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Fostering Strengths: Using Testimonios to Identify Community Cultural Wealth in Foster Youth

Katherine Mullin

University of San Francisco, katherinemullin@gmail.com

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Running head: FOSTERING STRENGTHS
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Fostering Strengths: Using Testimonios to Identify Community Cultural Wealth in Foster Youth

A Field Project Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Education
Human Right Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Human Rights Education

by
Katherine Mullin
May 2017

**Fostering Strengths:
Using Testimonios to Identify
Community Cultural Wealth in Foster Youth**

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

In

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

by

Katherine Mullin

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UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this field project (or thesis) has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

Approved

Dr. Monisha Bajaj
Instructor/Chairperson

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Date

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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Working in a group home was my first experience with the foster care system. I was a residential counselor at a co-ed teen group home. I quickly learned from the youth what it meant to be a “group home kid” in Santa Clara County. I watched teachers, principals, law enforcement officers, social workers, store owners, neighbors, parole officers, and family members interact with the youth. The youth were overwhelmingly put down in these interactions. Police would refer to them as “punks.” School officials would shrug them off as “never there anyway.” But these same youth came home and cooked delicious dinners, loved to learn how to bake, painted and drew when they were bored, and would ditch school to lay on the couch and read a novel. The same youth that got suspended for fighting at school would come home and spend half an hour comforting another resident. When I saw youth growing with compassion, empathy, and understanding in the group home setting, I began to realize that for some youth this was the only place where they were acknowledged as individuals instead of being labeled as foster youth or group home kids.

Foster youth are underrepresented in colleges and only 46% graduate from high school. They are more likely to be unemployed, homeless, or in the criminal justice system. They are more susceptible to drug addiction, sexual abuse, and exploitation (Reilly, 2003). Foster youth are stereotyped and often defined by their obstacles. The adults in their lives, particularly their caregivers, do not see most of the attributes, skills, or tools that foster youth have accumulated. Racial and cultural biases exist on an individual level, as well as a systematic/structural level (Miller et al, 2013). Stereotyping, deficit perspectives, and discrimination lead foster youth to be

less “successful” in settings like school, housing, and work. Less “successful” can mean foster children receiving lower grades, dropping out of school, losing their living placements, or not being able to get or keep jobs. The youth are not given the opportunity to identify, value, nurture, and use their innate capital (Reilly, 2003). The concept of capital or strengths used in this project draws from Yosso’s (2005) conceptualization of community cultural wealth in the forms of aspirational, navigational, family, social, linguistic, and resistant capital, as will be discussed and defined later in this chapter.

The goal of this field project is to create a training about youth strengths for caregivers from an asset-based perspective. Ideally, caregivers would not draw their ideas of valuable capital from only their own experience and trainings, but also from the perception and experience of youth. They would be able to identify existing strengths and the formation of new strengths, as well as help them grow. Staff would use positive interventions to encourage youth's capital growth.

Purpose of the Project

In California in 2014, about 6% of youth in foster care were placed in group homes. Santa Clara county had a much higher percentage, 18%, of youth in group homes (Kids Data, 2014). Group homes are placements that are generally for youth who are considered not to be “successful” in foster home settings. This would include youth who are being asked to leave family homes or foster homes. Mental health and behavioral problems are the most common factors in youth losing their placements. Some common behaviors that result in losing placement would be physical or verbal aggression, inability to complete hygiene, substance use, leaving placement without permission, and hypersexualization (The Center for Human Services,

2008). Group homes are intended to be temporary, short-term placements. There is often a high turnover rate for youth and staff. These elements create a unique and challenging environment. Treatment often focuses on deficits and vulnerabilities (Leve, 2012). There is little research around the strengths and tools developed by foster youth, despite the resilience and resistance that the youth show. These strengths, tools, adaptations, and support systems that help the youth are forms of community cultural wealth or capital (Yosso, 2005) that they can use to navigate their reality in and out of the foster care system. Foster youth should be taught to identify and develop their capital. Currently, their capital is not valued or identified by caregivers as much as it should be.

The ability to identify capital in foster youth is not something that is taught to caregivers. When I started working in a group home, I was only taught to identify risks and needs. However, in my work, I saw that youth were more successful when they had staff who believed in them and identified their strengths. Unfortunately, it is hard for staff to identify the youth's strengths when their deficits are systematically focused upon. This is especially an obstacle in group home care because it is generally short term. Identifying strengths is harder to do when there is less time to build relationships with the youth.

Ideally, group home staff would be able to identify the unique capital that each individual youth takes with them into the group home. Stereotypes and staff's learned expectations would not interfere with staff observing and positively reinforcing capital growth. The group home would help youth identify their strengths, and then the goals and program would focus on the strengths that the youth themselves believed were important. If schools and places of employment could also see the capital that the youth have, if the capital has had the chance to

grow, and youth knew how to apply their strengths in various settings, they could draw upon their strengths more readily and often. Others in those spaces would hopefully be able to see the youth's capital as well.

The goal of this project is to identify strengths that youth develop at group homes and translate the knowledge into a training for group home caregivers. The training is divided into three hour-long segments so they could be used at staff meetings, or put together for a single training. The training starts by helping caregivers identify positive strengths in youth. The second portion focuses on how to foster the capital in the residential setting, and what interventions can support the youth's growth. Lastly, the training gives tangible ways that caregivers can help connect the youths' strengths to success in independent living. It focuses on how caregivers can act as a resource for youth to prepare for life after foster care.

Theoretical Framework

With the overwhelming focus on negativity and deficits, community cultural wealth can serve as a lens that allows for intentional and deep valuing of assets in individuals and communities (Yosso, 2005). Deficit thinking around oppressed communities dominates society, manifesting itself in schools, public policy, the work force and other institutions (Garcia and Guerra, 2004). These perspectives are often used to explain outcomes that are reinforced and perpetuated by deficit thinking. An example would be the "banking method" in education. Oppressed youth are viewed as lacking necessary and important cultural knowledge. The importance is based on white, often middle class, and capitalist values. The current knowledge or learning methods of the youth are undervalued by our society and systems and outcomes continue to be stratified (Freire, 1973). Yosso uses community cultural wealth as an alternative

to other cultural capital theories that perpetuate deficit thinking and build on racialized assumptions. Traditional cultural capital theories reinforce racism and other oppression by assigning value to capital based on privileged perspectives while silencing other communities (2005). She defines community cultural wealth as “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).

Community cultural wealth is grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT). In the 1980s, CRT came out of critical theory in several different fields: law, history, ethnic studies, sociology, for example. Scholars in these fields left out conversations around race that pertained directly to the work they were doing (Crenshaw, 2002). Work in these fields was not being done that acknowledged the role of racism or worked towards the goal of eliminating racism. Theory was kept separate from conversations about race, racism, and its role. As critical theorists looked at social structures and offered suggestions for transformation and legitimization of these structures, these recommendations fell short to addressing racism and its impact on communities. (Yosso, 2005).

CRT first arose from Critical Legal Studies, incorporating race and racism into the analysis of legal theory. One of the first topics explored was Civil Rights legislation. At first the scholarship operated with a black-and-white lens, silencing the voices of many other folks that experienced diverse and layered oppressions (Yosso, 2005). From this critique, many different lenses of CRT began to develop, including Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit), Native American critical race theory (TribalCrit), and Asian American critical race theory (AsianCrit). Solorzano classified five tenets of CRT: (1) intercentricity of race/racism, (2) challenge to

dominant ideology, (3) commitment to social justice, (4) centrality of experiential knowledge, (5) interdisciplinary approaches (1997). Community cultural wealth builds upon these tenets when identifying capital and analyzing its value, use, and presence in communities.

In contrast to cultural capital models that take a deficit perspective, CRT research relies on the voices of the oppressed. Cultural capital research is limited and outcomes are deficit based and racist because it does not including diverse voices and experiences (Yosso, 2005). Capital is divided into “good” and “bad” capital where “good” is in line with white middle class values (Yosso, 2005). When value is assigned based upon these social racist assumptions, oppressed folks will appear to lack capital. They are required to survive and resist oppressive forces on a daily basis, using capital that is invisible in cultural capital models. The deficit model is rooted in racism and its assumptions. When a CRT lens is applied, the bias from researchers and the data that leads to these conclusions can be critiqued, undermining the deficit perspective. Foster youth voices are often left out of research for various reasons. Little knowledge exists around the capital that they possess but this does not mean it does not exist or is not valuable.

Yosso categorized community cultural wealth into six categories: aspirational, navigational, family, social, linguistic, and resistant capital (2005). These categories are ones that Yosso recognized but are not the only types of capital that individuals or communities can hold. They are also fluid, overlapping and growing. One asset can be part of one, many, or all the categories of capital. Community cultural wealth uses CRT to explore capital that has been held by communities historically (Yosso, 2005). While ignored by scholars and oppressors, communities have used their capital to survive, resist, and empower. While community cultural wealth is a common lens used for communities of color and often youth of color, I could not find

studies that use it specifically to explore foster youth's assets. There are studies that use cultural capital theory with foster youth, but they lacked the CRT perspective. The value of their assets is not based on their unique needs, goals, and dreams and their race, other identities, and experiences are not considered and valued. Due to the over-representation of certain groups in foster care it is especially important to consider the intersecting identities of race, sexual orientation, mental health, developmental level, and gender in a critical way.

Aspirational capital helps maintain motivation and hopes for a positive future. Regardless of feasibility, dreams and aspirations for an improved future are held by individuals and communities, despite obstacles and oppressive forces (Yosso, 2005). Sometimes one holds these for themselves, other times they have dreams for their loved ones. Despite facing constant adversity and being surrounded by racist and other oppressive ideas and assumptions, communities of color continue to imagine and dream. Foster youth are continually faced with hopeless situations and have little certainty about their future. They lack access to caring family and role models due to physical removal from their community and natural support systems. These circumstances do not mean that foster youth do not possess aspirational capital. But it does mean that the capital will look different than other communities and will require a critical look into the experiences, history, and stories of foster youth.

Linguistic capital included skills and knowledge that enables communication and expression. Bilingualism, use of art, music, poetry, and storytelling are all examples of different ways that communication is not limited to verbal and written skills in English (Yosso, 2005). Linguistic capital can help individuals express themselves, advocate for their community, access education, healthcare, or other resources for themselves or others, and acquire knowledge. Foster

youth usually have less exposure to language acquisition through family, but have increased contact with diverse youth and caregivers that hold their own linguistic capital. Of course youth come up with nontraditional ways of maintaining contact with family and communities such as social media, using apps on various devices, or communicating through other people.

Communication through various art forms is common with foster youth. Art is often used as a skill to cope with past and ongoing traumas, as well as creating a space for safe expression. Storytelling is common among group home residents, sometimes sharing their histories or passing knowledge about survival in the system to other residents.

Navigational capital are the skills, abilities, and contacts that are used to maneuver systems and institutions that were created solely for privileged communities and often act exclusively towards others. Recognizing individual agency within institutions, navigational capital includes social and psychological techniques to gain access to resources and cope with structural violence while also looking at social groups resistance to the violence and community navigation of various systems (Yosso, 2005). Foster youth have continual interaction with various systems. On top of the systems that they continue to interact with from their family's community, they are under the jurisdiction of social services and are more likely to be involved in juvenile justice and mental health systems. Therefore, they need to develop additional navigational capital.

Familial capital encompasses the cultural knowledge that grows within families including cultural intuition, community history and resources, and lessons in caring and coping (Yosso, 2005). White heteronormative definitions of family limit the understanding of this capital. Instead family is extended to include extended family, friends, and community members from

the present or past. For foster youth, family is even more expansive and inclusive. Often it includes those listed above as well as other foster youth, foster parents, or members from the community to where they were displaced. Friends of foster youth often hold a “family” member role due to a lack of biological family involvement. Often friends are more consistent than parents or other family. The family, however defined, connections are important for teaching youth to develop healthy and safe connections to individuals and communities. They also share knowledge around how to care for others, cope with reality, and daily living skills. (Yosso, 2005). While some foster youth have access to familial capital that has already been identified in communities of color, others do not have family, even after expanding our idea of family, that are able to teach them basic living and coping skills. These youth also struggle with attachment later in their lives. But they find other ways to acquire this knowledge. Family also builds a sense of connection and ability to see that one is not alone in facing adversary (Yosso, 2005).

Social capital is access to people and resources in the community that help navigate through social systems. Historically communities have found ways to communicate and preserve the knowledge they use in these systems. Sometimes this is creating societies and organizations, other times its community members simply reaching out to each other (Yosso, 2005). Foster youth access various different services – sometimes finding and maintaining social capital – while also maintaining connects to the social capital in their home community. They find creative ways to maintain social connections to peers and adults. Often individuals they have lived with, gone to school with, or received mental health or housing services from act as gateways to services and resources.

Resistant capital includes knowledge and skills that are used to challenge oppression and resist their influence (Yosso, 2005). History is full of resistance from marginalized communities and is often how communities work towards liberation. Foster youth face many forms of oppression on a daily basis. Their resistance takes various forms from acting-out behaviors to getting legal support from their attorneys. Solorzano and Bernal (2001) explore the different types of resistance, classifying them based on their level of critical consciousness and their motivation for social justice. As both these measures increased, the resistance had more transformative power.

Community cultural wealth has a transformative nature through acknowledging the assets that communities hold and valuing what these strengths accomplish for them. Historically, communities have used it to survive the current systems, resist oppression, and create change in access to resources. Through the naming and valuing of community cultural wealth and CRT, consciousness and hopefulness can be increased, leading to more transformative results.

Significance of the Project

Group home caregivers are an important audience because of their potential to be positive support in the lives of youth. When youth are placed in group homes, sometimes they have minimal family in the area, sometimes they are being placed out of the area, sometimes they are being removed for the first time and it is an emergency placement. Often times, there is not much steady adult support in the youths' lives. Youth are often moved in and out of schools or do not attend school regularly, so they do not have the consistent educational support of adults.

Caregivers have the potential to be an additional support system. They have the opportunity to

create an environment that is stable, supportive, and encourages positive capital growth through their actions, attitudes, and interventions.

Conclusion

Foster youth have been silenced and oppressed by social systems as well as research in academia. When they are in studies or focused upon, it is their deficits or needs that are discussed. Foster children, and even more specifically the youth in group homes, come into contact with government, educational, and social service systems more often than their peers. Therefore, these systems affect them and their experiences even more heavily. Group home staff are trained in and constantly surrounded by deficit models with little training to identify the youth's strengths. Yet, foster youth still show resilience, resistance, and growth. Imagine the potential if these assets could be acknowledged, valued, and fostered. The goal of this field project is to create a training that, through youth voice, group home staff can start to identify strengths in youth and engage in interventions that encourage these assets. The theoretical framework for the project rooted in Yosso's community cultural wealth which categorizes assets into 6 different forms of capital. Community cultural wealth builds on Critical Race Theory as opposed to traditional cultural capital theories. Community cultural wealth focuses on the assets of individuals and communities as they navigate, survive, resist, and transform the systems that historically and currently operate to maintain traditions of power and oppression. The six categories are aspirational capital, navigational capital, linguistic capital, social capital, familial capital, and resistance capital. Using community cultural wealth, group home staff have the potential to acknowledge the youth's assets through an understanding of the youth's diverse and valuable experiences.

