raised in foster care, have the opportunity to return home when they are going through difficult times, are saving money, or attending post-secondary education (Statistics Canada,

2 CCO "means an order under section 41 (1) (d), 42.2(4) (d) or (7) or 49 (4), (5) or (10) (a) placing a child in the continuing custody of the director" (p. 6, CFCS Act, 1996).

3 Placement – the place where the child or youth lives or "is placed" in foster care. Examples include foster homes or group homes.

2007). For many youth who have aged out of foster care, and for the young adults I interviewed in this research, this is not a likely option. It is my experience working with youth that provoked my interest in this research topic.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Numerous studies have explored the outcomes of former youth in foster care. Many of the studies laid blame for the negative outcomes of this population on their lack of in-care preparation for independence. Studies of youth who have aged out of foster care indicated that many of their post-care outcomes are influenced by in-care experiences (Fransson & Storø, 2011; Rutman et al., 2007; Stein & Dumaret, 2011; Stott, 2012Tweddle, 2005). Youths' supports, education, housing, employment, and criminal involvement are all influenced by their in-care experience. This chapter will provide a review of relevant literature discussing the above five topics, the connections between them, and ways to improve in-care services with the goal of positively influencing youth outcomes.

General Issues Affecting Former Youth in Care

A study completed at the University of Victoria explored the outcomes for youth who had been raised in, and aged out of, foster care (Rutman et al., 2007). The study's findings included: pregnancy rates are higher among youth from foster care than youth who have not been in care, and youth raised in foster care struggle with mental illness. Nearly half of the young adults in this study reported their main source of income was from social assistance. Almost all of the employed young adults worked in low paid employment, and less than half of the participants had completed their high school by age 20 or 21. If the youth had not completed high school by the time they were 19, the study noted that they were even less likely to complete it as adults. Participants had little stability in housing, which in this study accounted for the attrition rate between interviews; some of the youth had moved three or more times, in six to nine months (Rutman et al., 2007). Compared to young adults who were not raised in foster care, youth who had aged out of care were less likely to be living

with family, more likely to have lower education, more likely to be on income assistance, less likely to rate their own health positively, more likely to have an ineffective support network, more likely to have been arrested for a criminal offence, and more likely to have higher levels of alcohol or drug use (Rutman et al., 2007).

Legislation and Service Standards

When identifying foster care services for youth, it is beneficial to review the legislation and service standards that mandate this service in British Columbia. The legislation that oversees social work practice in British Columbia is The Child, Family and Community Service Act (CFCSA, 1996). Accompanying the Act, and guiding British Columbia child welfare social work practice, is the Child and Family Service Standards (2004). In the CFCSA (1996) it states: "a director may establish support services for youth, including, but not limited to, safe houses, outreach services and supported living arrangements" (p. 12); "Included in agreements with youth is the provision of residential, education or other support services" (CFCSA, 1996, p.13); this includes financial assistance. There is no mention in the Act or Service Standards of continued support when the youth ages out of foster care.

The purpose of the Child and Family Service Standards is to "promote consistent quality service for vulnerable children, youth and families" (CFSS, 2004, p. 1). There are two parts to the Service Standards: Child and Family Service Standards, and the Children in Care Service Standards. Themes of the Standards include: strengthening family involvement in planning and decision making; keeping Aboriginal children connected with their families and communities, and collaborative working relationships with Aboriginal communities;

stability and lifelong relationships for children; and involving community in plans to protect children and support families (CFCSA, 1996).

The Children in Care Standard 15 provides guidance for social workers when a child leaves care, but is more relevant to a child returning to family care than a youth who is aging out of foster care. As per the Standard, the guardianship social worker should support the youth in adjusting to their change in care and living arrangements (out of a foster or group home); and, if the plan is for the child to return to parents and family, the parents should be involved in the transition planning and receive information on relevant community resources to assist supporting the child. The Child and Family Service Standard 15 provides guidance for youth services, but does not include guidance on preparing a youth for independence.

There is nothing mentioned in the Child and Family Service Standards (2004) about ongoing support for youth after they have aged out of care, something youth and professionals have identified as needed (Freundlich & Avery, 2006). The Child, Family and Community Service Act (1996) does not provide social workers with sufficient guidance nor does it acknowledge the importance of supporting youth to prepare for independence. There is a gap in the legislation that would allow for ongoing commitment and support for adults who have been in foster care.

The Representative for Children and Youth in British Columbia provides advocacy services for youth in foster care, and has acknowledged the lack of support for youth aging out of care (Representative for Children and Youth, 2010). As with other services, the Representative supports youth in foster care, but does not have the mandate to provide support and advocacy for them when they age out of care.

According to Shin (2009) some youth, while still in foster care, identified that they were given opportunities to gain independence skills. Other research with young adults who had aged out of foster care identified that their in-care preparation for independence was insufficient (Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007). As young adults, they continued to need supports, advocacy, and opportunities to build on their independence skills. It is possible that some youth, while in-care, believed they were receiving adequate preparation, and until faced with the reality of true independence, were unaware of the array of skills and knowledge needed to live independently.

Under the Child Family and Community Service Act (CFCSA, 1996) and Child and Family Service Standards (2004), youth in British Columbia age out of foster care at 19 and are no longer eligible for the same services they received while in-care. The CFCSA, Service Standards, and Representative for Children and Youth, are there to guide social workers in their practice of supporting youth, and to provide advocacy for youth in-care if their needs and rights are not being met. These supports do not continue to provide guidance and support for youth when they have aged out of care. But often, they need this support as adults.

The mandate of the Representative for Children and Youth is "to improve services and outcomes for children in BC through advocacy, accountability and review" (Representative for Children and Youth, 2010). Youth "outcomes" should include their adult independence realities. Social workers would benefit from an increase in support and guidance when working with youth around independence planning and it should be made a priority. Youth and service providers shared similar opinions when assessing independence planning services. Professionals attributed the negative outcomes for youth on the

weaknesses in independence planning services and preparation (Freundlich & Avery, 2006). If the legislation and standards required social workers to improve this service provision, it would indicate the importance of independence planning, by supporting social workers in their work to help youth, not only in foster care, but also post foster care.

Supports, Control, and Stability

Youth who were formerly in foster care need continued support as they become independent. Research has identified that, when former youth in care have continued support from their former foster caregivers, their outcomes are more positive, compared to those where ongoing support was not provided (Schofield & Beck, 2009). Ongoing support can cover a variety of areas, such as housing, employment, education, or simply the day-to-day support that young adults often require as they learn, and transition to the realities of independence. Continued support into adulthood becomes even more necessary for youth with learning difficulties or mental health issues (Schofield & Beck, 2009).

In foster care, there are so many decisions made for children and youth. In some cases, a feeling of powerlessness is almost inevitable, given the numerous decisions made for them (Samuels, 2008; Schofield & Beck, 2009; Stott, 2012). In child protection cases, children sometimes have no choice regarding their removal from family, community, and school. In smaller communities with fewer resources, children are removed not only from family but also, in some cases, from their community, which, among all the other changes, leads to a change in school. There are effects from every move, from the initial removal to placement changes. Placement changes can often lead to more distance from the individual's home, friends, and family, as well as changes in visitation schedules (Samuels, 2008; Stott, 2012).

Instability in foster homes can lead to later issues for children and youth (Stott, 2012). Placement instability is connected with an increased risk of delinquency, crime, and incarceration (Ryan, Hernandez, & Herz, 2007). There are also the emotional and social impacts that come with changes in foster homes (Stein & Dumaret, 2011; Stott, 2012). Former foster youth have identified that constant moves impacted their later willingness to form trusting relationships (Samuels, 2008). Placement instability also contributed to substance use as young adults, perhaps to cope with feelings of hopelessness and helplessness (Stott, 2012). Placement instability is also connected with mental health disorders; indeed, research has shown that children in foster care have higher rates of mental illness than their peers (Stein & Dumaret, 2011).

When in foster care, children and youth should feel they have some control of their lives with the provision of day-to-day opportunities for control. Youth from foster care have identified their desire for collaborative practice, ongoing relationships, and youth-focused practice (Scannapieco et al., 2007). Children and youth in-care often have no control over the quality and length of their relationships, in part because of foster placement moves (Samuels, 2008). Placement changes can occur without children having sufficient notice or the opportunity to say goodbye to family and friends (Stott, 2012).

Taking an anti-oppressive and strengths-based approach, and including youth in decisions about their own plans, is likely to increase their feeling of power, worth, and control, and also to teach them the skills of healthy decision making. Although changes in foster placements might be inevitable, the process of change needs to be more collaborative in order to decrease later negative effects, and to increase autonomy and empowerment for children and youth.

Belonging

Children and youth display their emotions and feelings differently. By the time children enter foster care, they have likely already experienced much adversity in their home life (Stein & Dumaret, 2007). It is not uncommon for youth to struggle to put into words how they are feeling (Scannapieco et al., 2007). Foster caregivers can help youth learn to deal with their emotions and feelings in appropriate ways by helping them to identify and process their feelings and emotions (Samuels, 2008; Scannapieco et al., 2007). Some former youth in care recognized that their upbringing was different from peers who were raised with one continuous caregiver. Some described that stability in childhood as "regular families" (Samuels, 2008, p. 77). Children and youth in foster care have been through trauma (such as neglect or abuse) that brought them into foster care, as well as trauma in being removed from family and placed in a different home—sometimes one that is completely unknown and away from what is familiar to them. They need someone to provide the emotional support to help them process what has happened, what it means, how they are feeling, and perhaps how to make sense of it (Samuels, 2008).

Youth in foster care need the opportunity to feel as though they are a part of the foster family where they have been placed, while still having the opportunity to maintain belonging in their own family, culture, and community (Scannapieco et al., 2007). A component of family membership involves continued support and involvement from former foster caregivers after the youth has aged out of foster care. Former youth in-care have identified that they need more ongoing support than is provided to them post-care (Freundlich & Avery, 2006). Whenever possible, former foster caregivers should be supported and encouraged by child welfare agencies to remain involved with youth who have lived with

them. This could include emotional support, invitations to family get-togethers, and advice on living independently.

Former youth in-care have identified the importance they place on relationships that have endured through the many changes in their life (e.g., placement, school, social workers) (Samuels, 2008). Longevity in relationships with supportive adults and peers who understand what they are going through are valued by former youth in-care (Samuels, 2008). Children and youth benefit from having someone who believes in, and encourages them (Schofield & Beck, 2009). Having a supportive, healthy, adult relationship is a protective factor in supporting youth to successfully transition out of foster care (Drowsky & Courtney, 2009; Stein & Dumaret, 2011).

Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Bockern (2002) discussed four skills that youth need to be successful: belonging, mastery, significance, and generosity. All of these skills are entwined and influence the other: "When the circle of courage is broken, the lives of children are no longer in harmony and balance" (p. 61). Significance includes having the acceptance, attention, and affection of others. Without significance, one feels unaccepted; that they do not belong (Brendtro et al., 2002). In group homes, in part because of staff turnover and inconsistency, youth often have less opportunity to develop and strengthen long-term relationships with healthy, positive adults than in a long-term foster home. Group home staff are often relatively young and are not in the job for the long term (Courtney, 2009). Similar to foster caregivers, group home staff are not responsible to continue to support youth when they age out of foster care (Courtney, 2009). The lack of a consistent caregiver should be acknowledged in independence plans for youth. Youth and service providers recognize the importance of long-term relationships that can continue to provide support when youth age

out of care (Melipigano & Collins, 2003; Samuels, 2008). However, many supports in foster care are ended post-care (Raybacha, 1989). Independence planning for youth should include connecting youth to adults who can continue to provide stable support for them, even if their placement changes and as they become adults.

Independence Planning

Adulthood does not happen automatically when a youth reaches 19 years old; it is a process (Rutman et al., 2007). When a youth reaches 19, it does not mean they are any more ready to be independent than before their birthday. Many young adults not raised in foster care have the opportunity to return home when they are going through difficult times, saving money, or attending post-secondary education (Clark, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2007). Typically, for youth who have aged out of foster care, this is not a possibility. In short, leaving foster care can be a stressful and scary experience. There is evidence that both mental and physical health problems increase for youth during their transition from foster care, possibly due to their new challenges and experiences (Stein & Dumaret, 2011).

