

Predictors of Success in a Residential Education Placement for Foster Youths

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This study examines factors that contributed to successful outcomes (graduated high school, remained in school, went to a lower level of care, or reunified with parents) for the first 246 residents of a residential education placement. Residential education placements' primary purpose is to provide an educational program rather than mental health treatment. Data were gathered from official records and from intake interview data. Overall about 69 percent of youths had a successful outcome. About two-thirds of study participants had graduated or were still attending school at the end of the study. Youths most likely to be successful were those who were age-grade appropriate on admission and were African American.

KEY WORDS: *education; foster youth; placement; residential; school completion*

The transition from adolescence to adulthood can be difficult for many youths. Youths involved with the foster care system are often uniquely challenged in fulfilling this task. These challenges include the emotional trauma of abuse and loss; the potential disruption of ties to family, friends, and community, including school continuity; placement instability; and the often abrupt termination of support from the system at age 18. It is not surprising that, given these challenges, recent research has developed an alarming picture of youths leaving foster care. This research shows that youths leave foster care without a high school diploma and the skills necessary for seeking well-paying productive employment (Cook, 1994; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004). This article reports on research that examined predictors of graduation from a residential education placement for foster youths.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Functioning of Foster Youths

Foster children exhibit a much higher level of academic risks than do youths in the general population. Research indicates that foster youths have educational problems such as high dropout rates, grade repetition, and lower scores on standardized tests and that they are more likely than non-foster youths to be placed in special education (Courtney

et al., 2001, 2004; Goerge & Van Voorhis, 1992; Shin, 2003). Only 37 percent to 55 percent of youths in care earn a high school diploma or a GED before exiting the foster care system (Barth, 1990; Courtney et al., 2001; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration on Child, Youth and Families, 1999). Depending on the reporting source and the statistical methods used, the U.S. graduation rate is estimated at about 66 percent to 88 percent. The consensus among data sources is that minority youths, particularly African American and Latino youths, have much lower rates of school completion, perhaps as low as 50 percent (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2008).

In the past three decades, growing earnings differentials have increased the economic importance of a high school diploma. High school graduates had a median income of \$35,700 a year in 2004, whereas adults without high school diplomas had a median income of \$21,000 a year (Baum & Ma, 2007; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Included within the data on high school completions are the 15 percent to 20 percent of youths who receive a GED instead of a high school diploma. A substantial body of research has indicated that GED recipients' incomes are no higher than those of dropouts, suggesting that the school completion data are actually worse than the data presented. It also should be noted that GEDs are disproportionately earned by racial and ethnic

minority students (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2008), a group that is overrepresented in foster care. Some available evidence suggests that foster youths are more likely to complete high school by earning a GED than by graduating, compared with their non-foster care peers. Fifty-two percent of youths who completed school in Mallon's (1998) study of the educational achievements of foster youths finished with a GED.

It is not surprising that given the low rates of high school completion, the number of former foster youths proceeding on to postsecondary education is also low relative to the general population despite evidence suggesting that a college degree is more important today than it has ever been in the past for achieving economic self-sufficiency (Merdinger, Hines, Lemon, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). Workers with a bachelor's degree on average earned \$20,000 more a year than people with only a high school diploma or a GED (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Courtney and Dworsky (2005) found that only 7 percent of recently discharged midwestern former foster children attended a four-year college. Another 16 percent of these youths attended a two-year school, and 9 percent were in vocational training. A study of 1,087 former Casey Family Programs foster alumni that gathered retrospective data for up to 10 years after discharge found that 44 percent of the former foster youths had attended college, 10 percent had a bachelor's degree, 8 percent had an associate's degree, and 20 percent had finished a vocational program (Pecora et al., 2003). In contrast, 28 percent of the general population age 25 and over had received a baccalaureate degree in 2007 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Sixty-five percent of 18- to 25-year-olds attended some form of postsecondary education in 2001 (Day & Newberger, 2002). The cumulative impact of this research is to suggest that youths in care have substantial academic problems that are likely to handicap them in their attempts to make a successful adaptation to adulthood. Research on minority foster youths indicates that they suffer worse outcomes in terms of physical and mental health, educational attainments, and access to basic services than do nonminority youths in care (Hill, 2006; Martin, Magy, Gibson, & Wilkins, 2007).