Definition of Terms

capital: the strengths, tools, adaptations, and support systems that help the youth to navigate their reality in and out of the foster care system (used synonymously with **strengths** throughout the project).

community cultural wealth: an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression (Yosso, 2005).

deficit perspective or model: the viewpoint or framework commonly used in various disciplines, particularly social services or mental health, that the clients lack assets needed to navigate their daily life. The clients are viewed through their needs, challenges, and obstacles.

foster care: a branch of the Child Welfare System that takes formal and informal, 24-hour care of children whose families are unable or unwilling to provide for them (Foster, 2001).

foster child/foster youth: a child (0-17 years of age) or transitional-aged youth (18-25 years of age) that is part of the foster care system formally or informally because their family is determined to be unable or unwilling to care for them.

foster homes: non-relative adults that are regulated by an organization or the government to care for foster youth in their community-based homes. Their name is transitioning to Family Resource Homes in California.

group home (sometimes called residential treatment facility): community based residential group care with 6 or less beds that meet different levels of care. They provide 24-hour care, supervision, and services. They are licensed and monitored by state agencies. Group homes serve multiple populations besides solely foster youth including adults and youth with mental health or

developmental conditions, adults with disabilities, refugee youth, and juvenile justice involved youth. I will be focusing in this field project solely on group homes that serve foster youth (though this might not be the only population they serve). They are transitioning to being called Short Term Residential Treatment Centers.

placement: when an agency or court decides to remove this child from their family home, the new location they determine the child should live is called the youth's "placement."

residential treatment facility: see group home definition.

staff (also called group home staff): employees of the group home or residential treatment facility that provide direct care and supervision to the youth in the home. They are the current caregivers of the youth. They provide meals, program structure, mental health interventions, administer medication, and other essential needs of the youth. Their shifts vary to provide 24-hour supervision.

strength-based model: framework and praxis that identifies, communicates, and utilizes youth, family, cultural, and community strengths. Strengths can be values, characteristics, skills, resources, or people that are important to the youth.

Testimonios: a research method that originated in Latina feminist studies. It privileges the voices of those who are marginalized and silenced. But it does this in a critical way that questions the traditional narrative and highlights the individuals critical consciousness, resistance and transformation (Delgado-Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012).

trauma-informed model: considers the brain's development and daily reaction to stresses as a foundation. There is an emphasis on understanding behavior and emotional reactions of youth through a trauma-based lens. How is the behavior serving the youth? What needs are being met?

Creating a sense of safety is central to the trauma-informed model (Cimmarusti and Gamero, 2009).

Wraparound model: a “philosophy of care” with a team based approach that is family-based, creative, culturally competent, individualized, and strength-based. Instead of focusing solely on “mental health,” wraparound acknowledges that school, communication, healthy relationships, and family time all intersect with mental health treatment and well-being.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

Foster care is a broad topic that has been defined differently in various periods in United States history. The literature reviewed in this chapter has been narrowed to the United States foster care system, focusing on youth in group home care. The first section defines foster care and group homes as they are today. It goes on to discuss foster children and, more specifically, youth who are placed in group homes. The history of group homes is not heavily documented partially due to the ambiguously or fluidly defined nature of a group home and partially due to the otherization of “group home kids.” The history of American foster care is broken into three major time periods that can be categorized by the entity that took responsibility for child welfare. In the pre-1875 period, this was primarily the courts and communities, through the use of orphanages. In the middle section of history, non-government agencies took responsibility creating institutions and systematic foster homes. From the 1960s onward, the government took control through legislation and funding changes. The next sections survey two major residential treatment models, trauma-informed theory and a strength-based model. These are two of the most common models that I encounter in my work and in the literature that I reviewed.

Foster Youth and Group Homes: A Modern Overview

In 2014, more than 64,000 youth were in the California foster care system. This is less than 1% of California's child population. Foster care is a branch of the Child Welfare System that takes formal and informal, 24-hour care of children whose families are unable or unwilling to provide for them (Foster, 2001). Foster care has come from a history of child “protection.” Sometimes the “protection” is from abuse and neglect, sometimes from low-income, minority

communities. Writings concerning abuse, neglect, and unsafe environments is historically racialized, culturally-influenced, and class-based. This is supported by current racial breakdowns and overrepresentation of certain social/cultural groups in the foster care system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008). In 2014, Native American children were three times more likely to enter into foster care than their peers. Black and biracial children were greater than 50% more likely to enter. Asian and white children are both underrepresented in the foster care system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008). The foster care system is a complex network of government child welfare and protection agencies and programs often called “the system.” Historically and currently, non-government agencies hold key pieces in the services and treatment of youth and families.

Youth in foster care sometimes remain in their family home with support services, but many are living in out-of-home placements. When an agency or court decides to remove this child from their family home, the new location they determine the child should live is called the youth’s “placement.” In 2014, most removed youth, 46%, lived in non-relative foster family homes. Twenty-nine percent lived in relative homes. Six percent lived in group homes, while 8% lived in other institutions. Other situations make up small percentages of removed youth, 5% are currently in a trial home visit, 4% in a pre-adoptive home, 1% in independent living, and 1% are currently on the run (Foster Club, 2014).

Historically, the definition of group homes changes depending on the time period, complicating what little research there is on the topic. Institutional care transitioned from orphanages to modern group homes. (Development Services Group, Inc., 2008). But this change is poorly documented and regionally experiences and histories are different. Orphanages and

group homes have traditionally been last resorts for housing children with no other community living options. The individuals who have lived in these institutions are not just foster children but other marginalized people, which is the major reason for the lack of historical documentation.

Modern group homes¹ are community based residential group care with 6 or less beds that meet different levels of care. Residents are encouraged to be part of the community and often attend local schools; but, it is more structured and restrictive than family homes. They provide 24-hour care, supervision, and services. They are licensed and monitored by state agencies. Group homes serve multiple populations besides solely foster youth including adults and youth with mental health or developmental conditions, adults with disabilities, refugee youth, and juvenile justice involved youth (Department of Social Services, 2007). I will be focusing in this field project solely on group homes that serve foster youth (though this might not be the only population they serve). Legislation changes have led to transitions in group home services and structure. In particular, the Continuum of Care Act, AB403, (that was planned to be in effect for 2017 whose implementation is still being defined by legislatures) is requiring group homes and other institutions for foster youth to transition to Short Term Residential Treatment Programs (STRTP).

In California, 6% of youth in foster care are placed in group homes. In Santa Clara County, that portion goes up to 10% (kidsdata.org, 2014). Group homes are a last resort for foster youth. (When group homes are not an option, the alternative is that youth remain in juvenile hall

1

Sometimes modern group homes include 24-Hour Therapeutic Residential Facilities that have over 6 beds and are not based in the community and are considered a level 14 group home. I am not including these facilities in my research since none of my participants lived in them.

longer than they are required to stay, the hospital without a condition, or remain weeks in 24-hour-maximum-stay shelters.) Sometimes youth are placed in group homes because they are recently removed from their homes and are in need of an emergency placement, but this is very rare. (Ryan et al., 2008). Much more often, they are teenagers who have spent years in many different foster placements. On average, youth in group homes have been in five family home placements before being placed in a group home (Development Services Group, Inc., 2008). These youth are often unable to be placed in foster homes due to their age, behaviors, mental health needs, ethnicity, involvement in the juvenile justice system, or a lack of available families (Development Services Group, Inc., 2008). Seventy-five percent of the children in group homes are 12-17 years old. (Foster, 2001). Foster youth in group care are particularly likely to be exposed to, learn, and exhibit risky and unsafe behaviors such as running away, sex with coercive partners, substance use, domestic violence, commercial sexual exploitation, crime, and gang involvement. Foster children in group homes are also more likely to be over-medicated (Ryan et al., 2008). I have seen that youth who have lived in multiple group homes or there for long periods of time are sometimes called “group home kids,” by themselves, each other, staff, or other members of the system. The term has a negative connotation but is often reclaimed by youth and used in an empowering way.

The History of American Foster Care: Before 1875

Currently the “system” is legally defined and formalized across all the states (Curran, 2008). But the origins and historical practices of foster care are not well documented or clearly defined. When looking at the history prior to the Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Children around 1875, there are two major perspectives: child protection and out of home living. By some,

indentured servitude is identified as the first form of foster care. Families that did not have the means to support their children would turn to another adult with a skill or business. The youth would, sometime involuntarily, be bound to the skilled adult and must work for them. In exchange, the adult would care for them and teach them the profession (Curran, 2008). With high mortality rates during this period, children were often orphaned. Children were legally viewed as the property of their parents or if orphaned, of the local community. Orphans were sent to an orphanage or auctioned off publicly to indentured servitude (McGowan, 2005).

The practice of indenturing children reduced as more institutions such as orphanages became more common. In 1821 and 1824, respectively, the Report of the Massachusetts Committee on Pauper Laws and the Yates Report warned against the use of outdoor relieve or indentureship and advised a systematic turn to almshouses and other institutional solutions. These documents were some of the first to examine the effects of residential care (McGowan, 2005). Following this, the 1830s marked an increase in orphanages and other institutions. Black children were often not allowed in the private orphanages where white children lived. Some black orphanages were founded during this time. Two examples of orphanages for black children, the Philadelphia Association for the Care of Colored Children and the Colored Orphan Asylum, were both burned down by whites in racialized riots (McGowan, 2005).

During this period, there were no “juvenile” courts, but courtrooms, judges, and lawmakers who continued to act as “protection” for abused and neglected children. A Massachusetts law passed in 1642 allowing children to be removed by community magistrates if parents were neglecting the children's teachings (Myers, 2009). Individual courts have removed

children from homes because of physical or sexual abuse or neglect of basic needs or education, placing them in other families' homes or orphanages.

The History of American Foster Care: Non-Governmental Agencies from 1875-1960s

The next major chapter of Foster Care is characterized by an involvement of non-government organizations in the “protection” of children. The first documented case of an organization getting involved in a case of child abuse was in 1874 with nine-year-old Mary Ellen Wilson from New York City. A religious missionary, Etta Wheeler, discovered that Mary Ellen was being physically beaten and neglected. Etta turned to local police and charities to “rescue” Mary Ellen but was ignored. She then turned to Henry Bergh, founder of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty Against Animals. Henry's lawyer was able to remove Mary Ellen from her caregivers through creative use of the law.

In 1875, Henry founded the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC) which was the first of many non-government agencies that focus on the protection of children during this period (Myers, 2009). Courts gave these organizations power to remove children from situations of abuse and neglect. Neglect was still closely associated with the economic circumstances of the parents. Removed children were placed in orphanages or other institutions that more closely resemble modern group homes. Children began to be placed in organized foster homes (Courteney, 2008). Previously, family or community members acted as foster homes, but there was not an organized effort to create and maintain family-based homes as options for child placement.

In 1854, the Orphan Train was started by the Children's Aide Society in New York City. They took orphans or children whose parent(s) were persuaded by the Children's Aide Society to

give them up because of hard economic and social situations and put them on a train to cities and towns in Upstate New York and the Midwest. Christian, particularly Protestant, families in these rural communities would take in the children and raise them. The removal of the children from the city slums to rural families was viewed as “saving” them from less appropriate conditions. The Children's Aide Society focused on the “better” or more “suitable” homes to which youth are relocated (Courteney, 2008). The ideological shift from protecting children solely from abuse and neglect to “protecting” them from the economic, cultural, and racial communities that they are from is important to note in the racialized history of foster care. The Orphan Train and similarly organized efforts that followed were the first systematic recruitment of foster homes. Similar to indentured servitude, the children were expected to work for their room and board in the foster home. The first to criticize this system for assimilation was the Catholic Church. Since most of the foster homes were Protestant families, the Catholic Church spoke out about youth being systematically placed in homes where they could not practice their religion (McGowan, 2005). Native American children were removed from their homes, often for “economic” reasons, and placed in Indian Orphanages. These orphanages practiced cultural assimilation and had high cases of physical abuse to the youth (Holt, 2001).

The non-governmental organizations that focused on child protection continued to grow until the Great Depression in the 1930s. They assumed the major role of intervention in cases of abuse and neglect in major cities. But most areas in the United States had no organizations present to investigate or intervene for youth. In the post-civil war society, there was little to no documentation around the protection of children of color. The individuals involved in reform who ran and operated the non-government organizations were overwhelmingly middle-class,

Christian, white folks who brought their own set of biases and assumptions to the organizations (Curran, 2008). After the Great Depression, the number of non-government organizations decreased to one sixth what it had been at the beginning of the 1900s (Myers, 2009).

In 1899, Chicago created the first Juvenile Court System. In the next twenty years, all but three states instituted their own Juvenile courts (Myers, 2009). The jurisdiction and power of juvenile courts increased substantially with funding in the 1960s onward.

The History of American Foster Care: 1960s Onward

Around the 1960s and onward, the responsibility of child protection shifted to government agencies as program funding increased and the medical field began to focus on physical abuse of children. Smaller publications by various doctors about signs of child abuse lead up to the highly publicized 1962 paper by Physician C. Henry Kempe, “The Battered Child Syndrome” (Curran, 2008). This article inspired interest in child abuse from the medical profession as well as the media. Previously this topic was overlooked by research and public awareness. When a child was beaten to death, it may have been reported by local news reporters but now cases of abuse were receiving national coverage in magazines and newspapers (Myers, 2009).

The shift to focus on child abuse increased the legislation around reporting child abuse and funding related programs. The Social Security Act funded child welfare programs. In 1962 it was amended, requiring states to provide Child Protection and Welfare Services statewide (Myers, 2009). The 1974 Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) provided national funding to states as well as grants for non-profits for child abuse and neglect prevention,

investigation, awareness, and treatment. CAPTA also required states to institute agencies and systems for child abuse reporting, investigation, and protection. (Courteney, 2008).

With the increase in awareness of child abuse and reporting systems in place, reporting started to grow, and continued to grow over the next decades. In 1974, there were 60,000 reports of child abuse or neglect in a year. In 1980, there were over a million. In 1990, they had doubled. In 2000, there were around three million. With more reporting, there was a huge increase in youth removed from their families and in foster care (Myers, 2009).

More focus was now on “the system.” Advocates started to talk about the effects of out of home placement on youth and “foster care drift” - the continual changes and movements of foster youth from placement to placement. The “foster care drift” was an even harsher reality for children as numbers in the system increased faster than available out of home placements (Curran, 2008). There was also an increased awareness of abuse and neglect in foster care homes and residential treatment centers. Mindsets around child welfare began to move from child “protection” to family preservation. The Child Welfare Act of 1980 required states to make efforts to keep children at home and provide family reunification services (Curran, 2008). Despite this shift, the 1990s saw the foster care population more than double from the 1980s (Foster, 2001).

Native American and African American youth were and continue to be overly represented in the child welfare system. The 1978, Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was passed to reduce the overwhelming numbers of Native children removed from their homes into foster care (at that time 25-35%) by giving the jurisdiction back to the tribes or reservations. Social services is

required to investigate any claims to native heritage and notify the tribal court of any removals from native families (Myers, 2009).