Professionals recognized that many youth did not realize what independence was going to be like until they actually aged out of foster care and experienced these realities, namely that there were few supports and positive role models to help them—reflecting the lack of services for this population (Freundlich & Avery, 2006). Discharge plans are not implemented soon enough to prepare youth for independence (Freundlich & Avery, 2006). Independence planning for youth would improve if there was a slower transition out of foster care, giving them sufficient time to become accustomed to the growing responsibilities and realities of adulthood (Stein, 2008).

Education

Youth leaving foster care commonly have lower education levels than youth who were not in-care (Courtney, 2009), which points to the fact that children and youth in-care need supports to overcome the barriers to their educational achievement (Barth, 1990; Noonan, Matone, Zlotnik, Hernandez-Mekonnen, Watts, Rubin, & Mollen, 2012). Supports include positive mentorship and identifying and conducting educational assessments and identifying goals (Melipigano & Collins, 2003). In foster care, youth do not consistently have encouragement in their education. This leads to struggles in school, including possibly dropping out (Blome, 1997). Although teachers and social workers should not assume children in care will do less well in school, based on their "in care" status (Blome, 1997), school staff need to be aware of the realities for many children in foster care, and the effects of this on their educational achievement.

As stated, children and youth in foster care have higher rates of mental health illness than those not in-care (Stein & Dumaret, 2011). The research has shown the connection between poor mental health, poor physical health, and the lower educational level of children in foster care (Stein & Dumaret, 2011). Shin (2009) recognized that, although foster youth receive some opportunities to develop their independent living skills while in foster care, mental illness and/or limited education could reduce, or interfere with, the use of these skills as adults. Youth might attend life skills courses, but this does not mean they have mastered the skills taught, and this factor could be impacted by their educational level. For example, life skills include learning how to complete a resume, but based on a lower education level, youth might not be able to read or write well. Youths' academic abilities should be explored

and included in independence preparation, to make the most effective plan possible for each youth, and address any identified gaps.

If youth have not completed their high school education by 19, they are less likely to complete it as an adult (Rutman et al., 2007). After leaving foster care, although there are supports available for post-secondary education funding, including the Adult Youth Agreement (AYA) (Building Brighter Futures, n.d.), there is less support and encouragement for young adults to access education.

Youth who age out of foster care have lower education levels than their peers (Freundlich & Avery, 2006; Landvoy, 2000) and are likely to face unemployment and underemployment (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogran-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001, cited in Freundlich & Avery, 2006). Without their high school education, it is less likely that youth will be able to gain employment outside of low paying jobs. As noted, this increases the risk of poverty, including homelessness, hunger, and illness (Freundlich & Avery, 2006).

Housing Post-Care

Suitable, safe, and stable housing is a common struggle affecting former youth in foster care. For many former youth in care, homelessness is a reality (Rutman et al., 2007). When youth age out of foster care, their access to safe housing can be affected by availability, finances, references, ageism, life skills, and supports. Research (Drowsky & Courtney, 2009) has identified protective factors in preventing homelessness. One protective factor is closeness to at least one adult family member or support, possibly because family members continue to offer support post-care. Some former youth in-care, in search of relationships, make their way back to their family after leaving care, and even if siblings have been separated in foster care, many maintain their connection (Samuels, 2008).

Statistics Canada (2007) revealed that young adults not raised in foster care are leaving home later and later, into their twenties. As stated, this population is also more likely to be able to return home to live as needed (Clark, 2007; Samuels, 2008). These are young adults who likely were not faced with the same trauma that children in care had to deal with. Yet the expectation for adults raised in foster care is for them to be independent sooner than adults who had stability and family. Former youth in foster care should have the opportunity, up to a certain age, to return to their foster home or group home if they are not ready to live independently (Harden, 1988). Caregivers are an important part of the service team to support and prepare youth for aging out of care. Foster parents who continue to support youth should receive ongoing training and be recognized as an important part of the team.

As with other areas affecting youth, there appears to be a link between living situation, education, and delinquency. Criminal involvement and a history of running away from foster or group homes are predictive factors of later homelessness (Drowsky & Courtney, 2009). Adolescents in foster care, who are not enrolled in school, are more likely to be involved in delinquency and crime (Drowsky & Courtney, 2009). Ryan et al., (2007) recommended that more should be done to support placement consistency for youth in-care, avoiding changes to homes and schools, and thus supporting the importance of a holistic approach for youth in care, since one aspect of their life influences another.

Employment

Research has identified that youth raised in foster care are more likely to access social assistance compared to other adults (Rutman et al., 2007). The rates of social assistance, which can be as low as $610 per month for an "employable single" adult, make it understandable that housing struggles go hand in hand with being on assistance (Ministry of

Social Development, n.d.). Safe housing can be unaffordable for adults on social assistance, forcing them to live in parts of cities/communities that are not safe.

As stated, without their high school education, it is less likely that youth will be able to gain employment, except in low paying jobs. Youth need more in-care support to attain their educational goals (Blome, 1997). To gain and be successful in employment as adults, former youth in care would benefit from work experience opportunities while still in foster care (Freundlich & Avery, 2006). With no work experience, adults typically face more difficulty transitioning into a working role and the responsibilities that come with it, such as appropriate work attire and following and understanding a work schedule.

Criminal Involvement

Youth in foster care are more likely than those not raised in foster care to have some criminal involvement (Rutman et al., 2007). A United States study found that adolescents in foster care, who were not enrolled in school and who had placement instability, were more likely to be involved in delinquency and crime (Ryan et al., 2007). Education stability can be a difficult issue in Northern communities, especially with so few care and group homes in remote areas. When children and youth are removed from their home, there is the possibility of also being removed from their community, which as stated, leads to a change in school and greater distance between family members (Samuels, 2008; Stott, 2012).

Placement breakdowns and foster home moves can also lead to changes in schools. There is no policy or service standard to ensure children and youth have consistency in schools with home changes. This again is a gap affecting quality of care that is not covered in the legislation.

When working with youth, the reasons for their high risk behaviours should be considered. If children and youth have been unsuccessful, they may try and prove their competence in delinquent activities. To increase success in their lives, youth benefit from being involved in an environment with opportunity for positive achievement (Brendtro et al., 2002). These authors provided a framework of questions to provide guidance for looking into certain behaviours. The questions include: Is this child seeking revenge because of rejection? Is this behaviour in response to the frustration of failure? Is this behaviour because of feelings of powerlessness? Is this behaviour due to selfish goals? Youth who feel rejected and are looking for belonging may gain a sense of belonging through attention-seeking behaviours or through joining a gang. Others may have given up on relationships and are therefore hesitant to form new relationships. These unmet needs can be rebuilt with opportunities for trusting relationships (Brendtro et al., 2002, p. 61).

Schofield and Beck (2009) identified in their research that youth feel powerlessness when so many decisions affecting them are made for them. If youth do not feel in control, they may display their frustration or need for control in rebellious and aggressive behaviours. These youth would benefit from opportunities to develop their skills and confidence for positive leadership and self-discipline (Brendtro et al., 2002).

As discussed, former youth in foster care are more likely to be on social assistance than adults not raised in foster care (Rutman et al., 2007). If they are forced, based on affordable housing, to live in unsafe parts of town, they may be surrounded by gangs, violence, and drug and alcohol use, which could lead to criminal involvement.

Youth need supported opportunities to develop independence; to learn to make independent decisions and respect the advice of adults (Brendtro et al., 2002). In foster care,

youth need to be guided when learning how to make positive decisions and need to have the opportunity for contact with positive adults who can provide advice and support. As stated, this includes opportunities to develop independence skills, to talk about feelings, and to practice decision making (Schofield & Beck, 2009).

What Youth Need

Former youth in foster care have identified that they need positive role models and supports and connection to positive and healthy family and community members (Scannapieco et al., 2007; Stott, 2012). Foster youth want to have more input into their service plans (Scannapieco, et al., 2007), and they need more opportunities to experience success (Brendtro et al., 2002). Increasing self-esteem and positive feelings of significance, competence, power, and virtue can improve youths' in-care experiences. Positive experiences (therefore positive feelings) can be implemented into independence plans for youth by allowing them to have a say in their own plans.

Youth want to be a partner in decisions that affect their lives (Scannapieco et al., 2007; Stott, 2012). Throughout their time in foster care, youth have had many changes in relationships, be it caregiver, social worker, or other service providers (Scannapieco et al., 2007). Youth benefit from a consistent support person who can provide ongoing support during changes, be it caregiver, social worker, or others. Youth have an ongoing need for support and they seek relational permanence. If they do not have this relationship with their family, they may seek to fill this void through their relationships with service providers (Samuels, 2008).

Some youth in foster care identified that they received independence training (Shin, 2009), while others, post-care, identified that this training was insufficient to prepare them

for independence (Scannapieco et al., 2007). The necessary independence skills can be different, based on youths' needs, and it should not be just general life skills they learn while in foster care. For young adults out of care, new situations can occur, which often they were not prepared to handle (Freundlich & Avery, 2006). Former youth in-care need continued support pertaining to *their* life, not just the more general life skills they could have been taught while preparing for independence. Youth will not fully know what to expect from independence until they have aged out of foster care, and this is when they need the support to guide them through their new experiences.

Former youth in-care have described their transition from care as something that is completely different from anything they have experienced before: "It is difficult and new. Like to be on vacation in a new country…you cannot trust people around you. You just have yourself" (Fransson & Storø, 2011, p. 2522). Another former youth in care described his reluctance to leave care: "It was hell. I didn't want to leave, so I tried hard to delay it. When you are 18, you have to go, you're kinda thrown out then" (Fransson & Storø, 2011, p. 2522). Relationships, services, and advocacy for youth are important while in foster care, but continued advocacy and support are needed for youth when they leave foster care to help them transition to adulthood, and navigate through their many new experiences (Scannapieco et al., 2007).

It is beneficial to review what has worked to support youth as they transitioned out of foster care. When identifying preventative measures for youths' involvement with criminal behaviour, there is a program in the United States that provides services to youth. Washington State took a closer look at the difference in education levels between youth in and out of foster care. Recognizing the lower rates in education for youth in foster care,

collaborations were formed between child welfare agencies, education organizations, and child welfare advocates to create programs to improve youth-in-care outcomes for high school graduation and post-secondary rates. Instead of one person taking on the general life skills role, service providers were assigned to specific tasks for each youth, while maintaining a holistic approach with the entire team. Numerous service providers, each who specialized in one area, worked within one agency to support youth in the program. Supports and services included education, peer mentorship, life skills, and housing (Landvoy, 2009). Compared to other services identified in the literature, this type of service seems a progressive approach to truly supporting youths' successful transition to adulthood. Funding is an ongoing issue when it comes to child welfare, yet it seems that the benefits, as is often the case, outweigh the financial upfront costs that would be necessary to have a program like this in Northern British Columbia.

In Australia, St. Luke's Anglicare provides ongoing support for youth after aging out of foster care. This program works with young people in the process of aging out of foster care, and who have already aged out of care (Mendes, 2011). St. Luke's was concerned with the lack of ongoing support and outcomes for out-of-care youth. In 2003, St. Luke's developed a Leaving Care and After Care Support Service. This service provided assistance to former youth in foster care with housing, education, family support, and practical and material support, including clothes and furniture. The agency worked with local businesses to provide work experience for those out-of-care (Mendes, 2011). This was developed because of the negative employment outcomes for former youth in-care. While strengthening relationships with family, the program also identified the cultural needs of

youth and young adults. This program also included a mentoring program for youth (Mendes, 2011).

Mendes (2011) described a study exploring the positive outcomes for youth who had been in this program. Most of the former youth in-care were employed and had participated in, or were participating in, the St Luke's employment program. This program taught interview skills, resume writing, and presentation skills. It also organized work experience opportunities. Youth in the mentoring program received support that included assistance with communication skills, advice, self confidence, and someone to talk to.

Although there are positive services included with this program, there continued to be some struggles for service users. Similar to the realities of living in some northern British Columbia (B.C) communities, the youth from remote areas in the St. Luke's program identified that transportation was an issue to accessing the program (Mendes, 2011). If there was a program similar to this in northern B.C, it would need to address isolation and transportation issues for those travelling to and from the program, and to and from work.