Explanations for Poor Outcomes

Explanations posited for foster youths' poor school performance include the following: cognitive skills deficits resulting from maltreatment, behavioral problems that hinder school engagement, noninvolved caregivers, frequent school changes, and absenteeism (Stone, 2006). Also, school districts serving racial-ethnic minority populations located in high-poverty areas have demonstrated an inability to provide an adequate education for their students (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2004). It is in these schools that the bulk of youths involved with the child welfare system received their initial education (Lee & Barth, 2009).

A number of studies have reported that foster youths exhibit a much higher rate of behavioral problems than youths in the general population (Clausen, Landsverk, Ganger, Chadwick, & Litrownik, 1998; National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, 2005; Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000; Taussig, Slymen, & Landsverk, 2001; Zima et al., 2000). These problems have been observed in school settings (Smithgall, Gladden, Yang, & Goerge, 2005; Zima et al., 2000). Clausen et al. (1998) reported that children with behavioral problems were significantly more likely to have been suspended or expelled from school. McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, and Thompson (2003) found that youths with school behavior problems were more likely to fail a grade. Certainly, these behavioral difficulties make it difficult for youths to make the best use of the academic opportunities available to them. Explanations for foster youths being at high risk for behavioral problems include the effects of abuse that result in Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement as well as experiences in the child welfare system, such as multiple changes of placement. Placement change is often accompanied by a move to a new school. A change in schools is a known educational risk factor (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003; Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004). Research has suggested that residential mobility has an adverse effect on the learning and academic achievement of foster youths (Altshuler, 1997; Ayase, 1995; Barth, 1990; Conger & Rebeck, 2001; Eckenrode, Rowe, Laird, & Brathwaite, 1995; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). Zima et al. (2000) found that

the number of foster home changes was associated with having at least one severe academic delay. Conger and Rebeck (2001) and Eckenrode et al. (1995) reported that changing placements, schools, or both was associated with an increase in attendance problems.

School provides an arena for healthy development for most children; for some at-risk children, school is a place of safety. Children can find potential social support in relationships with school-based peers and teachers, and thus schools can provide protective buffers to risks encountered elsewhere. School change interferes with the development of continuous relationships with teachers who may need time to understand youths' individual needs. A teacher can meet a child's need for a caring adult who can provide mentorship and guidance (Reynolds & Suh-Ruu, 2004). Through school mobility, foster youths may lose peers who have been sources of social support. Frequent disruption of educational continuity may also make many foster youths hesitant to commit to the educational and treatment services available to them.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The residential placement in which the research was conducted was developed in response to the problems outlined in the literature review and was expected to provide a stable home and a comprehensive educational program in preparation for emancipation from foster care. In this article the residence will be referred to as the academy.

The academy has three unique features that make it unlike most residential settings. First, the academy is based on the concept of "residential education," an approach rarely used for foster children. The emphasis is placed on education and social development rather than the treatment orientation of most congregate care facilities. Residential education programs may provide some mental health services for low-level problems, but their primary focus is to provide an educational program in a congregate care setting (Lee & Barth, 2009).

Advocates of residential education believe this placement option has more in common with preparatory boarding schools that traditionally have provided an education that enhances youths' chances of attending college than with residential treatment (Chargel, 2002). The core academy

service is an on-site public high school that provides a high-quality educational experience. For example, the school maintained a 1 to 15 teacher-to-student ratio, which was about one-half the ratio found in the public schools in the community where the research was conducted. As much as possible, the learning experience was meant to mimic a school in the community. The school has a full range of extracurricular activities that one would expect to find in an American high school (interschool athletic competition, clubs, newspapers, proms, and so forth). These activities encourage youths to become actively engaged in the educational environment.

Second, unlike usual congregate care facilities in which youths are stabilized and then stepped down to a lower level of care, the expectation for youths admitted to the academy is that they will remain in residence until emancipation and graduation. This expectation of permanency during dependency is likely to have positive behavioral and educational implications for youths. The experience of frequent placement change has made many foster youths reluctant to commit to the educational and treatment services available to them. Youths might have the opportunity for continuous long-term relationships with teachers, who may really get to know their needs, and students will be less likely to lose course credit as a result of placement change. Youths who know that the academy is to be their home for the duration of their dependency may feel free to engage wholeheartedly in their education and treatment program. Residency is also an effective counter to absenteeism.