Residential Treatment Models

Trauma-informed Theory

Since the 1950s, theoretical work for the residential treatment of foster youth draws heavily from child development theories. Currently, attachment and trauma theory are two of the most popular and relevant for the foster youth population. Many children enter into the system due to exposure to trauma. Regardless, the removal of youth from their homes and entrance into foster care is in and of itself a traumatic event (Sisson, 2010). In attachment theory, the ideas of John Bowlby's 1969 article on parental attachment are still fundamental. Children's primary attachment to their parents or caregivers is directly related to their development. Again, when a youth enters foster care there is a disruption in their access to their primary attachment. For most children, the disconnect or unreliability of their caregiver was their reality long before entering care (Barton et al., 2012).

Trauma research is interdisciplinary, drawing from child development, psychiatry, and neurobiology for example. Foster youth often experience many traumas before and after entering the system. For youth in group homes, this is particularly true. The youth entering group homes or other residential treatment facilities tend to be some of the most traumatized youth in foster care. This plays out in risky behaviors which sometimes results in further trauma inflicted on themselves and often other youth in the program. Foster youth often suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), sometimes from violent events or abuse that occurred or patterns of neglect or stress (Sisson, 2010). Focus on trauma-informed models has led to institutional

changes such as reductions in programs that use seclusion and restraint practices and increased resources to keep youth at home instead of removal.

Youth affected by trauma and PTSD show long term negative effects on their development, behaviors, emotional regulation, and attachment (Sisson, 2010). Many times, these “side-effects” of trauma are what prevents youth from being successful in foster homes and is a contributing factor to the rationale for their placement in group homes. Trauma affects brain development, influencing the ability to regulate emotions and fear responses. Instead of brain function growing to the age level of the child, it remains undeveloped around the age that the trauma occurred. Finding out a youth's developmental level and their emotional age is important for communication and treatment (Barton et al., 2012). Youth with trauma are often overly reactive to conflicts with others and daily stress. This makes daily survival in settings such as school, jobs, and foster homes challenging. Without the disruption of trauma, children are naturally drawn to adults for comfort when feeling unsafe or distraught. Traumatized youth, despite the increased need for comfort, struggle to access relational resources for support.

Foster youth are constantly presented with changes in providers due to high turnover in the field, requiring them to rebuild trust. PTSD leads to hypervigilance and therefore a lack of focus or attention on other topics. Because of this, mental health professionals often misdiagnose PTSD as ADHD in foster youth. An important part of trauma theory is understanding trauma-based behaviors as purpose-driven. Behaviors such as lashing out, running away, or self-harming function as a way for youth to keep themselves safe. These responses become patterns that are particularly difficult to change, especially for individuals with trauma. The constant need to focus on survival prevents self-identity formation (Barton, et al., 2012). From trauma theory,

comes the trauma-informed model. This model of intervention considers the brain's development and daily reaction to stresses as a foundation. There is an emphasis on understanding behavior and emotional reactions of youth through a trauma-based lens. How is the behavior serving the youth? What needs are being met? Creating a sense of safety is central to the trauma-informed model (Cimmarusti and Gamero, 2009). Staff as well as the program must be consistent, safe, and mindful.

Seeking Safety: dual diagnosis treatment model. In 2002, Lisa Najavits published *Seeking Safety: A Treatment Manual for PTSD and Substance Use*. In 2006, Najavits and two colleagues adjusted the model for dual diagnosed adolescent girls. The model can be utilized in therapy or groups. Components are starting to be used in residential programs as well. “The treatment has five principles: (1) safety as the priority, (2) integrated treatment of both disorders, PTSD and substance use, (3) a focus on ideals, (4) four content areas: cognitive, behavioral, interpersonal, and case management, and (5) attention to therapeutic process. The treatment manual has 25 topics...Each topic offers a ‘safe coping skill’ relevant to both disorders” (Najavits et al, 2006, p.2). Accommodations were made to make the treatment work for adolescents such as reading handouts allowed, speaking about “friends” instead of the youth directly, leaving time for topics not in the manual, time to process trauma, and (with youth permission) updates to caregivers (Najavits et al, 2006). In addition to the 5 principals, Seeking Safety follows many trends including psychoeducation around PTSD, substance abuse, their relationship to each other, and trauma and safety. The topics use accessible language and result in practical solutions. Discussion is engaging for participants and is based in their current experiences instead of theory. The treatment emphasizes the urgency of learning and using skills, in particular it

prioritizes the treatment of substance abuse. The treatment for adults does not include processing traumatic events or the relationships between participants or participants and therapists. This distinction is made because of the potentially harmful effects of processing these topics in the group and a lack of time (Najavits, 2002). As stated above, an adjustment is made for treatment of youth using the Seeking Safety intervention, for example, space is made in the treatment for processing past traumatic events.

Strength-Based: a Wraparound Model

Wraparound is a “philosophy of care” with a team based approach that is family-based, creative, culturally competent, individualized, and strengths-based. Wraparound is intended for the most severe and complex cases (Walter, 2008). Wraparound defines itself by these essential elements: “(1) voice and choice for youth and family as active partners; (2) team-driven process; (3) community-based services; (4) cultural competence; (5) individualized and strength-based; (6) involving natural supports; (7) commitment to continuation of care; (8) collaboration of agencies; (9) flexible resources; (10) outcome-based services” (Walter, 2008, p.1).

The wraparound movement in the United States started in Alaska in 1985. In an attempt to return youth who had been placed out of state for difficult behaviors back to Alaska, Alaska Social Services started intensive wraparound programs. Almost all the youth did return to the state. After this, many other states started to pilot wraparound programs (VanDenBerg et al., 2003). Wraparound encompasses the youth and family in their various facets. It is supposed to work in conjunction with the family unit and the community to strengthen the family and build up its resources. A family-based approach supported the mentality of family preservation and worked to reduce numbers of dependent children. Instead of focusing solely on “mental health,”

wraparound acknowledges that school, communication, healthy relationships, and family time all intersect with mental health treatment and well-being (Burns and Suter, 2010).

Youth in foster care are sometimes court ordered to participate in wraparound services. Other foster youth are referred to wraparound services. The referral goes through an interdisciplinary committee, comprised of representatives from Child Welfare, Juvenile Probation and Behavioral Health services to determine if the youth qualifies for wraparound services based on their mental health need and behavior. Over time, the goals of wraparound have expanded from maintaining permanency (child remains in the family home) to maintaining placement (to prevent multiple placement disruptions). When a wraparound team supports a youth in a group home, the dynamics are different from that of supporting a family home. There exists a larger disconnect between the child and their family and community (geographically, through language, through behavioral requirements in the group home to spend time in the community). Sometimes youth's families are not present at all, leaving a void where the wraparound model looks for knowledge and strength.

Prior to wraparound care and the strengths-based model that it brought, deficit perspective was vast and expansive – as it still is today – in social service agencies, nonprofits, and community organizations (The Center for Human Services, 2009). Even qualification for a wraparound team is deficit based. Treatment planning was based solely on needs and areas of concern. It is sometimes also referred to as a “medical model,” that views the youth as a condition in need of treatment. Deficit perspective permeates every level of an institution including language, documentation, resident treatment, and staff/resident relationships (Barton and Butts, 2008).

A strengths-based model identifies, communicates, and utilizes youth, family, cultural, and community strengths. Strengths can be characteristics, skills, resources, people that are important to the youth, or values. The model picks a new starting place for treatment, which means that it requires a new type of assessment. Assessments in the deficit model identifies needs, voids, and delays. For a strength-based model, strengths need to be identified, classified, and qualified to assess their base-line and value, requiring an entirely new form of assessment. The goal has completely shifted from discovering deficits to uncovering strengths (The Center for Human Services, 2009).

For case management, a strengths-based model is intended to, and often does, result in more youth engagement and therefore collaborative case planning. The strength framework positions the case work to be individualized, creative, and more culturally relevant. Studies have found that, the youth seen through this strengths-based lens are more community involved in their case planning and program (Barton and Butts, 2008).

Strengths-based models require extensive staff training to shift deep underlying assumptions as well as unilateral changes that affect most policies and procedures. Leadership in the agency must create a clear vision during the model shift. Documentation needs to focus on strengths. Communication about youth needs to mirror the model (Barton and Butts, 2008). A strengths-based perspective on challenging behaviors must not only be based in the views and perspectives of the staff, it must also be reflected in the view of management, and the policies and procedures. This can sometimes create structural challenges within agencies (Walter, 2008).

Conclusion

Foster youth bring unique sets of skills, circumstances, and challenges as they fight for access to education, employment, and housing to which others do not have to question their access. Before 1875, when children's families could not care for them, they were either sold into indentured servitude or went to an orphanage. The major reason children left their families were because of financial instability or their parent's death. Foster youth began to be managed by non-governmental agencies around 1875 through the 1960's. They started to be removed from their homes and placed in other living situations such as foster homes and orphanages through the advocacy of the non-governmental agencies. During the 1960s, the government began to hold this role. Historically they have been marginalized and forgotten by society that found little responsibility to care for them as individuals, though there are some new models and frameworks that make room for individuality and positivity. Trauma-informed theory and strengths-based models are starting to have new conversations, such as considering cultural differences in responses to treatment or the neurological effects of continual trauma. The two models discussed here both rely on youth input. Through testimonios, this dedication to voice and personal experience will continue into the training. Keeping the history (of individual youth and foster children in general) in one's mind, no matter how painful, is essential to understanding the strengths and experiences that youth bring to the table.

Chapter III: Testimonios

Methodology: Youth Voice and Testimonio

A Testimonio is a research method that originated in Latina feminist studies. It privileges the voices of those who are marginalized and silenced. But it does this in a critical way that questions the traditional narrative and highlights the individual's critical consciousness (Delgado-Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). Critical consciousness is a bridge to social change. In this way, the Testimonio highlights stories of transformation as well as initiating social change and transformation through the revolutionary act of sharing.

Sharing of stories and learning from them is a common form of resistance in Latina communities as well as in foster care communities. For foster youth, story-telling is sometimes associated with shame and trauma. Often telling their story or putting words to their reality is what leads to them entering foster care, which is very often a traumatic removal from their family, home, and community. Sometimes the act of telling their story is rooted in shame and self-blame for being part of the system. This trauma can play out over and over again when youth are surrounded by mandated reporters. As youth move through the foster care system, they are asked repeatedly to tell their story to every adult they work with. Sometimes this is empowering and sometimes it is an impossible burden. Additionally, there is a culture of storytelling for youth in the system. Even in a county as large as Santa Clara county the youth often know each other and share their stories. They bond with each other and caregivers through the act of storytelling, and story-listening.

Testimonios offer an opportunity of transformation, an alternative to the stories and methods that we already know. The Testimonio does not stop at their individual stories. As their

stories come together, they act in communion with each other to form a collective narrative that privileges a collective common experience while still maintaining the power and truth in the individual story.

I chose Testimonio as my research method because of the complexity of the foster youth voice and storytelling. Foster youth are severely and structurally silenced in so many settings, to the point that speaking and listening are sometimes radical acts. The structure and purpose of the Testimonio lay a foundation for liberation that would be lacking in a traditional interview that may keep their voices silenced. The voices of youth in general are not taken as seriously as their older counterparts. They are seen as unable to reflect or contribute original ideas. But the Testimonio not only acknowledges their input but values it for its power to create change.

The four youth who shared their Testimonios with me were eighteen or nineteen years old and still in the foster care system. (Since they are over 18, they are opting to participate in AB12 which extends foster care services till the age of 21.) Since they were no longer living in group homes, it gave them an opportunity to have processed their experience but they are still living their experience in the system. Three are from Santa Clara County and one is from another county but has lived in a Santa Clara County group home. All four youth have lived in multiple group homes. They all identified as mixed-race. Three are female and one is male. I actually really struggled to find a male participant. It was not until looking for youth to share their story with me that I realized that I do not have consistent contact with any former male residents. Even though there are some that I hear from occasionally, I do not have any reliable way to contact them. Former female residents were more likely to have phones turned on or email addresses that they responded to regularly.

After telling the participants about my project and asking them about sharing their Testimonios, I asked them where they would want to talk. They all wanted to meet at their own apartment. As they were telling me their stories, this became more powerful. All four had been homeless or couch surfing at some point. All four never returned to their family's home. But here they were in their own apartments. We talked about where they were at now in school, with work, in their personal lives before we officially started the Testimonio, before signing the consent and pressing record. When they were telling their stories, I did not need to ask too many questions, since they all seemed to have a lot they wanted to share. Even though I asked for their reflections, often they offered a critical perspective and recommendations before I had the chance. The interactions also ended up being a mutual engagement in some way. As they helped me out with my project, I was able to help them out with small things. Sometimes this was recommending them to a resource, sometimes a ride to the store, sometimes a connection to someone else they wanted help from.

I had recorded the Testimonios and wrote them out. I looked at the four different stories and analyzed the different forms of Community Cultural Wealth that the youth have and how they attained and maintained this capital. I will discuss further in Chapter Four how this informed the training I created (Appendix A).

Limitations of the Study

The voices of foster youth have been historically, and continue to be silenced. Even though I only had four voices, there were voices from youth who were reachable and able to emotionally able to maintain a relationship with me. They had access to phones or email and were in communication with me and other providers. There are many youth I worked with who I

thought about talking to for this project but I was unable to reach them at the time. Some of these youth are homeless, some are not able to maintain a regular phone bill or regular access to email, some have just “disappeared” - having no contact with former providers or other foster youth.

Testimonios

Pauline

The first time I got picked up I was 11 or 12. When I was 14, I was on the run for like 5 months. I went from house to house and that was about as independent as I could get. When I was 15, I stayed in foster care until now. My first group home was trashy. Some girl came at me with a knife and gave me a scar on my hand. She was crazy and said she was going to put voodoo on me. That was the worst group home. You couldn't use the phone, there were boards on the windows, you only had a sheet, one blanket, and a pillow. It felt like jail. You couldn't lock your doors, or even the bathroom door. They said people would hurt themselves when they went in there. We could only eat at certain times, you couldn't have a snack. You couldn't open your windows. I feel like those people were rejected from other places. You already cant control that you are in foster care. That's why people have eating disorders and drug problems because they can't control anything in their lives. So being put in jail after doing nothing again, it's weird.

There were girls who were younger than me who had access to all types of older guys who had everything to have fun. You go out with them, it was a lot more fun going out with your roommate instead of by yourself. You AWOL with your roommate and you feel bad ass. I AWOLed² a lot and did a lot of bad stuff because that was the cool thing.

I didn't get along with anyone. I was very angry and hated everyone. I got into a lot of altercations, physical and verbal. In the group homes, I got in an argument with every single

2 A youth is considered AWOL when they leave placement without permission.

person I encountered. Everyone has their issues, so being in a house with a bunch of emotionally unstable people everybody is going to be angry. There is a lot of screaming even if you aren't in the argument. Most of them are pregnant now so I don't really talk to them. I think a huge thing is girls pretending to be pregnant in foster care. It gives them such comfort. I have met so many girls that pretend they are pregnant. There was this girl who kept this lie going for 5 months. Even the staff would tell her she wasn't pregnant in front of people, at meetings, because it got so bad. She would be like "no, I am."