The St. Luke's program seems to provide a large part of the ongoing assistance that many former youth in care do not have. It also seeks to move adults away from dependency on welfare systems and into the social and economic mainstream, by developing connections with employment programs (Mendes, 2011). Youth in foster care do not necessarily understand the realities of becoming an adult and being out of foster care. With this program, much of the support and education needed to prepare them for independence—over a period of time—appears to be provided.

Cultural Issues

Aboriginal children and youth in Canada represent the majority of children in foster care (Jones, 2010). This over-representation of Aboriginal children and youth in-care is, in part, due to the effects of colonization and numerous oppressions suffered by the Aboriginal population. In my experience, children and youth in northern, remote communities are often removed from the community to urban areas, due to the lack of foster homes in their home communities.

Some youth return to live with their family as adults, and whenever possible, healthy family involvement should be included during the child's time in foster care. Children and youth need to feel they belong (Brendtro et al., 2002). Even if they are not residing with family or in their community, they need the opportunity to maintain or develop ongoing relationships with family and to have an understanding of, and connection to, their community.

Cultural sensitivity and competency are important among social workers, caregivers, and other service providers. A study with front-line child protection social workers in Northern British Columbia acknowledged their need for increased opportunities to learn more about, and work with, specific Aboriginal cultures (Kariuki, 2010). The term "Aboriginal" should not be a blanket statement, and it is important that the individual cultures of each band and community are considered in service plans. Again, the importance of cultural competence should be reflected more in child welfare legislation and in service plans, to ensure that service providers learn and understand cultural backgrounds specific to the cultures they are working with.

Recommendations

Anne Tweddle's (2005) review of international research on outcomes for former youth in-care included the following recommendations:

- Increase the types of services and support available after leaving care.
- Support post-secondary education.
- Extend funding for former youth in care to age 24.
- Ensure agency accountability for youth attaining educational milestones while in care (p. 13–14).

More of Tweddle's (2005) recommendations were formulated from meetings with former youth in care. These recommendations included:

- More support in the transition from a foster placement to independence.
- Literacy assessments for youth in care.
- Identification (ID) clinic for youth in care.
- Life skills taught by a former, or older, youth in care.
- Ensuring that a child's placement is as stable as possible.
- Training for workers about what resources are available for former youth in care. (p. 24)

Summary

In the child welfare system, being "ready" for independence is defined simply by the youth's age and not by the youth's readiness to be independent. Their maturity, supports, understanding, income level, education, family, and community support are not used as assessment tools to determine their readiness for independence. With or without the

supports, when a youth is 19 years old in British Columbia, they are no longer in the legal care of the child welfare system.

Realistically, the transition from being a youth to becoming an adult is a process; it does not automatically occur when a youth turns 19 years old. But for youth in foster care, it does (Rutman et al., 2007). Young adults who were not raised in foster care depend on their parents into their twenties for emotional, practical, and financial support (Stats Canada, 2007); but under the Child, Family and Community Service Act (1996) there is no room for flexibility regarding when youth leave foster care. The child welfare system does not provide permanency, security, or as research has shown—skills children and youth need to be successful as young adults. There are some obvious improvements needed to reduce the gaps in services for children in care, and adults who have aged out of care.

The literature in this chapter has revealed that youth and service providers agreed that agencies should maintain contact with youth after they have aged out of foster care, and should continue to provide support for housing, employment, legal issues, and physical and mental health concerns (Freundlich & Avery, 2006; Samuels, 2008). The literature identified the connections between youth outcomes, including how their education levels affected employment, which affected housing, and so on (Rutman et al., 2007).

Unfortunately, child welfare legislation in British Columbia does not mandate ongoing supports for former youth in-care, and legislation and service standards lack adequate guidance for social workers to prepare youth for independence. Although the literature discussed in this chapter ranges from the 1980s to more recently, issues affecting former youth in care have generally remained the same. The negative outcomes for youth transitioning out of foster care will likely continue unless there are changes in legislation,

practice, and policy regarding working with youth in care as they prepare for independence, and working with youth out of care as they make the transition.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

Qualitative Research

This exploratory study used a qualitative methodological approach. One of the goals of qualitative research is to establish meanings of the topic under study, based on the information collected from the participants (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative research explores how people make sense of, explain, or understand the topic of study, typically using words rather than numbers in data collection and analyses (Bryman, 2008). My research method involved qualitative, semi-structured interviews to investigate the realities of a group of young adults who had aged out of foster care in Northern British Columbia. This interview format allowed for more conversational responses, and I was able to gain an understanding, from the participants' points of view, of some of their realities since aging out of foster care. The ability to attain full and accurate data from interviews is a benefit to a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2003). One aspect of qualitative research is to examine the underlying meanings and patterns of what is being studied; which I was able to do through my analysis (Marlow, 2001).

Context and culture affect the interpretation of everyday events (Henwood, Pidgeon, Sarre, Simmons, & Smith, 2008). Qualitative research allows for these experiences to be shared through the views and language of participants. My interpretations of a topic are influenced by my own experiences, but the use of qualitative research and open-ended questions in this study allowed participants to answer questions in their own words, their own opinions. I was able to ask clarifying questions if I had any uncertainty about the meaning of responses.

Data Analysis: Content Analysis

Content analysis served as a guide for my research and analysis. Content analysis is a "research technique for making replicable and valid inference from data to their context" (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 21). Data can take numerous forms, including word, print, and type (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002). In my research, data was in the form of participants' responses and was obtained through semi-structured interviews. Content analysis includes collecting, coding, and analyzing data. Each of my interviews was audio-recorded and transcribed. Content analysis involves "constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, meanings and nuances" (Bryman, 2008, p. 531). With the data obtained in the interviews, I was able to compare responses, identifying common themes during analysis. The goal of content analysis is "to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study" (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). This approach provided an appropriate method to gain information about some of the realities experienced by this group of young adults since leaving foster care.

Content analysis describes qualitative data, identifying common themes in the text (Kariuki, 2010). Content analysis can either follow a deductive or inductive approach. In a deductive approach, categories are predetermined based on prior research (White & Marsh, 2006). One of the goals of a deductive approach is to validate theory developed from prior research (Hseih & Shannon, 2005). This can be a benefit to the deductive approach, as "existing theory can be supported and extended" (Hseih & Shannon, 2005, p.1283). Although building on prior research strengthens the deductive approach (i.e., by validating other research), it can also become its weakness, creating researcher bias (Hsieh & Shannon,

2005). Kohler-Riessman (1993) noted that the "anticipated response to the work inevitably shapes what gets included and excluded" (p. 11).

Based on my experience with this population and literature review, I decided to use a deductive approach to analyse the data. I found there were similar experiences and realities for young adults whom I knew, as were identified in the literature. Based on the literature and my experience, I developed seven pre-determined categories for analysis. These were also the main areas that I was interested in exploring. As a new researcher, it was more straightforward for my analysis if the categories were pre-determined: it provided focus. If I had used an inductive approach, my biases and experience might have influenced the development of the same categories. By using a deductive approach, I was upfront about my biases, that is, I identified the categories prior to analysis, based on literature and practice, and because those were the categories I was interested in and thought the data would match. Aware of my own biases (and in an attempt to reduce my bias), my interview questions were non-leading. However, probes were required for some questions, such as identifying needs since aging out of foster care. Even with self awareness and reflexivity, using my experience and relevant literature to develop my framework for analysis affected what information I collected or left out, and how my data was analyzed. This, however, is a reality of a deductive framework (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The predetermined categories provided a guide to the development of my interview questions and, in turn, the collection of data. The categories included:

Education

Housing (while in foster care, and since aging out of foster care)

Employment

Supports

Cultural contacts

Family contacts

Needs since aging out of foster care

My research examined manifest and latent content (themes) of the interview responses. The identified manifest and latent themes were identified, colour-coded, and categorized into one of the seven pre predetermined categories. "Manifest content analysis is the analysis of the visible, or apparent, content of something" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 16). This is the actual response given by participants—what was said. While manifest content describes what was said, latent content is more subjective and is interpreted from the responses. The researcher can make inferences based on the analysis of recurring and identifiable responses (White & Marsh, 2006). Latent analysis requires critical thinking and identifies underlying aspects of what was said, thus describing the meaning (White & Marsh, 2006).

Research Method and Design

Sample selection. I used purposeful sampling to recruit six participants. The participants were selected based on characteristics relevant to my study topic, including age, and location of exiting foster care. Koerber and McMichael (2008) explain that in purposeful sampling "the researcher is looking for participants who possess certain traits or qualities" (p. 464). My research explored the realities of young adults between the ages of 19 and 25 who had aged out of foster care in Northern British Columbia, and participants needed to meet this set of criteria in order to be selected for the study. Even with purposeful sampling, it is beneficial to have diversity within the sample (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). In my research, the participants indicated a range of characteristics and experiences, such as gender,

age, number of foster placements, and the type of services received. All participants identified as Aboriginal. I had intended to have a range of ethnicities in my sample, but was not able to do so—a factor that could have been related to the over-representation of Aboriginal children and youth in the child welfare system in Northern British Columbia.

Participant recruitment. There were several ways in which I recruited participants for my research. I explained my research to colleagues, who shared this information with former youth in foster care, whom they were in contact with. They then identified the young adults who had expressed they were interested in participating in the study. I used snowball sampling techniques, i.e., the participants identified other adults from this population, whom I then contacted about participating in my research. I also had a recruitment information poster that I displayed at a local youth agency (see Appendix E). Initial contact was made by telephone or a pre-arranged meeting (if participants were referred by another service provider). I contacted one young adult directly, who I already knew, and asked her if she would be interested in participating in the research.

Although I continue to have contact with some young adults whom I worked with when they aged out of foster care, I purposely did not contact them for this study. I am aware of the perceived power difference between youth and social worker, and I did not want this to be transferred into my research. Since I continue to see, and informally support, some of these young adults, they might have felt that it would jeopardize our relationship if they critiqued my service provision. Recognizing this, I did not recruit former youth in foster care for this research if I had been their guardianship social worker when they aged out of care. I had worked with some of the participants, but not as their guardianship social worker when

they aged out of foster care. At the time of the interviews, I no longer had a working relationship with any of the participants.

Informed consent. I provided all participants with a copy of the study information letter (see Appendix B). I offered to read the letter to them, if necessary. Participants were provided with an informed consent form to read (or have it read) and sign. The information letter explained the purpose of my research. After they read the letter, I asked participants if they had any questions about the study. I always emphasized that they had a choice to withdraw from the study, even mid-way through the interview, if they so chose. Informed consent is the participant's understanding of the purpose of the study, their involvement in the research, the possible benefits and risks of the study, what will be done with the data after the study is completed, and knowledge that their participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn (Mauch & Park, 2003). I discussed the above with participants, and emphasized that this topic could bring up some difficult memories for them: I identified the counselling services, as per the information letter (see Appendix B).

Each participant was given a $20 gift card to the local mall as thanks for their participation in the study. Participants were told that, if they chose to end the interview before completing it, they could still keep the gift card. All participants completed the interview.

Ethical considerations. An ethical consideration entering into this study was my own ethnicity as a white woman. All of the participants identified as Aboriginal and this could have influenced their perceptions of me. One participant asked if I was Aboriginal and said he had assumed I was. Although no racial remarks were made to me during the interviews, one participant commented that her sibling had made fun of her for having white

friends, and this made me wonder about the participant's perception of me. My own culture and upbringing was very different from that of the participants, and during the analyses I was reminded of just how different. I also wondered about participants' feelings of distrust or power difference towards me, based on our ethnicities.

My dual role of researcher and social worker could have also presented an ethical issue. I have been the social worker for youth when they aged out of foster care, although I did not recruit these young adults for my research. If I had interviewed adults that I prepared for independence, they might have been more likely to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, and less likely to criticize their independence plans.

One participant admitted it was difficult to talk about his past, and that the interview had brought up difficult memories. Another participant, recruited by a participant, told me his friend had been somewhat upset after our interview as it had brought up difficult memories. The same participant, though, had told me he was glad I was asking the questions as no one had ever asked him before. He recognized the importance of knowledge from those who had experienced foster care. All participants supported my plan to share the results with service providers and even showed interest in co-presenting. As stated, there were counselling supports available to participants, identified in the information letter (see Appendix B).

During and after the interviews, I began to develop my own feelings of guilt as I became aware of how difficult it was for participants to talk about the topics presented. I struggled with the fact that they might feel discomfort with my interview questions, and that I was the one who would benefit from their responses, given that this research would enable me to gain a Master's degree. To deal with some of my own feelings of guilt throughout the

research, I kept brief notes and also, while maintaining participant confidentially, I debriefed with one of my colleagues.