Third, the academy campus is open, with fewer restrictions than would be expected in a typical group care environment. Placement is voluntary, and students can be given another placement at their request. This feature counters the criticism that residential care is by its nature a restrictive environment.

Admittance Criteria

Youths were referred to the facility by their CPS worker in most cases, but applicants could also be referred by other individuals associated with the dependency court. Youths were selected for admission to the residence on the following two criteria: (1) placement in an open campus was appropriate for the youth, and (2) the youth was

able to function in a facility that was more education oriented than treatment focused. Youths with severe mental health problems were deemed not appropriate for admission. Most of the youths on entry to the facility were either in high school or entering the ninth grade in the next academic year.

METHOD

Overview

The research reported on in this article sought to determine factors that predicted graduation from high school. These predictors were grouped in the categories of demographics, past school performance, placement history, and behavioral problems. Because the intervention was new, these predictors were seen as useful for determining who might benefit from a residential placement focused on education.

Sample

The sample consisted of all youths of high school age who entered the facility since its opening in October 2001 through June 2005 ($N = 246$). Data were collected as part of a larger evaluation and cost analysis for the residence completed in the spring of 2007. The cost analysis consisted of a record review of CPS files. Interview data collected at intake for the larger evaluation of the residence were also used in this analysis. This article focuses on identifying outcomes through December 2006.

Data Collection

The study received institutional review board approval from San Diego State University. Graduate-level research assistants (RAs) trained in the use of the study instruments, including the definitions of study variables, collected the data. For this specific study, an instrument was developed to abstract needed data from the case files. Data collection did not commence until RAs had reached a 90 percent concurrence (interrater reliability) on a common case.

Study Measures

Two separate dependent variables were developed: Outcomes on exit and graduation. An exit was considered successful if a youth graduated from high school, reunified with her or his

parents, went to a lower level of care, or remained at the residence and continued attending school. Discharge due to reunification or moving to a lower level of care was regarded as successful because public policy supports these exits as preferred outcomes. All other outcomes were regarded as unsuccessful (went to a higher level of care, emancipated without graduating, absent without leave [AWOL], and so forth). Finally, we tracked graduations. Youths who were age eligible for graduation but not attending school were categorized according to whether they graduated or not (1 = yes, 0 = no).

Data abstracted from the files also included demographic information: age, gender, and placement history prior to entering the academy. The type of placement was an area of concern because youths in foster care can have school experiences that are different from those of youths in group homes. Foster youths attend schools in the community, whereas group home residents often attend on-site schools within the residences. Group home residents are also assumed to have more behavioral problems than do youths in foster care.

Youths completed the Youth Self-Report (YSR) through an interview on entry to the academy. This standardized instrument measures youth's behavioral, emotional, and social competencies and problems (total problems, externalizing and internalizing syndromes) (Achenbach, 1991). The YSR demonstrated excellent reliability with the academy sample ($\alpha = .89$). The YSR is widely used in studies of children's mental health; it provided information about the behavioral problems of the academy youths on entry.

One measure of school progress was the age-grade appropriate (AGA) variable. This measure was based on the current grade of a student and his or her date of birth on entry. This birth date was used to determine the year the child would have been eligible to enter kindergarten in the county in which the study was conducted. It was assumed that this was the year that the child started school. Using that year, the grade that the youth should be attending at entrance to the academy was identified. We then identified, on the basis of the child's actual grade at entrance, whether the child was in the appropriate grade for his or her age. Age-grade appropriateness captures both previous academic difficulties through grade repetition and some of the problems associated

with school change. For example, students may lose credits when they transfer, which may require them to repeat schoolwork. These students may represent a subset of foster children with particularly difficult educational and other problems, which could make working with them challenging for teachers and social workers.

Youths were also queried at intake about their experiences with suspensions, attendance, school performance, and grade repetition. These questions were assumed to provide further information about school success and behavioral problems.

Length of stay (LOS) at the residence was also computed by subtracting the exit date from the entry date. If no exit date was available for program graduates, the graduation date was substituted; for those in residence, the date that data collection ended was used as their exit date. Most youths were discharged shortly after school completion. A variable called still in residence (coded 1 = yes and 0 = no) was created to examine the effect of using the end date of data collection for those students.