Only a few people really tried to get to know me, they were the ones who wanted to go into that field. But they never kept in contact. Why force someone to open up to you and then drop off the face of the earth when you quit? That's like a break up almost, now I hate you because we broke up. Be real about it at least, say "No, I'm not going to call you its just a job." Instead of being like, keep in touch and then not. Then you have a negative thing about all staff and then you are all fucked up again.

I moved group homes a few times. The last one was probably the best group home I've been in. It's clean and no one is crazy. Well everyone is, but not as bad, its probably not crazy to me. Anger is what I used. You get to take it out on everyone and it makes you feel good because other people are hurting and you get to pretend you are the baddest bitch. I screamed at staff a lot. They were they only people around. A lot of them didn't live in group homes. They were like "Why are you complaining? You have food and shelter." But they were spoiled as kids and have good families. It made me hate them. But they got emotionally and verbally abused by me. A lot of them didn't have very good boundaries. I remember one told me about her boyfriend's sexual endeavors. It made me mad and want to leave. It gave me a reason to leave. They would piss you

off, but you couldn't really piss them off in their lives, only at work. So you would misbehave to make them mad, because they have such great lives outside. Only a few of them saw positives in me. Most of them were there to just make sure no one killed each other.

I learned that I don't have it as bad as other people. People have a lot of ways of showing their emotions. Normal people don't show being hurt as being violent. I feel like a lot of people in foster care are going to be psychologists because they are around it all the time. They can read people off the bat because there are so many people going in and out, in and out.

Good staff would have some training. Most seemed like they just got out of college, and they wanted to see what things were all about. They don't even pay that much either. The staff would even talk about it, "This is just our training before we do what we really want to do, we want to go to grad school and do this and this, we don't really want to be here but our school wants us to be."

Maybe more people that have experience would help, like if they were in foster care. Some people who know what it feels like. Instead of people dealing with angry teens and are like, "Why are they so mean!" People who want to work with foster kids. Even my interview for Starbucks, I have to bullshit and say I want to work at cooperate Starbucks, you have to want to be in that field. I think training is the most important.

My family wasn't allowed to visit the group home. I didn't talk to my family much. They were quick to sign over the rights. My mom came back a little bit after my dad died. My mom was a crazy meth addict but is now just a crazy drunk. She doesn't care about me or anyone but the men in her life. Which I understand because she is searching for that since her dad got her addicted to drugs and didn't give a fuck about her. I can understand how she is such a bitch

because her mom is such a bitch. People can't learn to be good parents like that. Which is not an excuse because I would never behave that way. I went into foster care because she is abusive. My dad is dead and spent most of the time in prison. I don't think he ever came to court, I think he just told his lawyer what to say.

When I was in group homes I had staff drive me. I was naturally good at getting jobs. I got my first job in Texas on my own. I remember I got all ready and I was going to be 5 minutes late. It was all the way down this long street, and I was walking because there was no bus. I sprinted the whole way. Half way, this dude in a truck stopped and was like, "Are you ok?" I got in and said I need to go to Starbucks. I got out and slammed the door. And I was on time though.

You have to be positive and pretend you are the happiest person on the planet with jobs. And have nice teeth....just kidding.... No one wanted to get a job in the group home, half of them didn't even go to school. They probably don't have people around them that care. Even if they do, they aren't the right people who are suppose to care. I didn't think I cared about myself because of the things I would do. The only thing I wanted to do was graduate, the rest I didn't care about.

I graduated from high school. I didn't really work hard. I didn't want to go to school. They made it from like 3 hours, to two hours, to an hour a day. Then I still didn't finish. But I think they just gave me whatever grade in math and told me to fuck off. They didn't like me there. My mom didn't graduate so I always wanted to do that. I wanted to be better than her, because she always tells me I'm not.

You can only rely on yourself after you get out of the group home. No one is going to transport you or drive you to an interview. No one taught me how. I use the internet and my

great-grandma taught me how to cook. I can't think of anyone who has taught me how to do things. You can google anything or just read about it.

Skills that would help after leaving the group home would be emotional skills or money management. Everyone has that work sheet, of what you spend money on, but its not that. I don't have enough money. Most people have their first car bought for them, or they live with their parents and don't have to buy fucking soap. I kind of like being alone now. But I miss having more people around. That's the biggest adjustment going into a THP (transitional housing program) not money or nothing like that. Being alone. Not having anyone to take your anger out on, or a random girl to go party with, or a roommate so you aren't sleeping alone, or staff there to talk to when you are upset. But here if you are upset, you are going to have to talk to yourself and that's the worse way to deal with it.

No one is watching you or asking where you are going, or telling you to be home on time. But that is also bad because you can do whatever you want. I don't make bad decisions now because there is nothing I am running from besides myself, and I have cats. I am not allowed to have animals, even emotional support animals. You can have medical marijuana but not emotional support animals.

It's really easy in group homes to get an education. You get woken up, and fed, and taken to school. But now no one wakes you up or takes you. And now its like, no one wants to wake up at 6am for a 10am class to get ready and take the bus. It's a really good excuse to not go to school. They have people like foster care liaisons and social workers for the school. But the hard part is getting yourself there. You don't have anyone to make proud of you, and you don't care about school so you would rather stay home and sleep.

Now everyone is either pregnant or doing stuff I don't want to be a part of. I never got to be best friends or the brother/sister thing in group homes. I am so used to living with roommates. You have their problems too. There are some people who you are angry because its like, wow I wish I had it that good, and some you feel bad for.

I want to move far away from here. I don't have friends or family here so I might as well move somewhere where no one thinks of me as the little foster kid. Some adults have really negative connotations, like group homes are where all the bad kids are. Which is true, but its deeper than that. When someone knows you are in a group home or don't have family they feel bad for you and are extra fake nice. Or when people are asking you questions for a job or the doctor's office that happens. When I first met my boyfriend's family, they were like, "Why are you dating someone in a group home?" They though group homes are where you send your kids for straight edge type shit. I was like "No, no, that is not true." A lot of people my age think I did something. My cousin sent me an angry text about how I was living off the system. They think I'm like living off of welfare. I mean what I get is less than if your parents were taking care of you. I buy my own shampoo and conditioner. My boyfriend's parents pay for his car to be fixed, \$4,000 out of pocket. I have to let mine sit there till I have enough money to fix it. Instead of giving kids allowance there should be a savings program. If I knew how broke I would be I would have been saving money. I'd be like, "No, I don't want to buy any drugs. I need to save money for my apartment in five fucking years."

Martin

After living with my mom, I moved into my grandmother's house. Then I lived with an ex-girlfriend for about a year. I got picked up, I think because I was homeless. They took me to

the receiving center. I stayed there for about two days. I liked it there. I was hogging the fridge. It wasn't a long time to be there. It was like an in-between from whatever experiences you were having before entering the system. When you come into the receiving center, you enter the system. It was laid back and mellow, not a lot of issues I saw there.

Then I entered a group home. I was 15. I wasn't ready for all the different people. I was still kind of a mommy's boy. The situation was too all of a sudden. The group home staff were kind of bribing us to make ourselves better. You know, with allowance. Our house was a little different. If you'll be friends with me, I'll be friends with you, and then you will get an allowance. I was okay because I respected staff. But I ended up AWOLing, and spending time with a best friend. I was going to my friend's and spent the majority of the time there. But I would go back to the house because they told me my bed would close. I left because I didn't appreciate the setting. I feel like they took me away from something I was already dealing with. Now I know I wasn't dealing with it properly. I was there for about four months.

I then decided I needed a different setting but I didn't know how to push that. I feel like I left too early. I ended up leaving to Half Moon Bay. I had my best friend's mom pick me up and drop me off near the town with my backpack and some clothes. She cried. I didn't really cry in these types of situations. As an adult, she felt a motherly look to me. I stayed in Half Moon Bay for four plus months, experiencing everything that everyone else was experiencing. I was living on the streets. We slept under the levy, off of the highway. Next to a cemetery, there was a little campground.

The setting of being homeless wasn't much different from a group home. You are meeting all sorts of people, you don't get to pick and choose. The environments were just another

situation in life I could deal with. You can control shit to a certain extent but you can't control people. One time I was homeless a cop searched me, I told her I had a blade and weed in my bag. She asked where I was from and for my name. They looked me up and saw I was a runaway. I heard the officer ask, "Should we take him in?" She asked like it would be a hassle. They left me with everything I had, the blade, the weed.

Talking to the people who have been through so much, but are just trying to grasp that little bit. One thing I say to people when I meet them, you don't know me and I don't know you. It's a flat line. You don't have to trust me, you will learn to trust me. One day you will have to trust me with your life, that's how a bond is made. Another time I was going to hang out with friends and I don't think I had bus fair. They called the security people, they considered me a runaway. They said they had to take me back. I told them to take me to the receiving center.

I came back to a different group home, and the understanding was that this was the "bad" house. People viewed it as the bad house, people at the agency didn't want to work there. It was "keep your distance, you are older now, where are you going to see yourself in a few years?" A couple weeks ago the house was shot up. They shot up a group home. Who in their right mind would try and hurt people who have already been damaged and experienced more than anyone else has experienced? That's what that was like, a lot of gangster kids going in and out of the house. I smoked with them. We would drink.

I went to high school then. The group home asked me to go to school every day. All of a sudden I felt like I wasn't getting anywhere. The first time I left, I realized I was bullshitting and sitting on my ass. I have had plenty of people telling me that, but I had to realize it. I went to thinking, I had survived homeless. My grandmother always called me a survivor. In a day, I

planned out where I was going to go. I decided to go south, explore that. I was 17. I went back to the house after school, after smoking with my friends. I was still deciding. I decided to do something drastic. I traded my X-Box for a bike with my friend. The morning I was suppose to go to school, I took off around 6am to the bus station instead.

The group home setting. People who come in fresh out of the start, its too all of a sudden. You have to give them their space. When you rush into a situation it makes everything worse. The first thing you learn in first aide is to examine the situation first, you have to see where the kid is at.

The way staff put out the outings, going to the baseball thing, the park, the movies. No one really asked me what my hobbies were. Staff read our files but they never really know our hobbies. Some staff do it. Some are so oblivious to it, they do their own thing. I didn't like that, its rude. You are not there for yourself, you are there for someone else. There was one staff, she grew up in gang affiliation. She came in very strong. She was very upfront, "don't do this, these are my restrictions, please follow them." She bought us food too. She talked to us. We would smoke cigarettes with her. But different people connect with different staff. It'll be things in common, or the same personalities. But sometimes its complete opposites.

The group home setting is chaotic. When you have people learning to cope with this chaotic behavior, you have to deal with that type of stuff. People who can't are going to quit their job, loose their cool, its going to not be a good situation.

Good staff are straight forward, to the point. They don't bullshit us. They aren't cheery about things. Sugar coating doesn't work for people. They think. "Oh, I can do this," but when it gets hard then they quit. Some staff will just point out your flaws. Someone that pays attention to

you a lot, takes you shopping, to eat, takes you to the flea market, lets go do this or that. Someone that is pushing you to go somewhere, will get to know you. You have to get comfortable enough to tell them, you are doing this wrong, you should help yourself to do this. Doing all those things, you will express yourselves. That's a way you can understand someone's strengths.

There was one staff, great dude at first, very nice, boyish, video games. He cracked jokes all the time. All of a sudden, if you flipped on his bad side he would get you in trouble. They can manipulate the situation with ease. He was one of the staff that allowed us to smoke off property without an issue. He would check our pockets, that's regulation, but he wouldn't bicker about it. He understands. He lived it at one point, so we got away with those things. One time, we were around the corner. I was all the way around the corner. I was smoking with these other guys, we were all over there. He said that he only saw me smoking. I was suppose to get my allowance that day. He dropped me to the lowest level. I couldn't go with a friend of mine that I was going to spend my allowance on that night.

Some things that are important to learn are money management, time management, and regulating what I eat. When I am older I want to be a healthy old man, getting stronger so I can survive at work. I bike everywhere. One essential need I have is my mechanically inclined mind. I've always been able to take things apart and put them back together.

In the group home, sometimes the meals aren't made. Sometimes people get lazy, sometimes they say there isn't time to cook. It's like what the fuck? You know this asshole won't cook, I have to cook for myself. Here, where I live now the other hand, there is always food. I have things that I want without worrying that someone else is going to take it.

The first thing you should learn is money management. After you fix yourself, put yourself in a good situation. The way I did it was getting myself together, before worrying about the money. That meant my mind, putting my past at ease. Being aggressive or naive didn't get me anywhere.

I lived with my mom until I was 15. I was still in the state of mind of child, I needed care. If I knew then what I know now, I would be in a different situation. But a different path was chosen for me, or I chose a different path. This is how it was meant to be. But at the same time, I put myself in this situation. I could have said it was meant to be for me to be homeless. I survived there for a while, I could have stayed there. But I thought, when I get older it'll be nice and fun. But there is going to be that day that I can't hunt or fish because of my back or leg.

But I have to apologize for people have to endure the world. From that experience, one thing I got is wanting to test myself. See what I can do, what I can learn. My money management got a hell of a lot better. My realizing the realistic portion of the world, not that fantasy bullshit. Life can go the way you want it to or the exact opposite.

Daisy

I first ended up in the system at age 14. I was put in a 24 hour holding place, the shelter. I didn't go to school. I couldn't leave. I couldn't see my friends. It made me kinda depressed. I was there for a couple of days. Then the woman who told me she was going to take me away from my mom told me they found a placement for me at a group home and that one of the staff was going to pick me up, everything was going to be alright, it was a good group home, she went on for a while. I got picked up by a guy. He had an awesome car, I loved it. It was one of those old style thunderbirds. He picked me up and asked if I was hungry. We went to In-and-Out for the

first time and then brought me home. They introduced me to my roommate, the other girls, and case manager. They told me about the rules, what I had to do. I was like, “Oh it's going to be easy, no need to trip.”

My roommate was a very interesting girl. Within the first five seconds of meeting me, after I put out my hand to her, she stormed up the stairs. I was a little 14 year old, petite. I was like “Oh great, fantastic, this big bald woman wants to hurt me.” She ended up falling in love with me and wanted to be my roommate forever. I watched as the kids were coming and going, different placements, different opportunities. I started getting depressed and AWOLed for the first time ever to a McDonald's. From there, I couldn't see my best friend because I AWOLed. So I started to feel worse. I got moved to the another house where I lived with five boys. From there, I started drinking a lot, going out a lot more, AWOLing a lot more, smoking a lot of pot. Thank God I didn't do other drugs. I was really depressed, basically I felt like there was no one there to help me. I was separated from my mom, and the system wasn't helping me anymore. It was preventing me from feeling loved.

When my AWOLing got really bad, they found me another placement, a foster home. I had issues getting up for school, smoking pot, drinking, and AWOLing. When I got to the foster home that all changed. I felt welcomed. I wanted to do good. Like I said, kids come and go. There were two batches of girls I could not stand. They had me crying and I wanted to hit them over the head. But of course, my foster mom didn't let me. They had stolen from each other and blamed me for stealing.

From there I went back to my mom. It was a honeymoon phase at first, we were just so happy to be around each other. But then I just couldn't listen to her, every time she told me to go

do something I didn't do it. I ended up going back to the 24-hour holding place, where I was placed at a different group home. I stayed a few days and then asked to go back to the first one. I moved back and started AWOLing for a different reason, not because I was depressed but because I wanted to escape the system and go be happy with my boyfriend somewhere else. It wasn't fair to certain people, but I don't regret it. I would do it again.