I plan to share the research results with fellow service providers, through presentations, discussions, or the sharing of the results in writing. I think this dissemination of results acknowledges the importance of the information that was shared and the contribution of the participants who went through the research process. It could also positively influence changes in child welfare independence planning. One of the goals of an anti-oppressive social worker is to raise awareness and empower those who are oppressed (Mullaly, 1997). I hope this research will do just that.

Although criminal involvement was a reality identified in the literature review for former youth in foster care, I did not cover this in my research. I felt that this type of information could raise ethical issues. It might infringe on participants confidentiality of past youth criminal involvement, if they felt they needed to include those convictions or charges in responses. I did not want feelings of shame or anger to arise from these questions. I did not want any disclosures regarding criminal activity unknown to the RCMP, as I would then be responsible to report them to the legal authorities.

Data collection. I conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews that were audio-recorded (see Appendix D). The qualitative interview format is less structured and allows for open discussion; it is a flexible interview process (Bryman, 2008).

Participants were asked the following questions:

1) How many years were you in foster care? (It does not have to be a consistent time, but in total).

2) How many foster homes and/or group homes did you live in?

3) Are you of Aboriginal ancestry (if yes, go to question 4, if no go to question 7)

4) Were any of your foster homes on reserve? How many?

5) If living in an urban placement, how often did you return to your community? For what reasons? With whom?

6) When you aged out of care, did you and your social worker have a meeting with your band? If yes, who attended? What was discussed?

History and current:

7) Did you complete high school, or receive your General Education Diploma (GED)?

When?

If No, why?

Did you have supports in school?

8) Are you, or have you been, enrolled in post-secondary education?

Who paid for this?

What did you take?

What are your educational goals?

9) Do you have employment? In what? For how long? What are your career goals?

10) When you turned nineteen years old, did you have stable and safe housing where you could continue to live as an adult? Was it safe? Was it affordable? Who did you live with? (stable will be defined as have lived there for longer than three months, and is affordable).

11) Do you have contact with your family?

Who?

How often?

Where?

12) Do you have contact with any of your social workers or service providers from when you were in care?

Probing questions:

How often? How? (cell, texting, see them when out in community)

Where?

Why?

13) Who do you phone when you need help (need something such as a ride, money, food)?

How often?

14) Who do you phone (text or email) when something good happens? (examples, got a good grade, got a job, are excited).

15) If anything, what would you change about your experience in foster care?

16) What were services or people who helped prepare you to age out of care? What was the most helpful?

17) What challenges have you had since you have aged out of care?

18) What are your coping strategies for dealing with challenges?

19) What should social workers do to better prepare youth to be nineteen?

Who should be involved in this plan?

20) What would better support you now as an adult?

I followed the questionnaire guideline, but also asked probing questions to gain information not addressed by these questions.

At the beginning of each interview, I provided participants with an explanation of the purpose of my research, as a requirement for my thesis work, and also my goal to disseminate the results to social workers and service providers. All questions were answered by all participants, excluding one question by one participant (Question 15). After each interview was complete, I provided each participant with a photocopy of the notes I had taken during their interview. One participant did not want a copy of the notes. I told participants they could contact me if they had any questions, or anything to add later on, and that I would be in contact with them after I had transcribed and analysed their interview. One participant stated he did not want to be contacted for follow-up.

Reliability. Reliability in coding is important when identifying themes (Boyatzis, 1998). In my analysis, this means different viewers would code the data to the same categories, and identify similar themes. "Consistency among various viewers is attained when different people observing or reading the information see the same themes in the same information" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 147). My academic supervisor, Glen Schmidt, coded an interview transcript based on my framework for analysis, and there was near-unanimous agreement.

Member Checks. Each of the interviews was transcribed and, as stated, I used content analysis to review the data. After completing the interviews, I had planned to meet with the participants again so they could review their interview transcripts and provide any feedback. I also wanted to have the opportunity to ask questions about my interpretation of their responses overall (i.e., latent themes). I was aware it might be difficult to re-connect with participants again after the interviews, as most did not have a telephone and I did not have their home address. Some participants had contacted me from a friend's phone to

arrange the interview-meeting, and others had arranged the meeting via their former social worker. As I was aware I might not have the opportunity to meet with them again, I did ask questions for clarification of their responses, or about my interpretations, throughout the interview process. Usually participants needed a ride somewhere after the interview and, during the drive, our conversations allowed for more discussion about the interview process, my goals as a student, data collection, and some of my perceptions of their responses. For example, with one participant, we talked during the drive about his numerous moves and instability since leaving foster care, and how this had been a challenge. Generally, this additional time also allowed for a debriefing process for the participants. I observed during and after the interviews, that all participants seemed open to share their in and out of foster care experiences, and I was aware of the sensitive nature of the topics we discussed.

There were three participants with whom I was able to reconnect with after their interview. I provided each of them with a copy of their interview transcript and reviewed the latent themes that emerged from their interview. They all agreed that their interview content was reflected in the themes that I discussed. I was not able to contact the other three participants. One had told me after the interview that he did not want follow-up and I did not have current contact information for the other two participants.

Reflexivity. Important in the research process is reflexivity, which is similar to self awareness. Reflexivity in research involves reflecting on yourself and the research process (Kobayashi, 2003). As a social worker who has worked with children and youth in foster care for the last seven years, I have developed biases in regards to services that prepare youth for independence. Creswell (2003) explains: "researchers start a project with certain assumptions about how they will learn and what they will learn during the inquiry" (p. 6).

Throughout the development of the research questions, and during analysis, reflexivity involved being aware of how I am influenced by my own values, beliefs, and biases. My values are affected by my upbringing, education, and professional experiences. I am aware that my values are already entwined in the research development: after all, I chose this topic based on my interest and connection with this area. Reflexivity should occur throughout the research, and not just when looking back on the research process (Kobayashi, 2003). I was aware of this during the research process, especially during the interviews. I was careful to keep the questions open-ended, as much as possible, and when probing questions were necessary, I worded them in a way that would hopefully keep my own biases out of them.

Methodology Summary

My qualitative research explored the realities of six young adults since they have aged of foster care in Northern British Columbia. I analysed their interviews using content analysis and a deductive approach. I identified manifest and latent themes that were colour coded into the pre-determined categories. The pre-determined categories were developed based on the literature review and my social work experience. With the results, I identified experiences, strengths, and struggles of the group of young adults post-care. Based on the information from participants' response, I provided suggestions to improve independence planning, and post-care supports.

Chapter Four: Research Findings

The six participants described their in and out of foster care experiences and shared opinions on how independence planning could be improved. In this chapter, the research findings are analyzed, and supported by excerpts from the interview transcripts.

Following a deductive approach, I developed seven categories for analysis that were based on the literature review and my experience as a social worker.

The categories include:

Housing (while in foster care, and since aging out of foster care)

Cultural contacts

Education

Employment

Family contacts

Supports

Needs since aging out of foster care.

The data was examined using content analysis and involved four steps. The first step included reading the interview transcripts and taking notes based on my reactions to the responses. The second step involved identifying manifest themes, and colour coding these themes into the predetermined categories. In the third read, I identified latent themes, keeping notes in the page margins. These themes were colour coded and categorized into the predetermined categories. The fourth read of the transcripts ensured that nothing had been left out, and that no new themes had emerged.

The following table provides a snapshot of the predetermined categories and how I categorized the manifest and latent themes.

Table 1: Identified Themes

Predetermined Categories	Manifest Themes	Latent Themes
Housing (while in and since aging out of foster care)	Participants had been in and out of foster care throughout their childhood. While in foster care, participants had from two to 30 foster homes. Since leaving foster care, participants have had instability in housing.	Inconsistent homes and caregivers while in foster care. Since aging out of foster care, housing has been unstable, unaffordable, and unsafe.
Cultural contacts	Participants had little to no contact with their Aboriginal community while in, or since aging out, of foster care.	Lack of cultural contact in and out of foster care. Mixed feelings about cultural involvement.
Education	Participants had few supports in high school.	Lack of support in education. Lack of high school completion.
Employment	One participant was employed. For their income, participants were either on Person with Disability or Social Assistance	Lack of employment and clear career goals. Unprepared in foster care to attain employment.
Family contacts	Participants had some visits with family while in foster care Examples of being separated from siblings while in foster care. All participants had some contact with family since aging out of foster care.	Inconsistent family contact in and out of foster care.

Predetermined Categories	Manifest Themes	Latent Themes
Supports	Some participants continued to have contact with their in-care social workers. Participants identified community support services they accessed while in foster care and some since leaving foster care. Participants identified they contacted their friends and/or family for support.	Lack of supports since aging out of foster care. Friends appear as main support, although unclear how consistent this support is. Youth agencies provided valuable life skills, while still in foster care.
Needs since aging out of care	Struggles and needs identified by participants since aging out of foster care included: affordable and stable housing, employment, and confusion regarding how to access health care services.	Ongoing services are needed to transition with youth to independence and to assist them with the realities of adulthood. Insufficient preparation to leave foster care.

Manifest Themes

Housing. The participants answered questions about their experiences in foster care and since aging out of the foster care system. Many of their responses were similar.

The participants were asked how long they had been in foster care and the number of foster homes and group homes they had lived in while in-care. Answers regarding how long they had been in foster care ranged from eight to 19 years (on and off). All participants identified as being in and out of foster care during that time, i.e., they had been returned to family care, only to be removed again and brought back into foster care. Five of the six participants identified they had been in more than ten foster homes; the other participant had been in two foster homes and one group home. Three of those participants identified they had been in more than 20 foster homes as a child in care. For all participants, the number of

foster homes they had been in exceeded the number of group home placements, with that answer being between one and four.

Four participants identified they had safe, stable, and affordable housing when they first aged out of foster care. One identified it as safe, but could not remember if it was affordable. One participant stated they had never had stable housing:

> *I don't even know where I lived a month ago. I've been moving around. Not only been moving around my whole life in foster care, but as an adult too... couldn't stay in one place... nothing ever felt right....*

One participant stated that, although she had been helped by a local youth service agency to find housing, it was not safe or stable: "It was my own place...I was into drugs and drinking and gangs, and all that kind of stuff." She went on to say that although she supposedly lived by herself, the house became a place to stay for many. When asked who she lived with, she stated: "Myself...whoever I let in...it was like a shelter...I let them all in my house...I cooked for them and cleaned." She stated she was eventually evicted for selling crack out of the home.

When leaving foster care, other participants had either lived by themselves or moved in with siblings. One participant had allowed her brother and his girlfriend to live with her as they needed a place to stay.

Since aging out of foster care, housing had been a struggle at some time for all of the participants. One participant identified accessing shelters since aging out of care: "Sometimes I have nowhere to stay so I end up at...(names local shelters)...it's not really anywhere you'd want to be. It's pretty rough down here, down town." Another female participant had accessed the services from a local women's shelter.

Affordable housing was a challenge at some time since aging out of foster care identified by five participants. One stated: "Housing has been a problem. It's been $600 and up, and (I) only get so much on disability."

There were few positive examples of housing post-care, but one participant talked about his positive experience in a supported semi-independent living residence, which he accessed while still in foster care. He described the home as a four-plex with each youth having their own suite. While residing in the suite, ongoing supports were provided, but he had more independence and opportunities to gain life skills:

> *It was like a four-plex, and every four-plex was a 2 bedroom...but yah, everyone had their own suite, and we had to take care of it...and if we cleaned it right and properly we got $20. It was a good program and I felt good....They told us to come in at a certain time at night time, and we did. Everything just went good.*

One participant stated (contrary to another participant's opinion of amounts received on Person with Disability) that she had affordable housing after leaving foster care because her former foster parent had helped her get onto Person with Disability (PWD).

Cultural contacts. All six participants identified as being of Aboriginal ancestry. While in foster care, one of the six participants had a foster home in their Aboriginal community while the others had no placements in their Aboriginal community. Participants identified as having little involvement with their communities while in foster care. Three participants had returned to their community two to three times while in foster care, while two participants stated they never returned, and one participant could not remember. Reasons for returning to their community included potlatches, family visits, meetings to discuss post-secondary school funding, family problems, and workshops. Participants identified that, when they did go to their community, they had returned with their social worker or by bus. One participant explained he had been separated from his siblings in foster

care, and they were able to visit during a community visit. His response to why he returned to his community included:

> *To get to know family, I guess, and the second one was for me and my brother and sister to meet back up... in our old town... because we were separated in the foster homes... to hang out with each other... and meet our reserve people.*

None of the six participants recalled a meeting with their social worker and their Aboriginal band to discuss their independence plans for leaving foster care.