The school-related measures and the YSR were collected by graduate students as part of a larger evaluation of the academy. It should be noted that data on these measures are available for only 157 of the students in the sample. Midway through data collection, the contractor, who administered the residential portion of the academy (but not the school), became embroiled in a contract dispute with the public agency with overall responsibility for the residence and as a result of this dispute, the contractor refused to allow the RAs on campus. This decision ended the interview portion of data collection.

Data Analysis

At the descriptive level, simple statistics were used: *t* tests, chi-squares, and tests of significance of differences in proportions. Bivariate analysis was used to identify variables that differentiated successful from unsuccessful cases. The strength and direction of associations between variables that were significant in this analysis were examined by using the Spearman's rho, the nonparametric version of the Pearson product-moment correlation test. Nominal variables were coded as dummy variables before this analysis. For example, male was coded 1 and female was coded 0. The purpose of these analyses was to provide findings of significant correlations among these sets of variables in their own

right and to screen and condense the data as a step toward multivariate analysis.

Variables significantly associated with the dependent variable (successful/not successful) were tested in a logistic regression. Cox regression, a type of survival analysis, was used to identify the predictors of graduation. This analysis calculates a probability of graduation for every day between intake and graduation and uses these probabilities to calculate a hazard function. This procedure accounts for right-censored data that are partially missing because graduation occurred after the end of the study. Youths without a graduation outcome can be included because Cox continues to calculate the proportional hazard up to the day censored (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1995). This analysis was restricted to youths who had a birth date indicating they should have graduated prior to the end of the study. Also, youths who were still in residence were excluded.

The strength of regression as an analytic strategy is its ability to allow for the examination of several variables simultaneously in accounting for their relative effect on the dependent variable. Variables that had significant relationships with the dependent variables in the correlational analyses and were not highly correlated with one another were selected for inclusion in the regressions.

FINDINGS

Characteristics of Study Participants

Demographics and behavioral characteristics of the sample are reported in Table 1. Findings are contrasted by outcome. Sixty-nine percent of students were successful, meaning they either graduated, continued attending school, reunified with their parents, or went to a lower level of care. The 1a portion of Table 1 contains data abstracted from the case files, and the 1b portion describes the findings from the smaller interview sample. The educational progress of the participants and number of school changes experienced by the youths are summarized in Table 2. About 36 percent of the sample was African American, about 30 percent was white, and approximately 30 percent was Hispanic. African American students were more likely than other students to be successful, but this difference only approached significance ($p < .096$). The ethnic mix of the sample was representative of children in care in

Table 1: Demographics and Outcomes

1a—Case File Data	Total		Successful ^b		Not Successful		p ^a	
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Overall	246	100	148	60.2	108	30.9	NA	
Ethnicity	245							
African American	88	35.9	60	68.1	28	31.9	.096	
White	71	28.9	41	57.7	30	42.3	.452	
Latino	74	30.2	41	55.4	33	44.6	.202	
Asian ^d	5	2.0	3	60.0	2	40.0	NA	
Native American ^d	4	1.6	0	0.00	4	100.0	NA	
Other ^d	3	1.2	2	67.0	1	33.0	NA	
Gender	245							
Male	110	44.9	64	61.8	42	38.2		
Female	135	55.1	84	65.2	47	34.8	.645	
Age on entry	230							
14	55	23.9	35	63.6	20	36.4		
15	54	23.5	36	66.7	18	33.3		
16	71	30.9	41	57.7	30	42.3		
17	42	18.3	32	76.2	10	23.8		
18	8	3.5	7	87.5	1	12.5	.210	
Prior placement	246							
Relative care	51	20.7	17	66.7	34	33.3	.543	
Nonrelative foster care	59	24.0	42	71.2	17	28.8	.136	
Relative foster care and nonrelative foster care	110	44.7	76	69.1	34	30.9	.056	
Family foster agency	19	7.7	13	68.4	6	31.6	.611	
Group home	117	47.6	66	56.4	51	43.6	.041	
Exit reason								
Higher level of care needed	34	13.7	0	0.0	34	100.0	NA	
Emancipated without graduating	17	7.1	0	0.0	17	100.0	NA	
AWOL	14	5.8	0	0.0	14	100.0	NA	
Went to lower level of care	4	1.7	4	100.0	0	0.0	NA	
Became pregnant	3	1.2	0	0.0	3	100.0	NA	
Reunited with family	9	3.7	9	100.0	9	100.0	NA	
Funding ended	2	0.8	0	0.0	2	100.0	NA	
Reason not apparent from records ^e	4	1.7	0	0.0	4	100.0	NA	
Sibling was discharged from academy ^f	2	0.8	0	0.0		100.0	NA	
	Total		Successful (n = 112)		Not Successful (n = 39)			
1b—Interview Data	n	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	p
No. of placements	151	6.36	4.93	6.18	4.99	6.76	4.79	.512
Behavioral data	155			Successful (n = 114)		Not Successful (n = 41)		
YSR-Internal		50.95	10.05	49.61	9.49	52.51	10.99	.086
YSR-External		53.79	9.68	52.60	8.99	54.61	10.88	.212
YSR-Total problems		52.49	12.89	50.58	12.35	54.89	13.36	.044