From there, I went to a THP (transitional housing program). I hated it. The staff were so stupid I couldn't stand it. They were disrespectful. I got on the phone with one and she started yelling at me. I called licensing. A thing about licensing, I have called them four times since being in the system, once a year. Nothing has been done, zero, zilch happens. Everyone talks about how to call licensing if someone is mistreating you. But I don't buy into it. They never even called me back. I was AWOLing every single day. Not texting them to tell them I was alive. I couldn't stand them. I started getting depressed at the THP because I thought I was going to be homeless. I couldn't do the program.

I talked to another THP, the one my boyfriend lived at. They accepted me because they loved the way I cleaned my boyfriend's house. It's all a network. There is a foster care system network. If you have been in the foster care system for more than 6 months, you know so many people and you don't even know you know them. Going to the Hub, that's a good way to make friends. Going downtown, there are a bunch downtown. There are a bunch of foster kids at my school. Being in the system, they kind of come out. When you aren't in the system, you don't see them. They are like regular kids. Being in the system, you see kids you would never otherwise meet. My roommate, I met her before we lived together. You get matched with people you never would know. Being in group homes, group home kids, kids go in and out you would never

otherwise know them. You loose contact but you end up gaining contact back. Your friend is their friend. You end up living by each other.

I don't know if this was legal or not but it happened a very long time ago and I was a minor. Knowing all the kids, there was this other foster youth who was trying to fuck with me. I told the other kids. This CHILD would not leave me alone, constantly bugging me and talking to me. I told him if he didn't leave me alone he would get hurt. He didn't listen so I asked some of the big boys. They were like, "Ya, I'll deal with that no problem." All it took was me opening my mouth one time, he got beat up six times from that. Foster youth network, we are like siblings. It's so hard if its against group home staff, we do, but we will fight each other too. We don't care. People are people to us at this point. It gets kind of sad but its the way it is. I don't think any of the kids have sat back.

It can be a dangerous thing though. These kids don't mind doing stuff like that because they don't have a future, they are homeless, they didn't get the same opportunities because they are older, they aged out, there is to much shit going on, their social worker screwed them over, the group home staff screwed them over. Like there was one girl who was telling me her story. She never experienced sexual abuse till she ended up in the system. From her foster dad and group home staff. You know, that type of shit makes you sit back and think, damn these people are suppose to help her.

I was talking to one of the other homeless foster boys. He hadn't showered in 8 months because he didn't want to go back to his group home. He felt weird the way the staff stared at him. So he didn't shower, and he would go AWOL. But he was only 14. It was just a sad case. Foster youth will call each other. The younger ones will call the older ones to help them. It's like

a cycle. One boy I knew from a group home came to spend the night here, like that. He was back with his mom and he had to get away from his family life before he went completely crazy. So he stayed with us. The way everyone is so connected blows my mind sometimes.

It's sad how many suicides I've heard about that haven't been in the news. It will be kids that I know. They show it when its a privileged white child, with parents that are like, "I don't understand why she did it, she had everything in life." But they don't do it on the kids that don't have anything in life. They don't set up enough programs to help them. They just keep it going. It pisses me off.

At one time, a staff that was smoking and drinking beer with me was my definition of a good staff. And I had a couple of those. Now, my definition of a good staff is someone who is willing to take care of you not like you are a foster kid or reject, but like family. They are willing to get down on the floor with a kid who was crying and rub their back, or maybe not rub their back if they don't feel like it. Maybe a hug. I needed hugs. I was a hugger, other kids were not. It got kind of hard seeing all the kids for me. I got like, no I don't want to talk to them, they are just going to leave by next week. That's where I fucked up, cause I could have had so many more friends. So many more awesome people to hang out with and get McDonald's with. So far, one from the original batch is still my friend that contacts me on a weekly basis. I have lived with over 40 girls and I have lived with more boys than girls. I feel like it's worth it to connect with them. Being able to hit them up and go anywhere with them. I've gone to San Francisco to visit a friend, to Monterey, to LA.

When I realized I couldn't be with my mom, it made me very depressed. I started smoking and drinking more. I didn't want to talk to any of the group home staff that I usually

would call on the off days because I missed them. I stopped talking to my best friend. I made friends in the group home that usually I would be only acquaintances with, because they brought around a lot of drugs and bad people. I became friends with them because I knew who could get the alcohol or bud.

There are a bunch of people that noticed my running, my loudness. I'm a very demanding person. Maybe not demanding your attention but demanding your respect, demanding what I think is right in the world. If its not that way you are going to hear it. I've always been that way since I was little. My mom always wanted her child to be out there. These skills helped keep me alive and turned me into a leader. Kids at my school noticed, Daisy isn't just talking shit, she is making sense. It was weird how I evolved through the system to who I am now. I'm able to stick up for myself. No one can really bully me. If I feel you are wrong, you are going to know I feel that way. I had that skill before but I honed in on it. I used to have a filter but then realized what is the point in lying to people. I learned it through the foster care system.

I used to get into fights, they were my thing. If anyone said anything to me it was a straight punch to their face and I would keep swinging. I would swing at adult men who could probably kill me. But I did it anyway, I thought I was the shit. I had a new roommate. She was the recent one who fucked me over. She stole my shift, irritated my soul. She was younger than me. I tried to chill out and help her a bunch of times. Even though she claimed she could fight me and beat me up. Usually with half the shit she had done I would have already punched her and beat her ass at the group home. But I didn't, I tried my best, I left her alone, I gave her warnings, I stayed away from her, exercised so much self-control. And then she got her ass beat

by a 12-year-old. I pulled the 12-year-old off of her and helped her to the car. If you know me, you know how much it took to not just laugh at her.

I wanted a future. I didn't want to stay in the East Side, fighting scraps. I wanted to go to college, to be a vet, to have kids in the future. I didn't want to bring kids into MY world if its like that. I would just be doing a cycle, adding to it. My mom called me crying for money for dope. That woke me up in a way.

Staff couldn't be my parent. No one can replace your parent but some people in your life come so close, its an amazing thing. The staff that saw my strengths were just a handful that recognized me as a person, not just a pay check, or an annoying thing they have to take care of. Recognizing that I could be left alone with a knife for ten minutes. That I am going to try my best to stop the kids from ruining what I want. I got placed with more responsibilities. Staff were asking me if we could do this, or what about that. I used to always go do things. Once I got ice cream with a staff and ended up hiking up a peak. I wanted to use the system. We got the petty cash. Staff started to realize that they could do things with me and I wouldn't ruin it. The other kids had an issue with using the Group-Ons because they were embarrassed people knew we were foster kids. I would get us discounts on pizza, "Oh ya we are foster youth, these are our group home staff." It's crazy because when you would expose yourself as a foster kid people are like "Oh, I'm so sorry." People are so ignorant. I was dating a boy and he and his friend didn't understand what foster care was, at all. So when they found out I was in a foster home, they were convinced I was an orphan. When my mom picked me up, they tripped so hard. They thought I was lying. I showed them my court report.

I had empathy for people to an extent. In the middle of it, I lost that. I started to feel like, oh boo hoo your life isn't that bad. You find out more than any staff would know staying up one night with the kids. There was one graveyard staff, she would smoke with me and drink beers. But I used to stay up with her all night and talk to her. Most of the staff had stories similar to mine or someone else's. It's all crazy how the system affects us. The reason we have that network is because the system has fucked us over in some way.

I always had this thing where I brought animals home. I brought a lot of animals to the group home. I brought a snake, lizard, couple fogs, turtle or two, fish – hid it under the bed. Group home staff don't leave, you can't sneak your boyfriend or girlfriend inside. So we have to be more creative, bring staff out to the front, climb through windows. Now, I'm able to sneak my cat into my housing and that is an amazing skill. I don't care what anyone says to me. I have a cat and I'm in a THP. Kids can spend months in therapy trying to get their animal registered. But I found how I can have the best of both worlds.

Cooking, cleaning, learning how to do my laundry correctly, learning how to budget, were all things I needed to learn. You get a stipend and start thinking, I could do this and that, but oh shit I also need to pay PG & E, and food. It's so crazy being an adult, and being an adult in the system is even crazier. This is the best part of the system, after 18. They have rules but they are to make us better. I learned how to clean living with my mom. The cooking, I learned from watching certain staff cook. Budgeting I learned on my own. Now I have my own place now. I get to see my old staff and I get to hang out with them and its awesome. Some of us made deep connections, but other staff were never meant to be staff. Going downtown made me smoke a lot more pot than I was used to. But I'm trying to find that balance, where I can still be a

functional member of society. I'm really glad I have this program of being a foster youth to get a chance to actually grow up. Right now, most 18-year-olds are living with their parents getting fucked up, not going to high school, because who is going to get them in trouble. I'm glad I get this program to do it a healthy way.

Fernanda

My dad was three years in court for custody and then I went back to him. After that, my dad never let me forget that. Every time he ever got mad at me, he said, "You can go back." I thought it was like a child day care, but what he meant was the shelter, the children's receiving home. He always said that people are going to look at me as money. I never understood what he meant until I got into the system. I guess that was part of my depression, that I was money. I was a ward of the court. I never knew if people's hearts were in it or just their minds, for the money.

My first foster home, that was a big money person. I remember money a lot. I needed new clothes because my grandma didn't give me any. She sent me a bunch of clothes I didn't wear. She gave me a budget and then I also needed shoes. She made a big deal about giving me the money. We got in an altercation. I AWOLed. She ended up returning everything I bought. I remember signing a paper saying she spent this money on me. And then she returned it. When I got all my clothes, nothing was their. This is what the system was like. It got me in a depressive state.

I was on and off at the shelter and on the streets after that, back and forth. It was hard to not feel alone. At that foster home, I was with my sister. When I left that's when we separated. My second foster home was also about the money. She made it seem like heaven when I first moved in. I had my own room and she let me paint it, baby blue, I wanted it to be like the sky. A

social worker came by to see me. She told my foster mom that I used to cut myself and she needed to lock up knives, razors, everything. She told it to her when I stepped away. At a young age, I felt like if adults needed to say something, they could have said it to my face. I went upstairs to my room. At the time I was off of some medication. It made me feel like a zombie and I was hiding my pills. She came into my room and asked how come I never mentioned it. I thought she was genuine for asking. But then she started calling me stupid for cutting, and “who the fuck does that?” How do you call someone who was suicidal stupid? How do you insult someone for feeling that way? I went to school the next day and never came home.

I’ve only been to four placements for four years. If I wasn’t in placement I was at the shelter. If I wasn’t there I was on the streets. I was the only Hispanic. I got water thrown on my face. I got assaulted. I was so depressed back then. I didn’t know how to manage it. I remember crying and running past all these girls, and one whispered to the other, “She called you a bitch.” That girl that told her I called her a bitch ended up going to one of the group homes I was at later. I remember when I heard her name when she was new. Whenever we would get new kids I would be like, “who is the new kid, who is the new kid?” When I found out where she was from I told them to tell me her name. When they told me, I was like I bet I know her.

The dorms were split into a level 10 and level 12. I was in the level 12, in the assessment program. I was suppose to be there three months, but I was there for a year because of my AWOLing and stuff like that. So I feel like a lot of times they assumed it was “she’s just sad, she it just this, she is just that.” They left it alone. If they had only been like, “Hey, what’s going on? Hey, I noticed this, I noticed that.” It was none of that. It was, “She has problems, because she is

seeing a psychiatrist, this and that.” If they really showed me they cared. No one just works at a fucking shelter for minimum wage, you don’t *just* work there.

I have a bad habit of holding onto things. My family does this thing where they hold grudges. I really didn’t know how to just drop it. Now I’ll drop any mother-fucking thing in a heartbeat. I remember there was one guy. This is the time I knew about IRs (Incident Reports). I was telling someone how I was going to kill myself, and here comes the IR. And then all these people come telling me how I’m going to go to the mental hospital. I remember crying and shit. And he grabs these leaves off the trees. He said, “They are pretty right? And you are holding onto them and they get all messy. You don’t want to get messy. You just got to let it go sometimes.” It’s not going to change things, its just going to get all messy. This stuck with me. I have the notebook somewhere where he tried to get me to start journaling. I was going to but I never kept doing it. I remember I got this nice hard cover one. I stopped writing in it when I went to live with my aunt.

I ran away from my 3rd placement, it was my first group home. It was an independent living group home. I wasn’t aware of that. They didn’t have programs or anything. I just woke up, went to summer school, came back home, ate, went to sleep. I had this notebook. I wrote the saddest shit ever. I read it aloud and made staff cry. I was like, this is why I don’t journal. I was so depressed but I kid you not, every girl in there was. We had a fire drill at school, and I saw this one girl go into a cop car. She went to the hospital for a week and came back. Everyone went through her shit, I was like I’m not participating in that. When she came home, she was really medicated.

The next day, I walk in and she is trying to commit suicide. I had my own room and she was in the only room that was shared. We weren't allowed in each others rooms. Like any placement, but who listens to that. I was already grounded so I didn't give a fuck about any of the rules. Like fuck that, I'm not going to school. So I went into her room, and was trying to talk to her. I kind of liked her too. I was very bi-curious back then and very open about it. I was trying to talk to her, like "Hey, what's wrong? Why are you feeling this way?" I was depressed too. I was trying to ask her the questions I would want someone to ask me. Staff were doing bedroom checks. I'm getting cussed out by my home staff, telling me I needed to step out of the room. I was like, "but she is trying to kill herself." She was completely oblivious to the whole situation. She didn't care, she wanted me out of the room. I was already grounded a month ahead, so I told her I didn't care. I remember her saying, "You'll never see the light of day again, I can promise you that." I was like, "What? Hold up. You think you can keep me down in this house, is that what you are saying?" It pissed me off that she was so concerned about grounding me and keeping me in trouble, when this girl just came back from the hospital. I was so confused, I really was.

The first time I AWOLed I was so depressed. I just needed to get out of there, out of being so enclosed. I came back the next day and was talking to the manager. I remember they said, "If you AWOL again, we are kicking you out. Period." You don't happen to ask me why I did it, what's wrong, none of that. I was a frequent flier, and AWOLer. No one wanted to take an AWOLer. They warned me about that when I got into the system, "Don't AWOL. If you are going to AWOL no one will want to take you in, because you are just going to run away." But I didn't care. No one asked me why I did anything that I did. They just assumed shit about me.

That hurts. I'm just as average and normal as everyone else. I'm just a teenager going through teenager things.

Only when they actually had a conversation with me, did they see the good. When I was at that breaking point, that was when I went up to someone. But no one ever approached me. It's so hard to go up to someone and say, I'm feeling like this, knowing they will have to report me and say something. I get the point of IRs, not everyone does. Its like being able to build up the guts, "Hey, I'm not feeling so well right now." It's hard, its so hard. Some people would rather just hurt themselves than do that. Sometimes I really wish someone would say "Hey, you feeling okay? What's wrong? You have been in your room all day."