Education. Five of the six participants had not completed high school, and none were currently enrolled in post-secondary education. Four of the six participants identified they had received no support in high school (such as a Teacher's Aide or accessing the Aboriginal centre). Participants who did not complete high school identified they either "dropped out" or were "kicked out." One participant stated she had dropped out because she "got into drugs really bad." That same participant is now currently enrolled in an adult education program in order to earn her Dogwood diploma. At the time of her interview, she had one more course to complete.

One of the participants had been enrolled in post-secondary courses, but was no longer attending. Three of the other participants expressed an interest in completing high school or attaining their General Education Diploma (GED) as adults. However, excluding one participant, it was unclear how they planned to attain their GED or what educational goals, if any, the young adults had after high school. One participant stated:

> *(I) really want to finish my high school... I don't want to stop... whatever is next... whatever is available after my education is complete... want to explore some opportunities and go from there...*

Employment. One of the six participants was employed. The other participants were unemployed, but all stated they planned to find employment. Career goals were discussed,

and jobs that participants were interested in included "Menga" (which was explained as a Japanese form of animation), to be a fighter with the Ultimate Fighter Championships, and an "office job" (the participant could not identify what type of office job). One participant identified they wanted to get their "tickets," i.e., a qualification to work at a camp, so they could leave the vicinity. "(I am) trying to get certified tickets for my goals...I want to get tickets so I can go to camp and leave all this...there's drama everywhere and I want nothing to do with it."

Another participant identified the need to find employment in something basic, as he did not have any schooling: "I want to start something really easy, really basic. So my options right now are the bottle depot or Value Village. That's like retail service, customer service. I don't need anything difficult."

Family contact. Participants identified they had some contact with family while in foster care. When asked what she would have changed about her experience in foster care, one participant stated "I would get to see my family more." When another participant was asked the same question, she stated she would have changed her Mom cancelling visits: "Then she wouldn't show up. It was really hard on us when she wouldn't show up...when the parents don't show up...it's really hard on the kids." One participant identified being separated from siblings while in foster care and attending his Aboriginal community for a sibling visit.

All participants had contact with some of their family since aging out of foster care. Most of the contact was sporadic, such as bumping into family rather than planned visits. One participant lived with her younger sister. Two participants had parents who lived in shelters and stated they went to visit them there. Another participant identified his contact

with family was by sporadic phone contact: "Times when I (don't) call home in a year and a half and other times every other week."

Five participants identified their mothers and siblings as family with whom they had contact. One participant had some contact with an aunt and cousins; again, through chance meetings while in community. One participant had a daughter in foster care and has supervised visits with her.

One participant explained why he went to see his mom at the shelter, rather than her coming to visit him:

> *I tried it once. I told her where I lived, and she just ended up showing up drunk all the time; and I just didn't appreciate that whatsoever, so I didn't let her know where I lived after that. I just went to see her when I wanted.*

Supports. Of the six participants, five had contact with one or more of their prior in-care social workers. When asked why they contacted their former social worker, they stated reasons including: rides, a snack, or to make a long distance call from their office. One participant stated that his former social worker had taken him out for lunch for his last birthday. One participant stated they see their former social worker when they attend a local youth service agency (where the social worker's office is based out of), but the participant does not go to them for support.

When asked who they phoned if they needed help (examples included food, shelter, or clothing), or someone to talk to, some participants identified more than one support. Participants stated they talked to friends, one said family, and three said, depending on what it was they needed, they would contact their former social worker. One participant specifically identified that he would not contact his family for help, stating: "We got a couple of friends, that's it. No family." Two of the participants explained that they mostly figure it out on their own: "I don't really get that support anymore." One stated he would go to his

former social worker for the "simple things." One participant stated she continues to have a close relationship with her former foster mother; she calls her "Mom" and contacts her if she needs anything.

When asked if they would contact their former social worker for support, one participant explained a feeling of rejection from his social worker when he aged out of care.

> *It was a big "seeya." Like it wasn't good...I had a relationship with these people and I take my relationships with people seriously...then they're not even helping me or whatever...the only time they can talk to me is just to say hi on the street...can't even talk to me.*

Another stated: "I don't know. I've never been dependent on a social worker."

Participants were asked who they tell if something good happens to them. Participants named friends, family, a former caregiver, or "whoever I'm with". Another stated she posts it on the internet site Facebook.

One young adult identified the support he had been offered by his former caregivers. They had offered him a room to rent in their home after he had aged out of foster care, but had chosen not to. The same participant also identified disappointing experiences with former caregivers, explaining that when he went on Independent Living[4] he struggled because no one, including his former foster parents, had visited him:

> *They (former foster parents) made a mistake on their own. I asked them to visit me and all sorts of stuff and they didn't even come and see me. I'm not going to call you then. If I move and bump into you, I'll tell you...well, I'll tell you where I am, but if you're not going to show up, like you said you were, I'm not going to bother.*

One participant identified it was a letdown to be told by his former foster parents that they would help him when he first moved out and then didn't.

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4 An agreement under the Child, Family, and Community Service Act (1996) between the youth in foster care and government, or a delegated agency social worker, that provides financial support for a youth to live semi-independently, with services and opportunities to gain life skills.

> *Yah, like they told me, we'll come visit you, clean the house, and get stuff for you, and they didn't, so I'm like, whatever. I need to move up and do my own thing. I took it and I dealt with it. It was hard, though...because you really want that family connection, when you get that family connection. Like, any person should know that if you get that family connection, that it's real, and it was real to me, the last people I was at. They really did care for me.*

Services that prepared participants to age out of foster care were identified, including: agencies that provide life skill programming to youth in foster care; a youth shelter that provides semi-independent living apartments for youth in foster care; and workshops on life skills. When asked what was most helpful about these services, responses included: getting help to access Social Assistance or Person with Disability (PWD), and accessing the life skills programming, such as workshops on self-esteem, self-awareness, sex education, and drug and alcohol awareness. One participant spoke positively about his experiences at a local youth shelter, stating: "(they)...kept me away from bad friends and showed me how to make new friends. They were there for me on my birthday and Christmas. I wasn't expecting them to be there for me on both Christmases." Another participant stated she had a youth care worker at a local youth shelter who she continued to work with into her twenties. She said that normally this support stops at age 20. When she was 22, they told her she was no longer eligible for the youth care support. However; she does remain in contact with some of the shelter staff.

When asked about service improvements for independence planning, participants identified that all the service providers working with the youth should be involved in the plans. One participant stated that caregivers could provide more opportunity to gain independence skills, such as allowing youth to cook and talking to them about paying their bills on time. Another participant suggested that youth should have more opportunities to

gain life skills while in foster care. He provided an example of *showing* youth skills instead of just telling them: "bring them shopping...show them shopping and budgeting."

Needs since aging out of care. Participants identified numerous needs and challenges since aging out of foster care. Struggles included: access to affordable housing, landlords who will not rent to them because of their age, no identification, unable to access health services such as dental, and confusion regarding how to access former psychiatric services since being taken off medication. Sufficient food was a challenge for most participants, and they identified the need to access local food bank services. Sufficient and appropriate clothing was a challenge for some participants. One stated:

> *We can't get to the Laundromat; our clothes get ripped and we lose our shoes. Winter time is when we struggle the most. Welfare doesn't give us enough money for a proper jacket. We always have to be borrowing each other's jackets.*

Other challenges included "staying in one spot" and addictions. One participant explained she did not always have food and housing when she first aged out of foster care because of her drug and alcohol issues: "In the beginning, because I was so focused on doing drugs and drinking, I used a lot of resources in town." She identified her need to access a treatment program, which she later did.

One participant described her heartbreaking story of losing a child since aging out of foster care and how this affected her:

> *My daughter died three years ago....I left town and came back and found out she died...so I started going downhill after that, for like three years....I was doing speed and selling crack, started escorting...doing stuff I said I would never do...it got out of control.*

She goes on to describe how she began to turn her life around: "One of my friends came back from treatment and said it was really good. I called them and said I wanted to go after my graduation ceremony...I didn't like it, but I stayed."

When asked what would better support them as adults, four participants stated having their driver's license, although one stated she was too scared to actually get her license. Another stated that she used to spend Christmas with her foster family but now they have moved out of the area. When asked what she would do now for holidays, she stated "probably try with family." Another participant identified they needed help getting back on Social Assistance, help with schooling, and help with transport, such as being provided with a bus pass. One participant identified their challenges as: "food, and looking for a house, and keeping up with medication, and trying to keep stable, in a stable environment."

One participant stated that there were resources for young adults, if they looked for them:

> *I don't know. I've never been dependent on a social worker. I know many resources. I think some people are just way too lazy or too embarrassed...there's like (names agency)...and downtown there's...thrift store where you can get free clothes every two weeks I know many resources, but maybe the transportation and, like, getting there. But you can't even say that because, you can just go to disability and ask for a bus pass, and they'll just take it off your cheque, so there's, like, many ways....I think people just need to ask questions about resources.*

Participants were asked how they coped with stressors and challenges; what they needed to do in order to cope. Three of the six identified that they talked to friends. One stated he kept a journal, made music, drew, and wrote poetry: "I've been that way my entire life...I picked it up from my mom. She was always reading, too. That's what got me into it...just ways I've found out how to cope with things."

Four of the six participants identified taking drugs as a coping mechanism, and two identified using drugs and alcohol to cope with challenges. One participant, who previously used drugs and alcohol, identified that, since completing a treatment program, she attends Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous, and talks to her sponsor, as a coping mechanism.

The above manifest themes are surface meanings, taken from non-critical readings of the interview transcripts.

Latent Themes

The third reading of the transcripts involved critical thinking to identify latent themes. The latent themes were identified and then categorized into the predetermined categories that were based on the literature review and my experience in social work. The following latent themes resulted from the review:

1) Inconsistent homes and caregivers
2) Lack of cultural contacts and support
3) Lack of support in education
4) Lack of in-care employment preparation and goals
5) Inconsistent family contact in and out of foster care
6) Lack of supports post-care
7) Ongoing services are needed to transition with youth to independence

Subtheme: Insufficient independence planning.

These seven latent themes are based on my interpretations of the interviews and are supported by quotations from the interviews. When possible, member checking was done, throughout and after the interview process, to validate some of my interpretations.

Inconsistent homes and caregivers. Five of the six participants lived in more than ten foster homes during their time in foster care, with three having more than 20 foster homes. One participant stated: "Like I had so many homes...so it's all a blur." A change in home meant a change in caregiver. One young adult blamed his constant moves as an adult on his instability in homes as a child: "...just knew it was how I grew up...couldn't stay in

one place." One participant stated she had numerous foster homes and would have increased the number of "checks" done on some of them: "I don't know, but just maybe more background checks on foster homes, because I've had some shitty ones."

The young adults in this study not only had inconsistency in foster homes, but also inconsistency in being in and out of foster care. The participants had been in and out of foster care throughout most of their childhood. Whatever the reason they were brought into care, it was likely not resolved by the time they returned to family, or perhaps different issues arose, causing them to be removed and brought back into foster care. One participant, when asked what he would change about his foster care experience, stated:

> *There's no way to answer that... if I could change that (I) might as well go back and say that I wish family didn't have broken home problems since the beginning of time. And I would be able to say, I wish no one in the world had gone through that; but can't say that.*

The fact that the participants were in and out of foster care likely affected the number of foster home placements, as it might not have been possible to return to the same foster home they had left. One youth stated: "wished I could have stayed at one, but didn't know which were the good ones. Some weren't great."

One participant described a positive experience she had with a foster home as a teenager: "I had a really good foster home when I was in my teens...and that surprised the hell out of me because a lot of people don't want teenagers; they want babies...they were Métis...but I was really bad, so it kind of didn't work out."

Although this was not asked in my research, participants likely had numerous social workers who acted as their legal guardian while they were in foster care. One participant stated that he would have liked to have seen his social worker more while in foster care, but she did not check on him as much as he thought she should have. He said he felt safer in a

group home than in foster homes. He would have preferred weekly social worker contact but did not have that.