Notes: AWOL = absent without leave. NA = not available. YSR = Youth Self-Report.

^ans shift because of missing data. Valid percentages used when data were missing.

^bCases were considered successful if youth graduated, was still attending high school, reunited with family, or went to a lower level of care. Cases were considered if they went to a higher level of care, were emancipated without graduating, were absent without leave, and so forth.

^cCounted as unsuccessful.

^dStatistical tests were not run because of small sample size or categories were mutually exclusive. The exit reasons categories were mutually exclusive.

the county in which this study was conducted. More than half of the sample was female (55 percent). According to staff, the gender distribution was based on referral patterns to the residence and

not program design. Youths on admittance to the residence were on average 15.23 (SD = 1.4) years old and had entered care at 9.3 (SD = 4.1) years of age. Prior to entering the residence, they had

Table 2: Outcomes, by Academic Progress

Outcome	Total		Successful ^a (n = 114)		Not Successful (n = 41)		p	
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Age-grade appropriate								
3 grades behind	1	1.9	0	0.0	1	2.4	—	
2 grades behind	7	4.5	4	3.5	3	7.3	—	
1 grade behind	70	43.5	47	41.2	23	56.1	—	
% on target	77	50.0	63	55.2	14	34.1	.066 ^b	
Suspended from school								
Failed a grade	157	66.9	79	68.1	26	63.4	.583	
Failed a grade	157	31.8	41	35.3	10	22.6	.114	
Total %								
			Successful (n = 114)		Not Successful (n = 41)			
	n	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Total number of schools attended	155	7.50	5.78	6.82	5.48	8.88	6.14	.033
Grades	155	3.76	0.961	3.73	0.89	3.84	1.09	.378

Notes: ns shift because of missing data. Dashes indicate that no statistical test was run because ns were too small.

^aMostly As = 5, mostly Bs = 4, mostly Cs = 3, mostly Ds and Fs = 1.

^bCategories collapsed and tested as a dichotomous variable with chi-square.

been in care an average of 6.15 ($SD = 4.27$) years. Most students were age 16 at intake (30 percent). The number of placements before placement at the current residence varied widely from zero to 23, with a mean of 6.36 ($SD = 5.0$) placements. A little less than one-half of residents came from group care (47.6 percent). The remaining youths came from foster care. Youths in group homes were more likely than youths in foster care to be in the unsuccessful category. Youths from relative or nonrelative foster care had more favorable outcomes than did former group home residents.

Using the YSR clinical/borderline cutoff points, 18 percent of youths were above the cutoff/borderline point for indicating internalizing problems. Twenty-eight percent of youths were above that point for externalizing problems, and 25 percent of the sample was in the clinical/borderline for total problems. An individual could have met the cut point on all three scales. Youths with higher scores on Total Problems and Internalizing subscales were less likely to be successful than were youths with lower scores on these measures. However, the differences with the Internalizing scale only approached significance ($p < .086$).

The majority of students reported prior school grades in the average to above average range (C to A), with approximately 10 percent reporting they

usually had grades at the lowest end of the scale (D or F) (see Table 2). The self-reported total number of school changes ranged from one to 40. More school changes were reported than placement changes. Youths with more frequent school changes were more likely than youths with fewer changes to have unsuccessful outcomes, but this difference was only near significance ($p < .066$). Only half of the participants in this study were found to be AGA. Youths who lagged behind their peers in grade attainment were less likely to be successful than were youths who arrived at the academy on schedule. Again, this difference only approached significance ($p < .066$). Fifty-seven percent of those youths had graduated by the end of study. Another 11 percent were still in school. Thirty-two percent of the youths were not attending school. Thirty-two percent of youths reported having repeated a class because of failing grades (see Table 2). About two-thirds of the sample said they had been suspended from school.