There were people who genuinely cared, and pulled me aside. There was this one woman, I don't remember her name. We used to butt heads. I do remember, she pulled me aside and said, "Hey, regardless of what a kid is acting, there is always a reason behind it." And a lot of adults fail to realize that. Teenagers are acting on a lot of hormones. I was impulsive. I think a lot of times they forgot we were only kids who were just growing, it was a phase. A lot of people forget, unless you don't have a mom or a dad you don't know how it feels. Unless you loose it all, you don't know how it feels. But people don't understand it. People are like, family this, family that. Family is not even part of my vocabulary because of the system. I wish people took the time to understand rather than just assume or go off of what they read. You know those court papers. In this field, you can't go off of what you learned in school. You can use it but you can't just use that. We aren't books, we have feelings and we have reasons that we act a certain way.

I have met so many kids. It literally took one blunt to get everything out of someone. These kids just want to be listened to. I guess that's why I'm so good at listening. I still have

parts to work on, like how I'm suppose to respond to stuff like that. Besides, "Damn that's tough, hit this." But a lot of times I was able to relate to them, when I was able to share my experience. Even if it wasn't the same thing, but I felt the same way. It helps to make them feel they are not alone, someone else feels that way.

Being able to have outlets is important for me now. And healthy ones. I don't know how healthy mine are, they are getting tattoos and smoking weed. I have so many old staff I have been talking to. They are my outlets, they see me grow. I still talk to all these people. It's kind of hard to explain this. I've learned to laugh at myself. People are like, "What's so funny?" Me.

There was this staff, she always wanted to do something, some crafts or something. One time she bought like 400 of those strawberry baskets. She had seen something on Pintrest or something. When people can share stuff like that, get your mind off of things. I remember my case manager back then, she put effort into helping me. Like coping skills, do I have someone I can call, somewhere safe to go to? Even though you can't control what kids do, you can show them, well if you aren't going to listen to me, go to them. Remind them they have outlets. I don't know how many hotlines I was given for runaways. Another staff gave me this idea of a coping skills box. I still have it today. She put moon sand and all these little gadgets. There is one thing, to acknowledge and show you understand. And then there is doing something about it. Like take them on a drive, and singing my lungs out. It's like ya this has happened, but let's grow from it.

A lot of the times at group homes, when the staff didn't take it personally I was able to go back and tell them what was really going on. Or they check up on me later and ask what is really going on. If you notice someone is isolating themselves there is obviously something wrong. When I was being new to a place, it was hard because you don't know who you can trust. If you

genuinely love what you do, you go above and beyond and are welcoming. I'm pretty sure people will spread out their personalities. When it's intakes, it's like we are going to write down everything you do, here are all the rules, here is the sign in. Boom! Now you are treated like you are in a facility, not like you are human.

I've been at my high school for a year. We were doing a unit on *Mi Familia*, it is a Hispanic movie. A really good movie. Because it was English we had to write about our family. Me, being as vocal as I am, was able to communicate to her that I didn't feel comfortable writing about my family. They have completely disowned me. She said she completely understood. She sat in front of the class and gave this whole speech about how we don't do our work. The whole speech was obviously about me. She put me on blast about my family. She stood in front of me on purpose staying this. I remember walking out of the class crying. I got so mad inside. I called my friend, and went off, crying on the phone. I have a tendency of getting mad and crying. My principal asked what was going on. He had me write a grievance on my teacher. The teacher told me friend, to tell me she was sorry. A couple of days later when I went to school again, she told me she would give me double the credit on the whole unit if I turned it in. But I didn't.

Family is different for everyone. My dad was literally just snatched from my life. He went to a Pay-per-view fight. He got pulled over on the way home, driving without a license, hung over. He got incarcerated for a year and then deported. He moved to five different jails. I visited him although it hurt me. I literally only talked to him through a phone. What broke my heart the most was when he was in the county facility. He was in a red jump suite and everyone else was in orange, because my dad is an immigrant. It was crazy to see that, see everyone in orange and my dad in red. I remember my grandma told me he stopped writing letters to me

because he was in a hold. I never had a mom, so family is out of the picture. When you are in their field, I feel like you have to be sensitive about that. If you listen to someone you will see why they feel some type of way about something.

I want to go into business, technology, photo or video editing or making music. I have this crazy idea of starting my own clothing brand. Or maybe cosmetology. I really don't know what I want to do, but that's my basic idea. When I step into college, I might be presented with more opportunities.

Conclusion

Throughout the Testimonios, the four youth discussed their use of resources and skills to navigate a violent, abrasive and hopeless system. They also reflected upon what changes could be made to better support youth and shared ways that they had made changes in their own lives to better themselves and disrupt the patterns they saw. I identified various forms of all six categories of Community Cultural Wealth throughout their experiences and reflections. These forms of wealth helped the youth survive, reach their goals, and enabled them to create change in their community. In Chapter IV: Fostering Community Cultural Strengths Training explains further how I used the Testimonios as a foundation to create the training for group home staff.

Chapter IV: Fostering Community Cultural Strengths Training

Description of the project

Foster child caregivers such as group home staff and foster parents are required to receive 40 hours a year of Title IV-E training. Group home funding is often partially based upon the training hours of staff and they must meet certain requirements on staff training. So residential staff are paid for training hours and group homes often hold agency-wide trainings. This training is divided into three hour-long sections to fit into staff meetings or be used together for one longer training. The training's objective is to help staff identify strengths in youth as well as implement interventions that build on strengths to help the youth develop independent living skills.

The training is created to be facilitated by someone who is familiar with a strength-based model (as most group home managers and administrators would be) but not necessarily familiar with Yosso's (2005) theory of Community Cultural Wealth. The intended audience is group home staff. They would likely have a variety of experiences and backgrounds. They would not necessarily be familiar with Community Cultural Wealth or a strength-based model but would have, however minimal or expansive, on the floor experience to draw from during the training. The training is created for small group settings (such as a staff meeting) where there would be about 10-20 individuals. But it can be used and modified for other group sizes. The training materials consists of three handouts for the staff, one for each section of the training (Appendix B) and a training "lesson plan" for the trainer to follow (Appendix A).

The first hour long portion of the training is going to set the framework for the rest of the project. Community cultural wealth will be explained specifically in regards to foster youth. The

different categories of capital will be laid out and explored. Vignettes will be provided to the staff to look at in small break out groups to practice identifying capital and categorizing within the community cultural wealth framework. The breakout groups will share back with the larger group. They will then breakout again to do the same activity but drawing from their own experience and stories of working with the youth. If the staff do already work together, it is particularly helpful for them to use examples from youth that they currently work with or other members of the group have also worked with. In the first breakout, the vignette was given to them, but now the storytelling is in their hands. Just as storytelling and Testimonios informed the research for the training, storytelling is being used as a tangible method to identify the community cultural wealth of the youth. The staff would be encouraged to look at how youth strengths can fit into multiple categories or there might be additional types of capital that are not identified in the community cultural wealth model.

When leading the discussions, the facilitator should be able to give their own suggestions and observations of capital if the participants are struggling. It's important to remember that this is asking for a mind shift and might not be familiar and comfortable for the staff. Therefore, the facilitator needs to encourage sharing and participation. Not only should the staff walk away from this section of the training with applicable categories and ways of thinking of strengths but also with a method for identifying them, storytelling.

The second section of the training focuses on interventions to help youth see their own community cultural wealth and build on it. Some interventions are listed and explained on the handout. But these are not the only possible interventions. The participants are encouraged to think outside of these and share their own ideas. After initial discussion about the interventions,

there will be a gallery of stories or scenarios. Everyone will float around the room and write comments next to the scenarios including the capital they see and interventions that would be helpful, building on each other's comments and perspectives. If there is time, the facilitator can run a discussion about people's experience with the gallery and comments.

After, one will be selected for a role play. One participant (or two depending on the scenario) will be the youth and another will be the staff member. They will then try and utilize the interventions. If they get stuck, the participant can always pause and ask for suggestions from the rest of the trainees. If there is time, everyone will role play in front of the group. If there is not time for this, they will break out into small groups for the role play. After this, there will be time to reflect as a whole group on the interventions, their implementation, and the community cultural wealth that they foster.

In section three of the training, group home staff will have the opportunity to delve into the ideas explored in the first two segments for their specific clients and make tangible connections to independent living skills. The activity will be an art project. Everyone will get an outline of a person (Appendix C). Staff will have a list and description of the different categories of Community Cultural Wealth. They will be asked to keep a youth they work with in mind for the project. They will represent the Community Cultural Wealth the youth holds on the inside of the body. On the outside, they will represent the independent living skills or needs that the youth has. They will share this out with the larger or small groups depending on the size. Together, as a team, the group will discuss how to connect these skills to the Community Cultural Wealth of the youth.

Development of the project

Positionality of the Researcher

My positionality as a researcher not only informs how I interpret, digest, and present my findings, it also greatly influences what the youth shared with me and which youth I was able to talk to. I am a white woman. I grew up in a segregated community in Orange County, California. I had no interaction with the child welfare system. I attended a public but privileged college where I studied math. My experience working with youth, the child welfare system, and with communities and families has been all through my experience working at a group home in San Jose, California over the last four years. I worked as a staff on the floor and then as a case manager. All the youth who shared their Testimonios with me were formerly clients at the group home so what they shared was likely influenced by that past relationship.

Many staff and managers in the group home grew up in the same communities as the youth or in the child welfare system. I, on the other hand, am an outsider and this informs my work and how the youth see me. When a youth comes into the home and looks at me, they often see the providers, teachers, social workers, and police officers that take them away from family or take their family from them. I have to earn trust in a way that is different from a staff who is part of their community, who went to their school, knows the store where their mom buys groceries, knows the taqueria they went to last night when they left the group home.

I formerly worked with the four youth that shared their Testimonios with me. For all of them, we knew each other for over a year and still maintained contact and a relationship but I was no longer their provider. Of course this changes what the youth would share with me versus a more “neutral” researcher, but in different ways for each of them. At first I was unsure if talking to youth I knew already would be valid for research, thinking that it would not be

objective or would some how skew my data. After talking to my adviser and reflecting more on what I have learned about research methods, I realized this was not the case at all. In fact – and I found this to be true – I got more out of the interviews. With these youth I had already built a rapport. We had learned each other’s communication styles. I was worried that they would not feel comfortable sharing some things with me that they would otherwise with an unknown person. (Especially things that painted them in a poor light, whether it be to protect their image or my worries.) There is no way to measure this, but from my observation they were very willing and happy to share their stories including the struggles.

The interviews ranged from one to two and a half hours. I asked very few questions since they all seemed to have a story that flowed from them. But where I had to ask more questions was when we were talking about *their* strengths or capital. Three of the youth couldn’t identify their strengths-saying they had none-without me giving them an example of a strength I saw in them. After this, they identified others and talked about them with different degrees of comfort. But those were points when I felt my positionality strongly in the conversation. It was my position not necessarily as a white person or a woman or an outsider, but as someone who does care about them and sees them in a positive way.

Creation of the Training

Through the lens of Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth theory, I studied the four Testimonios that are presented in Chapter Three. I found that the four youth had community cultural wealth from all six of the categories and were using these assets to help them survive their adult lives. After identifying the community cultural wealth, I looked at the patterns. I identified sections of the Testimonio that displayed community cultural wealth, showed its

application by staff or family members, or when the youth was first identifying it for themselves. There were many similarities and trends, while at the same time some of the youth had completely opposite experiences regarding the same topics.

I broke down the training into three sections, identification of community cultural wealth, interventions to foster the wealth, and connecting it to independent living skills. With the patterns I had identified, there were examples of community cultural wealth, interventions the youth continually identified, and patterns of independent living skills. Using this information, I condensed these ideas into more digestible worksheets and activities. I narrowed down sections of all four Testimonios to fit into the activities with the intention of bringing youth voice into the room. I created space in the training for the participants to bring their own experiences and the voices of the youth they work with into the room and conversation as well.

The Project

Section One: Identifying Community Cultural Strengths

The first section of the training is introducing the participants to the idea of Community Cultural Strengths. “Strengths” is used instead of “wealth” because of the accessibility of the word and its connotation. “Strengths” is already a word used with youth and adults in the field, as opposed to wealth. When listening to the youth’s stories and asking questions, I offered different wording in my questions and responses to see what they were most comfortable with using. All the youth had more to say when I used the word strengths versus other synonyms.

Section one is divided into three parts/activities. The first one is a discussion of the five categories of community cultural strengths and how they relate to foster youth (Appendix B). I combined two categories of community cultural wealth into one, familial and social strengths.

The distinction was subtle enough that it took away from the goal of identifying strengths. What I found in the Testimonios was that for the youth familial and social assets were greatly linked and use in place of one another. The second activity involved reading and discussing vignettes in smaller groups. The vignettes are stories from the Testimonios (Appendix C). With the vignettes are prompting questions to help the participants use the stories to practice identifying community cultural strengths and the goals these strengths meet. The third activity is to bring the participants experiences and their youths' voices into their conversation. The participants share a story with a partner. The practice of storytelling is a great way to identify community cultural strengths, gives the partner an opportunity to practice listening, and can help them reflect upon their experiences as they tell the story. This is also followed with dyad discussions and a larger group discussion. There will be a lot of time for reflection from the participants in the training. This is deliberate to make space for all the voices in the room and to keep the knowledge genuine and growing.

Section Two: Interventions to Foster Community Cultural Strengths

Section two begins with youth voice in a gallery activity. This includes sections from the Testimonios (Appendix D). They are posted on the wall when everyone enters the training, with space for comments, drawings, or reactions from the participants. Everyone walks around the room reading the quotations, and then the comments, building upon each other's interactions with the quotations, while the room remains silent. Afterwards, there will be a large group discussion and reflection.

The second part is a discussion of various interventions (Appendix E). These interventions discussed by the youth in the Testimonios as ones they wish staff had done, or that staff had done that helped them see their strengths and build upon them. Many are found in the

gallery activity. There is specific space in this activity for the participants to share their ideas or interventions that have worked well for them. There should be encouragement of the participants to question the suggested interventions and each other's suggestions and looking critically at the situations.

Activity three is a role play activity for the staff to practice the interventions. Some of the participants will play the youth and some will play the staff. If there is extra time, they can switch roles. But it is important to keep time for discussion in the smaller and larger groups. Especially when scenarios can be challenging, it is important to leave time to debrief and process with the participants.

Section Three: Connect Strengths to Independent Living Skills

Section three starts with a ten-minute check-in about the participants understanding of independent living skills and refreshing everyone's memory on community cultural strengths. After this, part two is a Chalk Person/Gingerbread Person Activity depending on if it can be done outside or inside, respectively. The participants will decorate an outline of a person (Appendix F), with a particular youth in mind. Inside they will represent their community cultural strengths. On the outside, they will represent their independent living skills or ones that they need. The participant will then connect the skills and strengths that can be used to help build the other. The participants will have the opportunity to share their art, experiences, or reactions to the project.

Part three will be a case planning activity. There will be a worksheet for the participants to fill out for one of their youth (Appendix G). This will be identifying strengths, needed independent living skills, an intervention plan, and classifying the strengths. It is important to encourage the participants to work together and share their struggles and experiences with each

other. Part four, the conclusion of the training, will start with the participants writing an action step on a flashcard for them to take with them out of the training. The remaining time will be used for any closing reflections, comments and thoughts from the participants.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Conclusions

Foster youth in group homes show constant resilience and resistance to obstacles and challenges. Deficit perspectives held by caregivers, group home staff, social workers, probation officers, and many other adults that work with foster youth on a daily basis create environments where youth strengths are not recognized or utilized. Furthermore, foster youth voices and experiences are silenced and ignored on a daily basis despite the value they bring to the table.