Another described the pain of being asked about her life history repeatedly:

> *It's hard, as a little kid, when you have to tell social workers your story... (they should) read the file. Like when you're five and someone is asking you all these questions, it's hard. It brings up stuff and you've already told people before. It's hard to talk about it.*

Lack of cultural contacts and support. Of the six participants, one identified having a foster home in their Aboriginal community. While in foster care, the other participants had returned to their community on two or three occasions or not at all (one participant could not remember what his contact was like with his community). None of the participants recalled a meeting with their social worker and Aboriginal band to discuss independence plans when they aged out of care: "They didn't even work with the band. I was just another youth in the system."

When asked about supports, none of the youth, stated their Aboriginal band had been involved in their independence plans or identified their band as a support for them. Perhaps if bands were involved in planning, community and urban supports could have been identified for them to access after leaving foster care.

There were seemingly negative views of cultural contact identified by some participants. Three participants stated they did not want their Aboriginal band involved in their independence plans, and they did not want to visit their community when in foster care. One participant stated: "No. Someone like me didn't want that...didn't want them involved." Another stated, post-care: "I don't want to live up there (referring to his Aboriginal community); there's just no way."

In Northern British Columbia, the distance between urban and remote communities can be vast; and if children and youth are placed outside of their home community, it is possible the geographical distance and environmental elements (e.g., heavy snowfalls), could impact regular contact with their home communities while in foster care. When children and youth are placed outside of their community, they are less emerged in their culture; they don't have the same opportunity to develop a healthy and positive cultural connection. Due to this lack of family and cultural contact while in foster care, participants could also lack a sense of belonging and a positive self-image. This could affect their relationship with their community and family, and their feeling of belonging, after they leave foster care.

Lack of support in education. Of the six participants, one had completed high school. Four of the participants identified as receiving no supports in high school, although one stated that this was necessary.

> *Help kids with school, like if somebody needs help with studying. Encourage them to stay in school. Not to be hard on them and say "this is what happens when you do drop out." I thought everyone was lying, so I just went and dropped out.*

One participant explained he had dropped out of school because of bullying, and he identified the need for in-school counselling: "Counselling with schooling. If they have problems in school, counsel them through it."

One participant stated he had been put in the "alternate" school stream after elementary school, which meant only taking two core courses: math and English. When he dropped out, he thought his math was at a grade seven level, and his English between a grade eight and nine level. Despite identifying that being put in an alternate program was a "setup for failure" because he could only take two core courses, he stated he could not handle them and eventually dropped out.

One participant attended two alternate education programs while in foster care. She stated that the teachers there had provided her with support, but while attending mainstream school, she did not have supports.

Lack of in-care employment preparation and unclear employment goals. One of the six participants had employment at the time of the interviews. One participant identified a seemingly realistic plan to gain employment at the bottle depot or Value Village, but the others did not have plans. Participants expressed they were unprepared in foster care to attain employment. One participant explained the need for actually *showing* youth how to complete a resume, and walking them through the job search process, rather than just telling them where to go and get it done:

> *I needed help with the job search. No one helped me, they just showed me where to go, and that was when I was really unstable... they have the programs now that can do it (resume). It would still be good to walk them through. Still shy and nervous. Don't know what to do. They think they're independent, but...*

The importance of gaining job skills while in foster care was also identified: "Good too to get them a job at like 17, 18, so when they are 19 they have that self-independence and are able to handle themselves." It appears that few had work experiences while in foster care, which would have later benefited them in their job readiness. As explained by the above participant, some youth have no work experience, and as an adult do no know what to expect from the workforce.

Although one of the participants identified it was positive that he had been helped to access the financial social support of Person with Disability (PWD), he also identified that it seemed it was just assumed he would go on it, and that he had not always spent the money on what it was meant for:

> *I didn't appreciate...well, I did appreciate they set me up on disability. They're like this kid was in foster care, so let's hook him up on disability for the rest of his life. So the same time, I used the funds for my food and addictions. But that's what they (social worker and foster parent) did; they put me on PWD.*

Three of the six participants identified finding or keeping employment had been a challenge since they aged out of foster care. Three participants were on Person with Disability, two were on Social Assistance, and one was trying to get back on Social Assistance.

When asked about their employment goals, one participant identified that he "wasn't thinking that far ahead." Another stated he wanted to "try to get a job, and keep that job, and save up." When asked if there was any job in particular he wanted, his response was "no." Another identified he did not have a career goal, and was "trying to figure out some things."

Inconsistent family contact in and out of foster care. From the interviews, it appeared that family contact was inconsistent while participants were in foster care. Some participants explained they were not placed in the same foster home as their siblings. One participant identified that he did not want to see his mom when he was a youth in-care preparing for independence: "I didn't want her involved in my life at the time; she was an alcoholic really bad." One participant identified she would have liked to have seen family more while in foster care.

Five participants identified sporadic family contact since aging out of foster care and this contact appeared to be minimal. For four participants, most of their family contact was by bumping into them in the community. Three participants pointed out that their family members did not have phones, which added to the difficulty in maintaining regular contact. Not all of the participants resided in the same community as their family, which added to their inconsistent contact.

Lack of supports post-care. Five of the six participants identified a lack of supports for them post-care. When asked about post-care supports that would be beneficial for former youth in foster care, one participant identified that there should be a resource directory of services that former youth in care can access. She identified that they do not necessarily know what supports are available.

One participant stated that service providers think former youth in-care want to "go wild" when they age out of foster care, as they are so used to the restrictions of in-care rules. He stated he did not want this, and wanted the continued support of his social worker and foster parents. He identified he did not have this support as he transitioned to adulthood. He wanted service providers to understand the realities for youth after they left foster care: "I didn't want to go out there and go wild; I wanted their support. I want them (service providers) to see the bigger picture somehow".

One participant identified wanting more support during his transition to independence: "When I first got there (his house), nobody came around for two months; not my brother, my sister, my mom, nobody, no foster parents, nothing. I got left on my own and it wasn't good." The feeling of abandonment continued in his aging out plans: "Social worker should be there, so I didn't feel like my life just got dropped on me."

In their responses, participants identified friends, more than family as supports. Four participants stated they turned to friends in good times and in times of need. One participant stated that in colder weather, he turned to friends to borrow a jacket. Perhaps it is because of the minimal contact with family while in foster care, that, as adults, participants seemed to turn more to friends than family. Or perhaps friends are more available and willing to

support them than their family; or friends have a better understanding of what they are going through because they had similar struggles.

Four youth identified the same in-care program that provided life skills as a positive support for them when they were preparing for independence. Examples of the types of assistance this program provided include: finding housing, life skills, and getting connected to Social Assistance or Person with Disability (PWD). Two youth identified a community youth service agency that they had accessed while in foster care and since they had aged out of foster care, they had continued to access these services, such as using the laundry facilities. Most of the services and supports they received while in-care however, were discontinued for them as adults; and most participants identified they continued to need this support.

Ongoing services needed to transition with youth to independence.

Subtheme: Insufficient independence planning. Five of the six participants identified that they had insufficient supports as adults, and that they needed ongoing support since aging out of foster care. Participants identified the need for support in areas including: transportation (either assistance with getting their driver's license, or access to a bus pass); help in finding employment; advocacy (for such things as medical appointments and follow up); help finding housing; and help with continuing their education. Two participants said, since aging out of foster care, they wanted a social worker to continue to work with them; and two said this should at least be an option if young adults did want the support. One participant stated:

> *Pretty much stay in touch for the next three years after 19. By 21 should be able to handle yourself after that. Keep on getting pointers. Keeping on asking and telling them, this is what you do. The past three years, I've been on my own and learning by myself.*

One participant identified the need for a continued relationship with his past social worker, explaining how he had built a relationship with her, only to be cut off when he turned 19 years old.

> *I had a relationship with these people and I take my relationships with people seriously...then they're not even helping me or whatever...the only time they can talk to me is just to say hi on the street...can't even talk to me.*

All participants identified ways in which their independence plans and services could have been improved while in foster care. When asked what social workers should do better to help prepare youth for independence, participants identified making a more inclusive and collaborative plan for independence. Some participants felt they were not included in their own care-plans, and stated: "Instead of what they think would be a better fit for youth...see what we want." Perhaps this would lead to an improvement in post-care supports, if youth were able to identify what would best support them.

Participants identified that while in foster care, they would have benefited from more opportunities to gain life skills; such as budgeting, shopping, and eating properly (dietary requirements). One participant identified that he wanted to access workshops on "self-esteem, self-aware(ness), sex education, drugs, and alcohol."

Some participants appeared to blame themselves for their insufficient independence plans, or poor working relationships with their social worker when they were still in foster care. One youth claimed his social worker did not help him to prepare for independence, and he seemed to take some of the blame himself, stating: "No, I was different when I was younger, and she didn't really appreciate my company, I guess." Another participant had a

similar self-blame response. When asked if her social worker was helpful in her independence plans, she stated: "Yah...but I didn't see her. I was really fucked up." She also stated that, although she knows the resources now, when she first aged out of foster care she did not access them: "I know all the resources, but I just...I was not in the head space at that age." When asked about challenges since aging out of care, one participant responded, "(I) "didn't really accomplish anything yet...trying to be there more for (my) kids."

In order for service providers to understand the needs of former youth in-care a participant described a program that would help:

> *If they had a program with your social worker, foster parents, and with myself and whoever other support workers, and all were at this class at the same time. Something to show them what we're going to be going through and experiencing... so hopefully they don't think it's just a free run when we get out of foster care because they got so much rules and boundaries (when in foster care).*

Two participants stated they didn't know what would help them as adults. One stated:

> *I'm really confused from being in foster care. I don't have a set goal. I don't have a Dad who can say, you should work with me, or one of my friends here. I got none of that. I got to figure it out for myself. I know how, I just don't know what's right for me yet. I don't want to jump into something I don't want to be in.*

One participant described the need for an increase in support for youth after leaving foster care, and the importance of social workers' plans identifying the individual needs of each youth. She described what kids may turn to in order to fill an emptiness, or because that is all they know:

> *Like how much help the kid needs, and like if they do have disabilities, then, like, I don't know, just stay more connected with those kids. Or like at risk youth, because I don't know...but I think kids turn to alcohol and drugs because they lived in care and they dealt with all that kind of stuff, and they just don't feel like they have a sense of...like they don't have parents or something. Like their parents are really fucked up, so they do that because that's what they see...or like they go to the hood and get involved with gangs because that's a type of family and just...don't have a sense of belonging so they go and fill that void with anything they can.*

One participant in particular appeared knowledgeable about the resources available to former youth in-care, and stated it was their choice not to access them. She stated: "some people are just way too lazy or too embarrassed." Her response showed her resourcefulness, but also highlighted how other participants might be unaware of the services and resources in their community.

The above seven latent themes, inferred from the interviews with six former youth in-care, provide a look into the instability that these young adults have endured as children, youth, and since aging out of foster care. With so many challenges identified in the interviews, it is little wonder these young adults struggle to identify their needs and make plans to reach their goals. During the interviews, all of the participants identified housing, food, and clothing as challenges at some time since aging out of foster care. These are such heavy burdens for such a young group of people. The findings from this research emphasize the need for more support in education and employment, more emphasis on gaining independence skills while still in foster care, and the need for continued support as adults after aging out of the foster care system.

Chapter Five: Discussion

In British Columbia, youth age out of foster care and many in-care services when they reach 19 years old, whether they are ready or not. This research reflects the reality that participants were insufficiently prepared to exit foster care and, since becoming adults, have been faced with numerous challenges. From their years in foster care, participants recalled numerous placements and lack of stability. Since aging out of foster care, participants identified various struggles including: unstable, unsafe, and unaffordable housing; unemployment; ageism; and insufficient food. Although participants identified services that helped them prepare for independence, they appeared insufficiently prepared for some of their post-care realities. While faced with these realities, the young adults in this research are without many of the supports they had come to rely on while in foster care.