Thirty-seven percent of youths exited the academy prior to graduation. Thirty-one percent of the academy students had an exit considered to be unsuccessful. The most frequent reason for exit was "needing a higher level of care" (13.7 percent), followed by youths who left at emancipation without graduating (7.1 percent) and youths who went AWOL (5.8 percent).

Variables that proved significant in the previous analysis in predicting success were then examined using Spearman's rho. LOS was the strongest predictor of the successful/not successful variable ($r = .358, p < .0001$) and graduation ($r = .407, p < .0001$) (see Table 3). However, LOS could be an artifact of the age and grade at entry to the academy. It also should be noted that, except for LOS, most significant variables in this analysis showed weak to moderate associations with the dependent variables. Total number of schools attended showed a significant relationship with the dependent variables. Again, the relationship was weak with whether a youth was successful or not ($r = -.172, p < .033$) and with graduation ($p < .169, p < .04$). Both YSR measures only approached significance on outcomes. The score on the YSR-Internal score was significantly correlated with graduation ($r = -.172, p < .034$). Other variables showing significant but weak relationships with outcomes were AGA ($r = -.148, p < .067$) and whether youths had entered the academy from a group home ($r = -.130, p < .041$). Youths who were age-appropriate for their grade and did not have a group home as their previous residence were more likely to have positive outcomes. African American students ($r = .134, p < .097$) were more likely to be successful and graduate ($p < .110, p < .062$) than other groups, but these associations only approached significance. The only variables that predicted LOS was being African American ($r = -.177, p < .009$) and the number of schools

attended ($r = -.184, p < .024$). The more schools attended, the shorter the stay. Still attending (SA) also was significantly predictive of outcomes ($p < .257, p < .01$), both outcomes, which is not surprising because this variable was a component of both. SA was not significantly correlated with LOS. However, the strength of the relationship was modest.

Variables that were significant ($p < .05$) from the correlational analysis and were not highly correlated with one another were entered into a regression model with outcomes dependent. Results are reported in Table 4.

In the logistic regression only two variables were significant, LOS and having a group home as the placement before the academy. Youths from group homes, and those with longer stays at the academy, were less likely to be successful than were youths from foster care or those who had relatively short stays at the residence. A survival analysis was done only with youths with a graduation outcome. Included in the model were LOS, prior group home residence, YSR-Internalization, and total number of schools attended. This analysis did not find any significant variables and is not displayed.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Findings of the current study should be interpreted in the context of its limitations.

These limitations are as follows: The small sample size affects the ability to demonstrate statistically significant relationships. The sample was

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

Variable	Outcome ^a	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Graduated ^b	.925**	—								
2. LOS (2)	.358**	.407**								
3. African American ^c	.110 [†]	.134 [†]	.177**							
4. Foster care ^c	.113 [†]	.126 [†]	.024	-.042						
5. Group home ^c	-.130*	-.144*	-.033	.079	.861**					
6. YSR-Internal	-.143 [†]	-.174*	-.046	.034	-.069	.059				
7. YSR-Total	-.132 [†]	-.150 [†]	.064	-.063	-.079	.061	.738**			
8. AGA ^d	.148 [†]	.139 [†]	.077	.008	.185*	-.128	-.007	-.006		
9. Total no. of schools attended	-.172*	-.169*	-.184*	.075	-.132 +	.104	-.172*	.023	.030	
10. Still attending	.257**	—	-.054	-.063	-.135*	-.135*	.021	-.037	-.115	.099

Notes: Spearman's Rho used in the analysis reported upon in this table. LOS = length of stay, YSR = Youth Self-Report, AGA = age-grade appropriate. Dash indicates that data were not available.

^a1 = successful (youth graduated, was still attending high school, reunited with family, or went to a lower level of care), 0 = unsuccessful (went to a higher level of care, was emancipated without graduating, was absent without leave, and so forth); LOS = length of stay at placement in days.

^bGraduated restricted to only those with date of birth that indicated they should have graduated and are not still attending the academy.

^c1 = yes, 0 = no.

^dCollapsed from previous Table. 1 = AGA, 0 = not AGA.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. † $p < .10$.