The goal of this field project was to hear and honor the voices of foster youth through Testimonios and to take this knowledge and present it in a training for group home staff. The experience that I had when listening to the youth's stories was transformative for my understanding of the topic, and left me with even more questions. Despite working with foster youth daily, I rarely have the opportunities to ask them the questions I did and sit with them in their reflections, observations, and conclusions.

Using Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth theory helped me organize my ideas and critically look at the youth's capital. Without this framework, I would not have been able to expand my ideas of assets to fit the foster youth culture in a critical way. When looking at foster youth, the ideas of community and family are complicated by the youth's removal from families and their efforts to rebuild those and new connections. As stated in the previous chapters, there is very little work that looks at foster youth capital in a critical, racialized, and inclusive way. There is a great need for work in this area.

There were challenges in condensing the ideas that arose in the Testimonios into training time and structure. I tried to communicate as much as possible, in a genuine way, by

incorporating not only my summaries into the training, but the youth's actual words. In this way, the youth may communicate ideas more real and complex than I would have been able to do in the training. Those voices are also there to show the value and encourage participants to continue learning through the voices of the youth with whom they work.

Overall, there is valuable ideas and room for discussion in this training/representation of Testimonios. But it only scratches the surface of the work that needs to be done. Because of the way value is assigned and perpetuated in our society, foster youth, the services for them, and their service providers constantly need to fight to be acknowledged and have their voices heard. Youth and providers need to question the institutions and systems that are not set up with foster youth in mind. This can start with us all giving time and energy to listening to our youth and seeing their strengths, but that cannot be where it ends. We need to bring these views, convictions, and practices with us into all the spaces that our youth deserve to occupy.

Recommendations

I plan to implement the trainings created based on the Testimonios of foster youth in my work environment. We currently have weekly staff meetings at which I can implement one section of the training for three consecutive weeks. I can then get feedback from participants in evaluations after each portion of the training. The evaluations will ask if the information is presented in a way that is helpful and meaningful, as well as applicable to their work. After this initial implementation, I hope to improve the training. It will continue to grow and evolve through the caregiver participants and through the youth voices they bring into the room.

I recommend that the training be used with group homes and residential settings. But it can also be applied to any group that is working with foster youth in different settings or

contexts. The concepts and ideas can be applied by people in many roles, but they will have to make it work for them and their clients. The importance of bringing youth voices into the training gives even more flexibility to different perspectives when working with foster youth.

After the training, it's important for people to have the space to discuss their experiences with the training and its implementation. With most learning, it is helpful to continue to reflect on what is learned or what you are looking critically at. This can happen with co-workers in and out of work, in staff meetings, and in-between shifts. Since youth voice is used in this training, it is especially important to remember the conversations and experiences we have had with youth and reflect on them using the framing of community cultural strengths.

For future development of the framework and methods used in this project, I recommend increased research with foster youth. Their voices are constantly silences. As I have seen through working on this project, foster youth have to much insight and ideas on changes that would benefit other youth, *and they want to share it*. All the youth who shared their Testimonios with me were over 18, if given safe and brave spaces, there are a lot of foster youth under 18-years old who would enjoy participating and would have a lot to contribute to research. With all research it is important to consider the effect on the youth and its the researcher's responsibility to consider all the participants' different experiences when creating that space. Overall, my recommendation is that we bravely create spaces where foster youth feel empowered to lead us to better understanding, knowledge, and practices.

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Appendix A: Fostering Community Cultural Strengths Training

**Section 1: Identifying Community Cultural Strengths
(60 minutes)**

Part 1: Community Cultural Strength Discussion (20 minutes)

Community Cultural Strengths: Facilitator goes through definitions, how it relates to foster youth, examples, and facilitates discussion (use Appendix B: Community Cultural Strengths Handout). The facilitator could use examples from their own experience, elaborate on ones listed on the handout, or ask the participants for examples they can think of from their work.

Part 2: Vignette Activity (20 minutes)

Vignettes (4 groups): Identify community cultural strengths in small groups (Use Appendix C: Community Cultural Strengths Vignette)³

Questions to Discuss:

1. What obstacles have these youth overcome/are overcoming?
2. What supports or internal strengths do they draw on?
3. What community cultural strengths do you see?
4. How is this strength unique for foster youth? How is it helpful?
5. Do you see resistance? Do you see transformation?

Bring back to larger group: ask staff to share what they learned or thoughts that arose in small groups.

Part 3: Storytelling Activity (20 minutes)

Now it is time for the participants to use their own storytelling. Break up into pairs and ask the participants to tell their partners a story about a youth from their own work where they saw community cultural strengths. Ask them to tell one story, switch and have the other participant tell a story, and then together discuss the strengths and the experience using the questions on the handout as prompts. (The facilitator should give time prompts so both participants have time to share.)

Bring back to larger group: ask staff to share what they learned or thoughts that arose in dyads.

³ The facilitator can also use their own vignettes from their work with foster youth. It is important that it is in the youth's own words, to bring youth voice into the training.

Fostering Community Cultural Strengths Training

Section 2: Interventions to Foster Community Cultural Strengths (60 minutes)

Part 1: Gallery Activity (20 minutes)

Facilitator will post up different quotes, scenarios, or situations around the room creating a Gallery (Appendix D: Gallery Quotations)⁴. These are quoted from foster youth. Also put paper or poster board by each quote. Ask the participants to walk around the room and read the quotations. Ask them to write comments, words, make a drawing, anything that is triggered from the quotation or another participant's comment. Remind them of the following questions as a prompt, but they are not limited to them.

Questions for Gallery

1. What Community Cultural Strengths do you see? Which, of any, categories do they fall under?
2. What interventions could be used, are used, or are suggested?
3. Is there anything this calls to mind for you?

Group share out

Ask three questions above, ask anyone to share quote or comment and what stood out for them.

Part 2: Intervention Discussion (20 minutes)

Facilitator will use the Strengths-Based Interventions handout (Appendix E). Go through the explanation of the interventions, examples, and encourage discussion. Encourage the staff to give examples and share the interventions they use or saw in the Gallery Activity that are not listed on the handout. There is a space on the handout for them to write-in their own or ones others shared.

Part 2: Role Play Activity (20 minutes)

Have all the staff write a brief scenario that they have encountered with a resident. Put them together or mix them up. This activity should can be done in small groups of around four participants. Have them partner up in the small group and each pair draw a scenario. Each pair will take turns in their group acting out the scenario (one participant will be the resident, the other will be the staff). After they can talk as a small group and then share out in a larger group if there is time. When discussing in small groups and the larger group ask them to focus on what strengths the youth showed and what interventions could be used. Ask about the challenges in implementing interventions in the group home.

4 Again, facilitator could use quotations from their own work with youth. But it must be from the youth's experiences and accounts.

Fostering Community Cultural Strengths Training

Section 3: Connect Community Cultural Strengths to Independent Living Skills (60 minutes)

Part 1: Independent Living Skills and Check-in (10 minutes)

Ask the staff what independent living skills are important? Write them down on the board and encourage them to discuss what skills they have found they need, what do they see youth struggling with that they need support around, what do the older youth report to them that they need? Keep the list visible for the rest of the training.

Ask the participants to name the 5 categories of community cultural strengths that we have been talking about? Were there any others that are missing from this list? Also post these somewhere visible. Ask if their understanding of any of them has changed since we initially talked about them?

Part 2: Chalk Person (or Gingerbread Person) Art Activity (20 minutes)

If there is room to go outside and draw with chalk, this activity can be done by the participants with chalk outdoors. They can trace each other and use this outline or the activity can be done with the gingerbread person outline (Appendix F) and markers/colored pencils.

Participants can do the activity on their own or in pairs. They are to think of a particular youth and do the whole activity with them in mind. They can start with the inside of the person or the outside, or work on both at the same time:

- Inside the person: draw, write, or otherwise depict community cultural strengths that the youth draws from or can access.
- Outside the person: draw, write, or otherwise depict independent living skills that the youth already has or that would be helpful to them.

After they have completed both of these, they can start to draw lines or shapes connecting the strengths on the inside with the independent living skills on the outside that the strengths could help the youth develop.

After the participants finish their artwork, ask them to share with the larger group.

Part 3: Case Plan Activity (20 minutes)

Using Appendix G (Community Cultural Strengths Case Plan), ask the participants to identify one youth. This can be the same or a different youth from the last activity. There are four columns on the case plan: community cultural strength, independent living skill, plan, and which categories of community cultural strengths does it fall under? Explain to the participants that they can start in either the first or second column or can try both ways. Pick a strength that can help build to the independent living skills, and then write a plan. Depending on the participants role with the youth this plan might look different. It might be interventions that staff can use, it might be steps the youth can take with the participants help, it might be a plan for the family. The fourth column can include as many categories as the participants see that fit for the strength and

the plan. Remind them they can always use multiple strengths. Encourage them to ask the facilitator and other participants for help when they are stuck.

Bring back to a larger group and see if anyone wants to share their case plan or part of it, or their experience creating it.

Part 4: Action Steps and Closing Comments (10 minutes)

Pass out an index card to all the participants. Ask them to think about an action step they are going to take from what they learned to apply with a youth with whom they currently work. They can write one or multiple action steps. Ask them if they want to share with the group. They can take the card with them to act as a reminder. Take the additional time to ask people for closing questions, comments, or thoughts.

Appendix B: Community Cultural Strengths Handout

Community Cultural Strengths

Community Cultural Strengths are assets such as knowledge, skills, abilities, characteristics, and contacts possessed and utilized by individuals and communities to survive, grow, and resist oppression. (Below are five categories of strengths, many strengths fall into multiple categories or could be grouped in other ways that listed here.)

Aspirational strengths: help maintain motivation and hopes for a positive future. Regardless of feasibility, dreams and aspirations for an improved future are held by individuals and communities, despite obstacles and oppressive forces.

Foster youth are continually faced with hopeless situations and have little certainty about their future. They lack access to caring family and role models because of physical removal from their community and natural support systems. These circumstances do not mean that foster youth do not possess aspirational strengths. But it does mean that the strengths will look different than other communities and will require a deep look into the experiences, history, and stories of foster youth. Despite obstacles, foster youth continue to imagine and dream.

Linguistic strengths: enables communication and expression. Bilingualism, use of art, music, poetry, and storytelling are all examples of different ways that communication is not limited to verbal and written skills in English. Linguistic strengths can help individuals express themselves, advocate for their community, access education, healthcare, or other resources for themselves or others, and acquire knowledge.

Youth in residential care have less exposure to language acquisition through family, but have increased contact with diverse youth and caregivers that hold their own linguistic capital. Youth create nontraditional ways of maintaining contact with family and communities, such as social media or communicating through in-between people. Communication through various art forms is common with foster youth. Art is often used as a skill to cope with past and ongoing trauma's as well as creating a safe space for expression. Storytelling is common among group home residents, sometimes sharing their histories or passing knowledge about survival in the system to other residents.

Navigational strengths: are used to maneuver systems and institutions that were created for privileged communities and often exclude others. Recognizing individual agency within institutions, navigational strengths include techniques to gain access to resources and cope with structural violence while also looking at social groups resistance to the violence and community navigation of various systems.

Foster youth have continual interaction with various systems. On top of the systems that they continue to interact with from their family's community, they are under the jurisdiction of social services and are more likely to be involved in juvenile justice and mental health systems. Therefore, they learn these systems and navigational strategies.

Familial and social strengths: encompasses cultural knowledge and access to people and resources that help build identity, navigate through social systems, or growth in other strengths. Cultural knowledge grows within families and communities and includes cultural intuition, community history and resources, and lessons in caring and coping. Family is extended to include extended family, friends, and community members from the present or past. Family builds a sense of connection and ability to see that one is not alone in facing adversary. Historically communities have found ways to teach and preserve the knowledge they use. Sometimes this is by creating societies and organizations, other times its community members simply reaching out to each other.

For foster youth, family is even more expansive and inclusive, such as other foster youth, foster parents, or members from the community to where they are now living. Friends of foster youth often hold a family-member role due to a lack of biological family involvement. Often friends are more consistent than parents or other family. They share knowledge around how to care for others, cope with reality, and daily living skills. Foster youth find creative ways to maintain social connections to peers and adults. Often individuals they have lived with, gone to school with, or received mental health or housing services from act as gateways to services and resources.

Resistant strengths: are used to challenge oppression, internal and external. History is full of resistance from marginalized communities and is often how communities work towards liberation. These strengths range from expressing ideas and beliefs that differ from the norm to calling attention to oppression to fighting the policies and practices that are biased.

Foster youth face oppression on a daily basis. Their resistance takes various forms from acting-out behaviors to getting legal support from their attorneys. Actions or other strength that might not be resistance for other groups can be for foster youth, such as graduating from high school or going to live with their family.

Appendix C: Community Cultural Strengths Vignettes

Community Cultural Strengths Vignettes

Questions to Discuss:

4. What obstacles have these youth overcome/are overcoming?
5. What supports or internal strengths do they draw on?
6. What community cultural strengths do you see?
7. How is this strength unique for foster youth? How is it helpful?
8. Do you see resistance? Do you see transformation?

Daisy

There is a foster care system network. If you have been in the foster care system for more than 6 months, you know so many people and you don't even know you know them. Going to the Hub, that's a good way to make friends. Going downtown, there are a bunch downtown. There are a bunch of foster kids at my school. Being in the system, they kind of come out. When you aren't in the system, you don't see them. They are like regular kids. My roommate, I met her before we lived together. You get matched with people you never would know. Being in group homes, group home kids, kids go in and out. You would never otherwise know them. You loose contact but you end up gaining contact back. Your friend is their friend. You end up living by each other.

There was this other foster youth who was trying to fuck with me. I told the other kids. This child would not leave me alone! Constantly bugging me and talking to me. I told him if he didn't leave me alone, he would get hurt. He didn't listen so I asked some of the big boys. They were like, "Yeah, I'll deal with that. No problem." All it took was me opening my mouth one time. He got beat up six times from that.

It can be a dangerous thing though. These are kids that don't mind doing stuff like that because they don't have a future. They are homeless. They didn't get the same opportunities because they are older, they aged out, there is too much shit going on, their social worker screwed them over, the group home staff screwed them over.

Foster youth network, we are like siblings. It's so hard if its against group home staff. But we will fight each other, too. We don't care. People are people to us at this point. It gets kind of sad but its the way it is. I don't think any of the kids have sat back.

Foster youth will call each other. The younger ones will call the older ones to help them. It's like a cycle. One boy who I knew from a group home came to spend the night here. He was back with his mom and he had to get away from his family life before he went completely crazy so he stayed with us. The way everyone is so connected blows my mind sometimes.

So far, one from the original batch is still my friend and contacts me on a weekly basis. I have lived with over 40 girls and I have lived with more boys than girls. I feel like it's worth it to connect with them. Being able to hit them up and go anywhere with them. I've gone to San Francisco to visit a friend, to Monterey, to LA.