Identifying the lack of independence preparation received while in foster care is important, as it increases awareness for service providers of the need to improve independence planning. Participants provided insightful opinions on what would have better prepared them for independence, including opportunities to learn and use life skills while still in foster care. Some participants identified their continued desire for supports from service providers, including social workers and their former caregivers, since they had aged out of foster care. One participant explained a feeling of rejection from his prior social worker after leaving foster care, as well as disappointment in his former caregivers, who did not provide the support he had expected when he moved out on his own. There was a consensus among the participants that they had few supports as adults, and that there should at least be the option of having continued support from their in-care social worker.

Similarities in the Literature and this Research

There were numerous similarities between my research and the literature review, in Chapter Two. Schofield and Beck (2009) identified that youth in foster care resent the many decisions that are made for them. A participant in this research identified his feeling of lack of control and stated that he would have liked to be more involved in his in-care plans.

> *She (social worker) didn't tell me the plan at all. She talked to the group home workers, but not to me. It's like I had no say in where I wanted to live. It's like I had to live here and had no choice. I had to live here.*

This response provided an example of miscommunication with youth in foster care. Youth in-care should be provided with an explanation about why decisions affecting them have been made. Realities, such as limited resources of foster or group homes, and how this impacts placements and service providers' decision making should be explained. If youth in-care had a better understanding of why certain decisions are made, although it would not necessarily alleviate feelings of powerlessness, it might increase their understanding of their in-care plans, or possibly decrease feelings of self-blame for their realities. Discussions with youth about plans and decisions should not be a one-time conversation, but an ongoing discussion. As exemplified in the above quotation, participants in this research were still unsure about why certain decisions were made for them, and felt they were left out of their own in-care plans.

Freundlich and Avery (2006) identified the need for job training for youth in foster care. In my research, participants identified their lack of employment since leaving foster care and the need for job preparation while still in-care. One participant, of the six, had employment, although she continued to receive Person with Disability benefits. The other five participants all stated one of their goals was to find employment. A participant stated he

felt unprepared for the workforce, and would have liked work experience while in foster care, so that he knew what to expect from an employer as an adult.

Participants identified the lack of independence training they received while in foster care. According to Shin (2009), youth in foster care acknowledged they received some in-care training for independence. Other research with former youth in care reflected different opinions; that they did not receive sufficient opportunities to develop their independence skills (Scannapieco et al., 2007). Participants in my research identified some opportunities to learn independence skills while in foster care, but since aging out of foster care, they had been faced with realities for which they are unprepared, such as finding employment. Some participants would have liked continued support and resources to help them continue to learn independence skills and deal with situations faced as adults. One participant explained she did not want the independence training services that were offered to her when she was in foster care. This may be a reality for other youth—not wanting or not being ready for supports until they are older. Job preparation services, specifically for former youth in-care, should be provided for them as adults, when they are ready for that support.

Belonging was identified by Brendtro et al. (2002) as an important component of youth success. Although participants' sense of belonging was not specifically covered in my research questions, I wonder if they have a feeling of belonging, based on their lack of contact with their Aboriginal community, family, former social workers, and caregivers.

Participants identified that they had little contact with their family and Aboriginal community while in foster care (although some youth wanted little involvement with their Aboriginal community). Five of the six participants lived in more than ten foster homes; three of those had more than 20. This meant numerous changes in caregivers. Some

participants stated they wanted to see their family more while in foster care, and five participants identified sporadic relationships with family since leaving foster care. Participants mostly identified as having little contact with former caregivers; and some would have liked more. One participant identified that some former youth in care lack connection and look for it where they can find it: "...don't have a sense of belonging so they go and fill that void with anything they can." One participant insightfully stated that some former youth in care turn to gangs, as they have nowhere else to belong, getting this connection in that environment. This is similar to the arguments made by Brendtro et al., 2002.

Strengths

Despite the trauma, chaos, and instability in participants' lives, resilience was apparent in all of them, and it was important to identify some of their many strengths. Five of the participants had inconsistent contact with their family since aging out of foster care, but appeared to have developed a support network in their friends. Participants identified their friends as who they turned to in times of need and of success. Participants all identified challenges with insufficient food and appropriate clothing (such as a warm winter jacket). They all, however, appeared resourceful and identified services they accessed in times of need.

All of the participants identified someone they deemed supportive. One participant resided with her sister and identified as currently having stable, safe, and affordable housing. Most of the participants had continued relationships with some of their past service providers and one participant described a continued closeness with a former caregiver, stating that is who she turns to in good times and bad. Two other participants described positive experiences with former foster caregivers; one stated he felt that he was truly cared for by

them. Despite the unstable and inconsistent relationships these young adults had experienced while in foster care, they were still able to develop and maintain positive relationships as adults; something that was not consistently shown to them in foster care.

Participants identified the lack of support they received in school. Despite this, one participant had graduated from high school and has gone on to complete some post-secondary schooling. Another participant reported attending an adult education program with clear goals to attain her Dogwood diploma.

All of these young adults showed bravery by sharing their experiences with me. They provided thoughtful, knowledgeable, and sensitive insights into their experiences and into ways to improve in-care independence planning. When asked about what she would change about her in-care experience, one youth stated: "I don't know...I really wouldn't change any of it because it made me who I am today." Others were clear about the changes they wanted to see. They wanted more contact with their social worker while in foster care, and continued support from in-care services post-care. Participants wanted to feel like an individual; to have an individual plan made for them, not one based on assumptions of their in-care status. Participants discussed their goals to find employment, be positive parents, and to live a healthy style.

Anti-oppressive Social Work

Through this research, I wanted to create awareness about the realities for former youth in foster care in Northern British Columbia. As stated in Chapter One, anti-oppressive social work aims to increase awareness about oppression and empower those who are oppressed (Mullaly, 1997). Youth in foster care are members of an oppressed group based on their in-care status. As this research, and the literature, has revealed, youth in foster care

have little say in their circumstances, whether it be where they live, who they live with, how long they live there, or how often they see their family. It was not their choice to come into foster care, and while in foster care, their lack of choice continued.

"Oppressed people, as individuals, have limited choices over most aspects of their lives and are often ruled by forces of which they are not even aware" (Mullaly, 1997, p. 167). This was the reality reflected by the participants in this research. As mentioned, youths' feelings of powerlessness might have been better understood to them, if they had a more clear understanding of the child welfare system. I am not speculating that youth in-care (or out of care) have an interest or possibly maturity to understand such systems, but the attempt to explain and acknowledge the injustices and unfairness in the child welfare system might reaffirm trust between youth and service provider, decrease self-blame, and increase their understanding of service plans.

Social workers likely do not consider themselves as "oppressors," but self-reflection on practice could highlight areas where, even unintentionally, one has been in that role. In this research, former youth in care provided examples of how they have been oppressed: identifying that they were not included in their service plans; moved from foster home to foster home; and separated from their siblings. (Oppression) "occurs through the systemic constraints on subordinate groups that take the form of unquestioned norms, behaviours, and symbols and the underlying assumptions of institutional rules" (Mullaly, 1997, p. 145). Service providers working with youth might unintentionally reinforce the status quo as it seems there are no other options, or perhaps they do not question the reasons for practices.

Through this research, one of my goals was to create awareness for service providers, or perhaps a reminder, of in-care and post-care realities. During my interviews with

participants, I emphasized the importance of their knowledge in the research process. All of the six participants acknowledged the importance of their stories and the importance of the results of this research being shared. I hope that, in some way, their involvement in this research provided them with pride and empowerment. Following an anti-oppressive approach, I hope that (if I am able to reconnect with participants) participants will continue to be willing to co-present these results with me, to create awareness of the necessity for changes in social work practice with youth aging out of foster care.

As this research has shown, even changes at the micro level, in practice and day-to-day life, can create improvements for youth in foster care. But the research also reflects the need for systemic changes, in policy and legislation, to better support youth and alleviate oppression in and out of foster care.

Agreements with Young Adults (AYA)

An Agreement with Young Adults (AYA) is a newer initiative taken by the government to support adults who have been in foster care. This agreement provides some financial support to youth who have aged out of foster care and are continuing their education, including learning a trade. There are also finances available to support young adults who are attending a rehabilitative program, (e.g., for drug and alcohol issues). Adults are eligible for this funding from the age of 19 to 24 (Building Brighter Futures, n.d.).

One participant in this research, who was attending school, mentioned the Agreement with Young Adults (AYA). She had not applied for it as she was already receiving funding from Person with Disability, and the amounts on the AYA are comparable to Social Assistance. The other participants would not be eligible for the AYA as they were not enrolled in post-secondary or rehabilitative programs.

The Agreement with Young Adults (AYA) provides financial support for youth out of foster care to continue their education. However, as my research revealed, the participants were not attending post-secondary education and therefore were not eligible for this funding. This funding is also not long-term; it stops after age 24. As my research, and the literature, revealed, former youth in-care have many other stressors in their life that could prevent, deter, or distract them from proceeding with post-secondary education. These issues include: homelessness, drug addiction, alcoholism, poverty, and mental illness. Another barrier to accessing the AYA is the requirement to complete an application form outlining goals and the supports needed to reach these goals. To be eligible for the AYA, former youth in foster care must be enrolled in a minimum of 60 percent of a full time course load, or 40 percent if they have a permanent disability. Students are expected to maintain a satisfactory level of performance while in school (Building Brighter Futures, n.d). Although this appears a fair and supportive agreement, participants in my research identified lower levels of education that could prevent them from completing the application form. If the form is completed with support, there is still the expectation of a 60 percent full time course load and 40 percent for a person with a disability. This may not seem like a lot, but as one participant in this research identified, he was in an alternate program taking two courses, and that was too much for him. Participants all identified the lack of support they received in mainstream school and would likely require additional support if they continued with their education.

The Agreement with Young Adults (AYA) also provides financial support for former youth in care to attend rehabilitative programs. This seems a positive support, albeit perhaps an unknown resource, as only one participant identified the AYA in the interviews.

Although I agree the AYA is a supportive initiative; it overlooks many of the realities and needs of former youth in foster care.

Limitations

A larger group of former youth in-care may have revealed different realities in and out of foster care, and also provided more recommendations regarding independence planning. However, the stories and experiences shared by these six individuals are valuable in promoting an understanding of their experiences in and out of foster care. Although I was looking for realities of young adults in Northern British Columbia, the participants in this group all resided in the same Northern community. A sample from a variety of Northern communities may have revealed different results. However; the issues and realities identified by the participants in my research were similar to some of those identified in the literature review, which involved larger groups of former youth in foster care from different areas and countries.

As mentioned earlier, I am a practicing social worker. Although I was not involved in preparing the participants for independence, they all were aware of my dual role as researcher and social worker. Although participants appeared open in their responses, it is possible that they were influenced by my social work role or felt uncomfortable by a perceived power difference. Although I was able to complete some member checking during and after the interviews, I had initially planned to meet with all participants again to review their responses and my inferred latent themes. Unfortunately, as mentioned, I was only able to meet with three participants, due to lack of contact information. The participants I did connect with agreed with the identified latent themes and how they were reflected in their responses.

Many of my interview questions were open-ended. However; I did need to use probing questions in some instances to gather more information, and thus could have influenced some responses. I was careful how I phrased my questions, and tried to maintain open-ended questions even when probing. However, this was not always the case. For example, when asked about struggles since aging out of care, participants sometimes gave one response, such as "keeping a job." I would then list other struggles identified in the literature review or by other participants, such as housing, finances, or food.

Recommendations

In order for former youth in foster care to have improved outcomes as young adults, changes need to be made in policy, legislation, standards, and practice. Although much of the blame could be laid on social workers for ineffective planning, social workers are themselves faced with many challenges that affect their work. In my experience, high caseloads, sometimes spread over a large geographical area; work priorities (e.g., intakes); and supervisor support are a few of the potential barriers to effective independence planning. The literature review in Chapter Two reflects the lack of guidance provided in legislation and service standards regarding preparing youth for independence and, perhaps in part because of this, less priority is given to this work.

Similar to social workers, foster parents and group home staff would also benefit from ongoing support, training, and opportunities to implement independence planning and skills in their homes. One participant identified the need for opportunities to learn how to cook, while another provided an example of following the Canada Food Guide in an attempt to eat properly. These types of skills and knowledge could easily be implemented into foster home and group home daily routines, without any changes in policy. It is sometimes the

simple things that might be overlooked or taken for granted in independence planning, but the results of this research reflect the need for teaching basic life skills.