Table 4: Logistic Regression with Outcomes Dependent (N = 142)

Variable	B	SE	Wald	Exp (B)	p
Length of stay	0.003	.001	21.652	1.003	.001
Group home	-0.855	.408	4.396	.425	.036
No. of schools	-0.041	.035	1.374	.960	.241

Note: Exp = exponent; No. = number.

drawn from a single site, which limits the ability to generalize. The study relied on self-report data, and therefore responses might not always reflect reality. The Spearman's rho coefficients suggest the findings could be described as weak to moderate. A control group and random assignment were not used, which limits the ability to establish cause and effect. It cannot be said that the successful youths would not have had the same results if they had been placed elsewhere.

However, the study has two strengths that make reporting findings from this program worthwhile (1) the unique nature of the educational program at the study site and (2) the lack of empirical data on residential education transitional programs.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Descriptive findings suggest the educational challenges that foster youths present for school social workers and others working with them. For example, about one-half of the youths were not AGA, and about 6 percent were more than one year delayed. Other striking findings were that two-thirds of students said they had been suspended from school. Thirty-one percent of youths in the current study said they had repeated a grade. These rates are much higher than the percentages reported by Altshuler (1997), who found that 13 percent of youths had repeated a grade. These findings suggest that youths had substantial pre-placement school difficulties that presented substantial barriers for their success. Despite these barriers, the graduation rate was at the high end of most reported rates for foster children but lagged the rates for the general population cited in the literature review.

Youths who were not AGA at intake, who had frequent school changes, and who came from group homes did poorly. However, when school change and prior group home residence were

controlled for by other variables, these relationships were no longer significant in predicting outcomes. The staff at the school seemed to have had considerable success with a group of students who presented numerous educational challenges.

Similarly, the data available on behavioral functioning from the YSR suggested that many of the youths had significant mental health needs. However, our measure of association suggested that these problems were not a limiting factor in achieving success at the residence.

African American youths, who are noted in other studies of foster youths as particularly vulnerable to adverse outcomes, did relatively well when compared with other youths. The differences between African American and other ethnicities only approached significance on the dependent variables. African American youths had significantly longer stays at the academy than other youths.

The longer stays for African Americans could have resulted from these youths being more likely than other youths to have experienced an improved environment at the academy compared with their previous living situations. Many of these African American youths may have been attending underperforming schools and coping with the risks of living in low-income neighborhoods. However, Latino students, who for the most part came from environments similar to those of the African Americans students, did not enjoy the same benefit.

African American youths were less likely to leave the academy by going AWOL or emancipating before graduating. However, this difference with other youths was small and only approached significance, and there was no evidence to suggest they were more likely than other youths to graduate. Group home youths were less likely to be successful. However, the relationship was weak. Group homes are supposed to be for youths with more behavioral problems than foster children have. Unlike other residents, these youths were "stepping down" a level of care. It may be that these youths needed more structure than the academy provided. A placement with an emphasis on mental health rather than education may be more appropriate for some of these youths. These findings are not suggested as exclusionary factors but as the identification of students who might need additional help to succeed.

The relatively high graduation rate, compared with other foster care studies, suggests that residential education in a stable long-term placement for youths who do not need residential-based treatment for mental health problems may be a promising strategy for ensuring high school completion. From a life course perspective, high school completion exerts a powerful effect across the life span. High school completion is a prerequisite for continued education, and it can lead to an increase in lifetime earnings potential. High school graduation is also associated with the avoidance of a variety of social ills, such as the receipt of public assistance and criminal justice involvement. It is imperative that children in care be provided with quality educational programs that will help them succeed once care is terminated.

Given the purpose of the residence, these youths were not typical of youths found in congregate care. Youths were selected for the program because they did not need treatment-based care but could benefit from an educationally focused program. Residential education runs counter to current public policy by suggesting that foster youths could benefit by going to a higher level of care and remaining there until emancipation. The argument against residential education is that youths who could function in foster homes are taken out of the community and possibly segregated from their families and non-foster peers in a more restrictive environment than foster care.

The academy is obviously a more expensive alternative for foster youths. Youths are moved to a higher level care and are provided a high-quality education, but these costs should be examined in rigorous evaluation as an investment strategy. The resource-rich academy environment may provide stability and increased high school completion rates that might make the extra costs worthwhile. These additional costs could become mute over time if residential education moves more youths toward self-sufficiency than traditional foster care has done. **CS**

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