

Nowakowski, Matt. Annotation of “A Phenomenological Study of Youth Experiences in Residential Foster Care and Their Recommendations for Change.” *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 14, no. 1 (Christian Brothers Conference: 2023).

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## ANNOTATION

McCullough, RSM, Mary Elizabeth Ann. “A Phenomenological Study of Youth Experiences in Residential Foster Care and Their Recommendations for Change.” EdD dissertation, George Fox University, 2017. 80 pp.

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological study to investigate the lived experiences of participants who had lived in foster care and to document their recommendations for change. The researcher developed an interview protocol through a comprehensive review of literature, and used purposive sampling to obtain a study sample  $n=3$  (35). For the purpose of this study, the researcher sought to describe the perspectives of young people in foster care, particularly in residential settings, and to gather their thoughts on what they wish could have been different about their situation (2). The fundamental research questions driving this research were: (a) what are the circumstances that led the young person to residential foster care? (b) how do participants generally describe their experience with residential foster care, and (c) how would he or she change those circumstances if he/ she could or what would have made it better? (3).

The problem investigated in this study was to gain a greater understanding of the perspectives of young adults who had spent some of their childhood or adolescent years in residential foster care and to hear them describe these experiences (2). As a Religious Sister of Mercy, the author creates an interesting paradigm for this study, relating the purpose and mission of the research to the founding mission of the Order and the foundress of the community, Mother Catherine McAuley, to open a home for distressed women and children (6). While notably a small sample, the study sought to provide in-depth personal interviews for consideration and analysis.

The author offers a review of literature focused on foster-care children in residential settings (7-33). The literature review presents interesting demographics of foster care in the United States (8-9) and theories relating to the emotional and social challenges for children in foster care (9-14). The review then turns to the educational achievement for children in foster care and the impact of foster care on physical and intellectual development (14-16).

The literature review next gives a significant treatment of a number of different models of foster and residential care (18-28). The Project Re-Ed Model works with children who have emotional disturbances (18), while the Teacher Family Model works with a married couple who take on parental roles of six to eight young people (19). In addition, the research described a number of discreet care models, such as Casey Foster Care, The Milton Hershey School, SEED Foundation residential programs, Hariharananda Balashram model of education, and Kinderhaus residential settings that focus on working with residential foster youth and academic achievement (21-22). The review of literature also describes the characteristics and factors for inclusion in a foster care environment (24-28), as well as the characteristics of sound residential facilities (28-29). In

conclusion, the author cites a number of studies that describe the experiences and perspectives of youth who have lived in residential foster care (29-33).

The third chapter of the dissertation contains a description of the methodology utilized in this study (34-40). Three individuals, two women and one male, between the ages of 18-24 who had lived in residential care settings comprised the sample (35, 40). The interviews were recorded for transcribing and coding. The researcher followed a traditional three-step coding process to refine themes through initial, focused, and thematic coding (36).

The results of the personal interviews are presented as personal stories and narratives supported by verbatim statements (40-60). The researcher created an engaging table that summarizes the key themes and suggestions coded from the interviews (58). Key overarching factors, which were identified as leading participants to foster care, were: abuse, drugs, and running away from home. Participants mentioned some positive components of being in foster care, including structure, support, and available therapy. However, the participants mentioned a number of challenges and disappointments in foster care living including: “prison” feel, geographical remoteness, and loss of the feeling of control/ agency in one’s own decisions. Finally, sample members offered the following suggestions to make the foster care experience better: clearer communication, more privacy, family structure with activities, and equality of treatment by staff to all residents.

In the discussion of research results, the author noticed that the retrospective testimony of those in foster care may have allowed the participants the opportunity to reflect on their experiences after praxis and time; and participants seemed to have gained an appreciation of the care they received while in foster care (61). The participants agreed on the importance of a family environment as a component of foster care (62) and that relational permanence in this environment is a challenge. Participants also noted the desire for more agency in personal decision-making (63), as well as the feeling of a “lost childhood” through the involvement in foster care. In comparing this data with the review of literature presented in the second chapter of the dissertation, three thematic norms – family home, structure, and a committed and caring staff – were discovered to be in agreement with the literature. However, the data does suggest that participants cautioned against too much structure leading to a “prison-like” feel in the foster-care environment and the need to balance safety of the children with their desire for personal freedom (64-66). Finally, the researcher suggests that this vein of research should be continued by increasing the sample to include a greater depth and breadth of experiences (66).