Independence plans and post-care outcomes may also improve if plans and services were initiated sooner for youth. Although in my research, I did not explore when their independence planning began, if participants had longer to learn and experience life skills, they may have had more success in some areas post-care, because of this experience. For example, if youth were shown how to complete a resume, experience interviews, and had work experience while still in foster care, this *may* have improved their post-care employment outcomes.

Even with the opportunity to shop, job-search, and cook, some youth, while still in foster care, may reject the idea. Until faced with the reality of having to do it on their own, they may not understand the necessity of learning these skills (among others). As one participant pointed out, although she knew the community resources, when she aged out of foster care, she did not access them because she was not in the "head space at that age." Therefore, as identified by some of the participants, the need for ongoing services, including social work support, would be beneficial for former youth in care, to support them during and after their transition to independence. For example, a community resource, with weekly life skill workshops and a support worker, would be of great benefit for former youth in care. At the time of the interviews, participants all identified areas in which they currently needed someone to help them. These included getting new identification (after losing theirs); accessing and completing a form to be eligible for the GST/HST refund; and re-applying for Social Assistance. These are all areas in which a social worker would have helped them

when they were in foster care. They are also life skills that may have been overlooked in their independence plans.

The literature review identified the feeling of powerlessness youth-in-care experience and the importance of day-to-day opportunities for youth to make decisions (Schofield & Beck, 2009). In my research, the interviews reflected the lack of power youth felt in their own care plans when it came to placements, family contact, and independence plans. Following an anti-oppressive and strengths-based approach, youth should be included in their plans wherever possible. This can be difficult, especially when youth appear disinterested or uncooperative, but their history and prior experience may have affected their attitude toward service provision. For example, if youth are distrusting of service providers, or have been dissatisfied with prior service plans, they may be more reluctant to participate in current plans.

The life experiences of youth-in-care provide valuable knowledge that cannot easily be taught and learned in a classroom setting for students training to become social workers or youth care workers. An anti-oppressive approach includes a collaborative service approach, listening and learning from former and current youth in foster care about their experiences, which could contribute to the improvement of service plans for upcoming in-care, young adults. Youth benefit from opportunities to develop their skills and confidence for positive leadership and self-discipline (Brendtro et al., 2002). Their insights and experiences of life in foster care, and since leaving care, provide valuable knowledge into improvements that can be made to in-care service plans and independence planning. Anti-oppressive, strengths-based, and collaborative practice could include facilitating older or former youth in-care being involved in teaching younger youth life skills (Tweddle, 2005). The opportunity to

develop mastery and a strong feeling of worth are important for success, and could be provided through the practice of youth leadership (Brendtro et al., 2002).

While a child is in foster care, there is the constant awareness of liability on the part of social workers and child welfare agencies that are accountable for the safety and quality of care for in-care children and youth. However; there is no accountability for this same level of care when a youth ages out of foster care. Perhaps if some of the liability was still on the government or delegated agency, young adults would be more prepared and better supported after leaving foster care.

When still in foster care, one participant stated she could tell when a social worker really cared about her and when it was just a job. She talked about her experience of being in a "crack shack" and described her social worker and youth care worker looking for her: "(You)...know the ones (social workers) who are dedicated and the ones who are by the book. You can bullshit them because they're not driving around looking for you; they're sitting in front of their computer." Although this may not be the reality, it is the youth's perception. Youth in foster care should feel they are cared for, and ways to ensure this could be addressed in regular discussions and care plans.

My plan is to share these results with government and delegated agencies. By outlining the realities and struggles of former youth in-care, awareness can be increased and service provision improved.

Future Research

This research has demonstrated the need for improved and inclusive independence planning, and for service delivery post-care. It would be beneficial to include service

providers (including social workers, supervisors, foster parents, group home staff, and teachers) in future research to explore their opinions on independence planning.

A study that includes a wider area of Northern British Columbia would provide the opportunity to compare results by identifying various similarities and differences in challenges and outcomes among communities (including urban and rural). Extending the age of participation in this study could also identify the long-term needs, challenges, successes, and strengths of former youth in foster care. A mixed methodology approach, including questionnaires and a focus group, could be included in future research to draw out more information, in-part through discussion.

Conclusion

The information derived from this research has reflected similar realities for these former youth in foster care to that drawn from other research, identified in the literature review. It has confirmed my concerns about ineffective independence planning while youth are in foster care, and the need for continued supports for young adults post-care. I chose this research topic not only to identify former youth in-care realities and challenges, but also to provide some insight into the lives of this young population. With the transfer of child welfare services from government to delegated agencies, the information in this research will be beneficial to these young, growing agencies. Hopefully, although the agencies are governed by the same legislation as government, the development of their services can be shaped to better support youth. The experiences youth have in foster care impact the rest of their lives, and this research supports the need for in-care service delivery to be improved.

When I asked one participant what would better support him as an adult, he stated: "I've already been put through the ringer. I don't know what it is I need right now. I just

need good things. Positive things." Hopefully, with changes to the child welfare system, and an increased awareness among service providers, supports can be improved for youth in foster care and for when they have aged out of care. With the recommended changes, young adults will be better able to identify what it is they need as adults and, hopefully, will have the supports available to help them reach their goals and aim toward positive, safe, stable, and healthy experiences as adults.

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Appendix A: Research and Ethics Board Approval Form

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD

MEMORANDUM

To: Amy Merritt
CC: Glen Schmidt

From: Michael Murphy, Chair
Research Ethics Board

Date: June 19, 2012

Re: **E2011.0616.069.01**
(Draft Title) The Realities of Young Adults in Northern British Columbia after Aging Out of the Child Welfare System

Thank you for submitting a request for a renewal to the above-noted proposal to the Research Ethics Board. Your request has been approved.

We are pleased to issue approval for the above named study for a period of 12 months from the date of this letter. Continuation beyond that date will require further review and renewal of REB approval. Any changes or amendments to the protocol or consent form must be approved by the Research Ethics Board.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Michael Murphy
Chair, Research Ethics Board

Appendix B: Information Letter

My name is Amy Merritt and I am a Master of Social Work student from the University of Northern British Columbia.

Thank you for agreeing to contribute to my research. I have asked you to participate in this study, because of your experience in the child welfare system. The purpose of this research is to better understand the realities of young adults who have aged out of the foster care system in Northern British Columbia, and the services that they received while in foster care to prepare them for independence.

Being part of this research will include participating in an interview, which I will conduct, that should take no longer than 60 minutes. The interview will explore some of your in care experiences, and also your present day realities. The interview will be audio recorded and I will transcribe it myself. I might also take some brief notes during the course of the interview. You will be able to review the interview, after transcription, and then provide any input you might have. The tape and records will be kept in a locked cabinet in my office. Electronic records will be in a password protected computer in my office.

Your name will be kept anonymous and I will be the only one who will have access to your identity. No names or identifying information will be used in the write up of the research results. The tape recordings and transcription might be reviewed by my Academic Supervisor, Glen Schmidt, but your name will remain anonymous. The recordings and transcripts will be destroyed two years following completion of the study. I will provide you with a copy of my research when it is completed, by mail or I can hand deliver it to you.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you are feeling uncomfortable at any point during the interview, we can stop. This research might bring up emotional issues for you. You can choose not to answer questions if you are uncomfortable with them. You can withdraw from the research at any time, without penalty. The audio-recording and notes of your interview will be destroyed after you withdraw from the study. If at the end of this research, you feel you require debriefing, you can discuss this with myself, or you can access free support from the following organizations:

Native Friendship Centre: 250 564-3558

Native Health Centre: 250 564-4324

John Howard Society: 250 561-7143

E-Fry Society 250 561-1113

UNBC Community Care Centre 250 960-6457

The potential benefits of participating in this research include the opportunity to critically reflect on your experiences in foster care, and to shed light on the gaps in services that are needed to prepare youth for when they age out of foster care.
To thank you for participating in this study, you will be compensated with a $20 gift card to Pine Centre mall.
If you have any questions about this research, please contact me on my cell at 250 640-0837 or Rowea@unbc.ca or my Academic supervisor, Glen Schmidt at 250 960-6519 or schmidt@unbc.ca. If you have any complaints about the project, please contact the Office of Research at 250 960-5650 or reb@unbc,ca.

Thank you again for participating in this research.

Sincerely,

Amy Merritt, B.S.W

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Title: The Realities of Young Adults who have aged out of the Foster Care System in Northern British Columbia.

You have been asked to participate in a study conducted by Amy Merritt, Master of Social Work student, from the University of Northern British Columbia. The general purpose of my study is to have a better understanding of the realities of young adults after they have aged out of the child welfare system, and how their experiences in foster care prepared them for independence.

You will be asked a number of questions surrounding your experiences while in care and since you have aged out of foster care. Your identity will be kept anonymous and no identifying factors will be used within the study write up. I will be the only person who has access to your information, and I will keep the interview notes and recordings in a locked cabinet in my office. The interview will be recorded and then transcribed. I will provide you with a copy of your interview so that you are able to review it and provide input. If at all during the interview process you are feeling uncomfortable, you have the right to stop, and can withdraw from the study. Your interview audio-recording and notes will be destroyed after you withdraw from the study.

I will provide you with a completed copy of the research upon completion. The recording and interview notes will be destroyed after a period of two years following completion of the interview.

Thank you for participation in this study. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions.

I understand that I have been asked to be in a research study for the purposes of completing a thesis in the Masters of Social Work program at the University of Northern British Columbia. This study explores experiences of young adults who were raised in foster care. I was chosen to be a part of this study because of my experience in the child welfare system.

I understand that the research interviews will be recorded and that the researcher will be taking notes throughout the interview.

I have received a copy of the information sheet. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study.

I understand the potential benefits and risks to participating in this study, and that I can withdraw at any time from this study.

I have read the provided information and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

This study was explained to me by: Amy Merritt.

I agree to participate in this study.

_____
Name of Participant (please print)

_____ _____
Signature of participant Date

_____
Name of witness (please print)

_____ _____
Signature of witness Date

Appendix D: Questionnaire Guide

Rapport building:

How old are you?

What are ways you spend your days?

What are your hobbies?

History

1) How many years were you in foster care? (It does not have to be a consistent time, but in total).

2) How many foster homes and/or group homes did you live in?

3) Are you of Aboriginal ancestry (if yes, go to question 4, if no go to question 7)

4) Were any of your foster homes on reserve? How many?

5) If living in an urban placement, how often did you return to your community? For what reasons? With whom?

6) When you aged out of care, did you and your social worker have a meeting with your band? If yes, who attended? What was discussed?

History and current

7) Did you complete high school, or receive your General Education Diploma (GED)?
   When?
   If No, why?
   Did you have supports in school?

8) Are you, or have you been, enrolled in post-secondary education?
   Who paid for this?
   What did you take?
   What are your educational goals?

9) Do you have employment? In what? For how long? What are your career goals?

10) When you turned nineteen years old, did you have stable and safe housing where you could continue to live as an adult? Was it safe? Was it affordable? Who did you live with? (stable will be defined as have lived there for longer than three months, and is affordable).

11) Do you have contact with your family?
   Who?
   How often?

Where?

12) Do you have contact with any of your social workers or service providers from when you were in care?

Probing questions: How often?

How? (cell, texting, see them when out in community)

Where?

Why?

13) Who do you phone when you need help (need something such as a ride, money, food)?

How often?

14) Who do you phone (text or email) when something good happens? (examples, got a good grade, got a job, are excited).

15) If anything, what would you change about your experience in foster care?

16) What were services or people who helped prepare you to age out of care?

What was the most helpful?

17) What challenges have you had since you have aged out of care?

18) What are your coping strategies for dealing with challenges?

19) What should social workers do to better prepare youth to be nineteen?

Who should be involved in this plan?

20) What would better support you now as an adult?

I will follow this questionnaire guideline, but might also ask probing questions to gain information if needed that was not answered by these questions.

Appendix E: Information Poster

Do you have experience with MCFD, CSFS or Nezul Be as a youth in care?

Did you age out of foster care with any of these agencies?

Will you share your experiences and realities on independence planning?

If you are interested in participating in a study exploring the outcomes of young adults who have aged out of foster care in Northern British Columbia, please contact Amy Merritt at (250) 640-0837.

I am a Master of Social Work student at the University of Northern BC and I am conducting research on young adults' experiences and preparation to become adults after leaving foster care.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be compensated for your time.

Please contact me with any questions about this study or if you are interested in participating.

Your identity will be kept anonymous during the study.