Pauline

When I was in group homes I had staff drive me. I was naturally good at getting jobs. I got my first job in Fresno on my own. I remember I got all ready and I was going to be 5 minutes late. It was all the way down this long street, and I was walking because there was no bus. I sprinted the whole way. Half way, this dude in a truck stopped and was like, "are you ok?" I got in and said I need to go to Starbucks. I got out and slammed the door. And I was on time though.

You have to be positive and pretend you are the happiest person on the planet. And have nice teeth....just kidding.... No one at the group home wanted to get a job, half of them didn't even go to school. They probably don't have people around them that care. Even if they do, they aren't the right people who are suppose to care. I didn't think I cared about myself because of the things I would do. The only thing I wanted to do was graduate, the rest I didn't care about.

Martin

I moved into my grandmother's house. Then I lived with an ex-girlfriend for about a year. I got picked up, I think because I was homeless. They took me to the receiving center. I stayed there for about two days. I liked it there. I was hogging the fridge. It wasn't a long time to be there. It was like an in-between from whatever experiences you were having before entering the system. When you come into the receiving center you enter the system. It was laid back and mellow, not a lot of issues I saw there.

Then I entered a group home. I was 15. I wasn't ready for all the different people. I was still kind of a mommy's boy. The situation was too all of a sudden. The group home staff were kind of bribing us to make ourselves better, you know, with allowance. Our house was a little different. If you'll be friends with me, I'll be friends with you, and then you will get an allowance. I was ok because I respected staff. But I ended up AWOLing, and spending time with a best friend. I was going to my friend's and spending the majority of the time there. But I would go back to the house because they told me my bed would close. I left because I didn't appreciate the setting. I feel like they took me away from something I was already dealing with. Now I know I wasn't dealing with it properly. I was there for four months.

Fernanda

I was so depressed. But I kid you not, every girl in there was. We had a fire drill at school, and I saw this one girl from the group home go into a cop car. She went to the hospital for a week and came back. Everyone went through her shit. I was like, I'm not participating in that. When she came home, she was really medicated.

The next day, I walk in and she is trying to commit suicide. I had my own room and she was in the only room that was shared. We weren't allowed in each others rooms, like any placement. But who listens to that? I was already grounded so I didn't give a fuck about any of the rules. Like, fuck that, I'm not going to school. So I went into her room, and was trying to talk to her. I kind of liked her too. I was very bi-curious back then and very open about it. I was trying to talk to her, like "Hey, what's wrong? Why are you feeling this way?" I was depressed too. I was trying to ask her the questions I would want someone to ask me. Staff were doing bedroom checks. I'm getting cussed out by my home staff, telling me I need to step out of the room. I was like, "But she is trying to kill herself." The staff was completely oblivious to the whole situation. She didn't care, she wanted me out of the room. I was already grounded a month ahead, so I told her I didn't care. I remember her saying, "You'll never see the light of day again! I can promise

you that!" I was like, "What? Hold up. You think you can keep me down in this house, is that what you are saying?" It pissed me off that she was so concerned about grounding me and keeping me in trouble, when this girl just came back from the hospital. I was so confused, I really was.

Appendix D: Gallery Activity

Gallery Quotes

I wanted a future. I didn't want to stay in East Side, fighting scraps. I wanted to go to college, to be a vet, to have kids in the future. I didn't want to bring kids into MY world if its like that. I would just be doing a cycle, adding to it. ...my mom called me crying for money for dope. That woke me up in a way.

Good staff are straight forward, to the point, they don't bullshit us. They aren't cheery about things. Sugar coating doesn't work for people. The staff think, "Oh, I can do this." But when it gets hard they quit. Some staff will just point out your flaws. We need someone that pays attention to you a lot, takes you shopping, to eat, takes you to the flea market, lets go do this or that. Someone that is pushing you to go somewhere, will get to know you. Staff have to get comfortable enough to tell the kids, you are doing this wrong, you should help yourself to do this. Doing all those things, you will express yourselves. That's a way you can understand someone's strengths.

When I first moved there, one staff wouldn't stop fucking with me. She would be like "Hey, you haven't stepped out of your room, you good in there?" Even if people don't want to talk, that effort builds up. You start to think, "Hey, I can fuck with this person." When you build relationships like that it makes things easier.

The setting of being homeless wasn't much different from a group home. You are meeting all sorts of people, you don't get to pick and choose. The environments were just another situation in life I could deal with. You can control shit to a certain extent but you can't control people.

At one time, a staff that was smoking and drinking beer with me was my definition of a good staff. And I had a couple of those. Now, my definition of a good staff is someone who is willing to take care of you not like you are a foster kid or reject but like family. They are willing to get down on the floor with a kid who was crying and rub their back, or maybe not rub their back if they don't feel like it. Maybe a hug. I needed hugs, I was a hugger, other kids were not.

My mom was a crazy meth addict but is now just a crazy drunk. She doesn't care about me or anyone but the men in her life. Which I understand because she is searching for that because her dad got her addicted to drugs and didn't give a fuck about her. I can understand how she is such a bitch because her mom is such a bitch. People can't learn to be good parents like that. Which is not an excuse because I would never behave that way.

I was in the level 12, in the assessment program. I was suppose to be there for three months, but I was there for a year because of my AWOLing and stuff like that. So I feel like a lot of times they assumed, "She's just sad, she it just this, she is just that." They left it alone. If they had been more like, "Hey, what's going on? Hey, I noticed this, I noticed that." It was none of that. It was,

“Oh, she has problems, because she is seeing a psychiatrist, oh this and that.” If they really showed me they cared... No one just works at a fucking shelter for minimum wage, you don't *just* work there.

I used to get into fights, they were my thing. I am a big half black child. If anyone said anything to me it was a straight punch to their face and I would keep swinging. I would swing at adult men who could probably kill me. But I did it anyway. I thought I was the shit and this and that. I had a new roommate. She stole my shit, irritated my soul. She was younger than me. I tried to chill out and help her a bunch of times. Even though she claimed she could fight me and beat me up. Usually with half the shit she had done I would have already punched her and beat her ass at the group home. But I didn't. I tried my best. I left her alone. I gave her warnings. I stayed away from her, exercised so much self-control. And then she got her ass beat by a 12-year old. I pulled the 12-year old off of her and helped her to the car. If you know me, you know how much it took to not just laugh at her.

This staff, she let me know I wasn't alone. But she didn't have to say anything. She always wanted to do something, some craft or something. One time she bought like 400 of those strawberry baskets. She had seen something on Pinterest or something. When people can share stuff like that, get your mind off of things. I remember my case manager back then, she put effort into helping me. Like coping skills, do I have someone I can call, somewhere safe to go to? You put effort into it. Even though you can't control what kids do, you can show them. Well if you aren't going to listen to me, go to them. Remind them they have outlets. I don't know how many hotlines I was given for runaways. Another staff, she gave me this idea of a coping skills box. I still have it today. She put moon sand and all these little gadgets. It is one thing to acknowledge and show you understand. And then there is doing something about it. Like take them on a drive, and singing your lungs out. It's like ya this has happened, but lets grow from it.

I learned that I don't have it as bad as other people. People have a lot of ways of showing their emotions. Normal people don't show being hurt as being violent. I feel like a lot of people in foster care are going to be psychologists because they are around it all the time. They can read people off the bat because there are so many people going in and out, in and out.

Every time my dad ever got mad at me, he said “You can go back.” I thought it was like a child day care, but what he meant was the shelter, the children's receiving home. He always said that people are going to look at me as money. I never understood what he meant until I got into the system. I guess that was part of my depression, that I was money, I was a ward of the court. I never knew if people's hearts were in it or just their minds, for the money. When being new to a place, it was hard because you don't know who you can trust. If you genuinely love what you do, you go above and beyond and be welcoming. I'm pretty sure people will spread out their personalities. When it's intakes, its like “We are going to write down everything you do. Here are all the rules. Here is the sign-in.” Boom! Now you are treated like you are in a facility, not like you are human.

This is the time I knew about IRs. Because afterwards I was telling how I was going to kill myself, and here comes the IR. Then all these people come telling me how I'm going to go to the mental hospital. I remember crying and shit. And this staff grabs these leaves off the tree. He said, "They are pretty right? And you are holding onto them and they get all messy. You don't want to get messy. You just got to let it go sometimes." It's not going to change things you know, its just going to get all messy. This stuck with me. I have the notebook somewhere where he tried to get me to start journaling. I was going to but I never kept doing it.

Staff couldn't be my parent. No one can replace your parent but some people in your life come so close, it's an amazing thing. The staff that saw my strengths were just a handful that recognized me as a person, not just a pay check, or an annoying thing they had to take care of. Recognizing that I could be left alone with a knife for ten minutes and that I am going to try my best to stop the kids from ruining what I want. I got placed with more responsibilities. Staff were asking me if we could do this, or what about that. I used to always go do things. Once I got ice cream with a staff and ended up hiking up Mission Peak. I wanted to use the system.

When the staff actually had a conversation with me, they see the good. When I was at that breaking point that's when I went up to someone. But no one ever approached me. It's so hard to go up to someone and say, "I'm feeling like this" knowing they will have to report me and say something. I get the point of IRs, not everyone does. Its like being able to build that guts, "Hey, I'm not feeling so well right now." It's hard, its so hard. Some people would rather just hurt themselves than do that. Sometimes I really wish someone would say "Hey, you feeling ok? What's wrong? You have been in your room all day."

Appendix E: Strengths-Based Interventions Handout

Strength-Based Interventions

Active Listening: this involves not simply listening, but also acknowledging and responding to the youth.

Honest Talk: Being realistic, straightforward, and honest with youth when talking to them, in a caring and understanding way. This must be done thoughtfully and be connected to real world expectations, not as a form of consequence or way to “get back” at youth for their behavior. This will help prepare them for life and situations out of the residential setting as well as show them that you care.

Taking Time: Spending time with youth is a great way to build relationships, trust, and understanding of the youth and their communication. This does not always involve a lot of conversation, but can be doing activities together, going on drives, cooking, working on crafts, or running errands. This intervention often takes a lot of time and effort.

Sharing: Teaching youth strategies you use to cope, express yourself, self-care, or occupy your time. This could be a hobby, music, activity, location, or joke, to name just a few ideas.

Acknowledging/Trusting: Vocalizing the youth’s progress or strengths to the youth can help them see it in themselves as well as feel appreciated by others. This can be taken a step further by asking them to use those strengths to help themselves, the staff, the house, or others. When the youth show responsibility, it can be positively reinforced with trust and added responsibility.

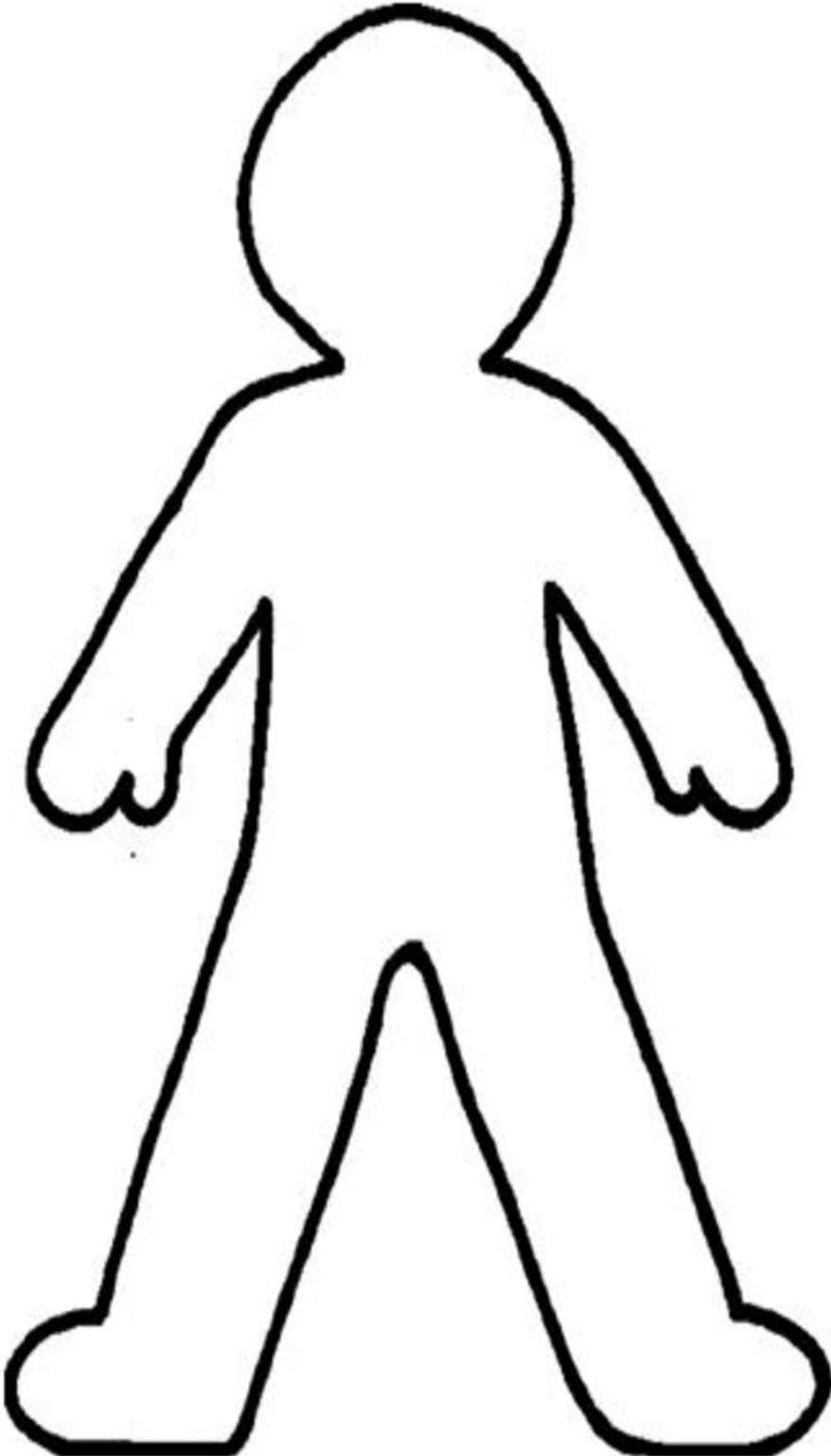
Checking-in: Remember that youth are not going to open up about their feelings and experiences right away. Continue to ask and check-in, even if there is not a response, especially when youth are being withdrawn, isolating, or acting out of their ordinary habits.

Seeing the bigger picture: Rules and expectations are in place to provide consistency, structure, and safety. But it is important to see beyond the policy, routine, or youth’s behavior. Take time to ask questions, reflect on youth’s experiences, and remember that there is usually more going on than what we are aware of or notice.

What interventions do you use that aren’t listed? What interventions did you see or think of after going through the gallery activity?

Appendix F: Gingerbread Person Activity

Gingerbread Person Activity



Appendix G: Community Cultural Strengths Case Plan

Community Cultural Strengths Case Plan

Community Cultural Strengths	Independent Living Skill	Plan	Aspirational, linguistic, navigational, familial and social, resistance