

# Hidden among the under-represented: Foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education

by

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## Abstract

The pathway to and through post-secondary education begins in early life. Individuals require academic preparation, to be made aware of post-secondary options, become engaged in the processes and procedures necessary for enrolment, transition to their studies, and persist to graduation.

This exploratory study investigated the experiences of Ontario's foster youth (FY) as they navigate this pathway. Viewing the issue of FY post-secondary under-representation, and their overall access and persistence, through theories of social reproduction, The Capabilities Framework, cooling-out, and resilience, it posed the question of whether or not FY experience equitable opportunity to attend and succeed in higher education. Semi-structured interviews asked what barriers and supports foster youth experience throughout their post-secondary educational journeys in Ontario. Four foster youth in addition to three child welfare workers, three child welfare experts, and one child welfare advocate shared insights reflective of findings in the literature. Though this study's findings are introductory, they align with previous research and point to the need for additional, consistent, and efficacious educational and child welfare supports to encourage, prepare, and help FY access and persist within post-secondary education.

This study also asked what the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs) do to address FY under-representation and support greater rates of access and persistence by the demographic. Programs, services, and supports offered by Ontario's 22 English-speaking CAATs were reviewed to determine how the system directly and indirectly supports FY, and make recommendations for improvement. Once FY are enrolled in post-secondary education, this research points to the need for greater, more tailored and responsive programming, services, and supports in Ontario's colleges.

Overall, this study highlights gaps in data collection on foster youth outcomes after they age-out of child welfare, the need for more research into the post-secondary experiences of youth in the province, and the importance of informed policies and practices in child welfare and post-secondary education in order to advance foster youth post-secondary opportunities and attainment.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This research explored Ontario foster youth (FY) and former foster youth (FFY) access to, and persistence within post-secondary education (e.g., college, apprenticeship, university, technical schools, etc.). Through an qualitative exploratory research design, the study collected and examined demographic, access, and persistence data and explored barriers and support factors involved in both access and persistence as reported by a sample of FY/FFY (hereafter collectively referred to as FY), child welfare workers, child welfare experts, and child welfare advocates across Ontario.

The study also engaged in an overview of current Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT) initiatives, services, and access programs that may provide support to these learners, identified research-informed implications for additional initiatives, services, and programs, tailored to meet the needs of this unique, and underrepresented group, and elucidated further research needed.

I reviewed relevant Canadian and international literature, engaged in e-mail communications with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) and the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU), and discussed research with experts in the field of social work (i.e., AdoptOntario and Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies) and family law (i.e., Justice Marvin Zuker). From these communications, it appears that this study is one of the first higher education research studies in Ontario, and in Canada, conducted with and for this population. As such, this study addressed a concerning gap in the literature.

In this chapter I introduce and explain the context surrounding the issue that my research problematized and addressed, clearly articulate the issue itself, explain the purpose of the research, provide both a professional and personal rationale for the research, identify the specific

investigative questions that guided the study, and embed these in theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The scope, and limitations of the study are also identified and discussed.

In Chapter Two I outline, critique, and analyze literature and research I reviewed relevant to the FY post-secondary experience (in advance of access through to program completion). Most of the literature is derived from studies in the United States, as I was unable to find many studies originating in Canada. Following the literature review, in Chapter Three I clearly present the research design and methodology I used for this study. In Chapter Four I discuss the findings in relation to the specific Research Questions that drove this study. And, finally, I present the conclusions and implications of the findings Chapter Five.

## **Background of the Problem**

In collaboration with the Ontario Looking After Children Project (OnLAC), operating through the Centre for Research on Education and Community Services at the University of Ottawa, provincial child welfare workers have responded to survey questions about the youth they supported. These data provided the MCYS, and the public, with information on the status of our children in care and acted as an assessment of Ontario's child welfare system and services. In the most recent report "Good Parenting, Good Outcomes: Ontario Provincial Report (Year 13)" (Miller & Flynn, 2014), data were collected on 1,894, 16-21 year old youth and young adults, 2,662, 10-15 year old youth, and over 2,100 younger children in the care of or supported by Ontario's child welfare system.

In the older group of youth, data were collected around post-secondary education expectations, aspirations, and completion. In that report, Table 5.10, titled "Highest level of education completed (ages 18-21 years)" (Miller & Flynn, 2014, p. 19), only 5% of the sample had graduated from a College of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT) and, even more

concerning, only 1% had graduated from a university program. When you consider that 43% of the sample had a Grade 11 education or less, these numbers become more disconcerting. All of these percentages also greatly contrast the levels of education foster youth hoped to achieve. In that same report, Miller and Flynn found that of the 16-22 year old youth polled, 39% indicated they wanted to go to college and 18% wanted to pursue a university education (p. 18).

Unfortunately, these statistics are consistent with what has been well established in other countries. Extensive research and data collection on FY post-secondary enrollment and attainment in the United States and the United Kingdom has indicated that FY face considerable challenges in the attainment of foundational education and are vastly underrepresented in higher education, experiencing barriers to both access and persistence (e.g., Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek & Fogarty, 2012; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Kirk & Day, 2011; Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen & Colvin, 2007; Jackson & Ajayi, 2007; Merdinger, Hines, Osterling & Wyatt, 2005; Okpych & Courtney, 2014). Furthermore, as a recent Conference Board of Canada report points out, “Canada collects remarkably little data on foster children as they age out of care...there are virtually no official national surveys to monitor their progress after they leave the system” (Conference Board of Canada, 2014, p. 6).

Over a decade ago, Tweddle, in her report, “Youth Leaving Care - How do they fare?” (2005), reviewed international research that examined outcomes for FY who had aged-out of care, making recommendations to the Canadian government. Consistent with what I found in my review of the literature, Tweddle states,

Canada does not have the capacity to track the outcomes of youth as they leave care, nor can our programs identify the types of interventions showing the most promise in helping them to achieve better outcomes. More needs to be done to address the needs of this small, but very vulnerable population. (p. 3)



My initial inquiries for data from both the MCYS and the MTCU on the numbers of FY accessing and persisting in Ontario's colleges were not successful. Each ministry indicated that it collects no data on the numbers of FY pursuing a college education. The person I spoke with at the MCYS did not mention the OnLAC report identified above, even though it was a MCYS initiative. Perhaps this is because the data collected regarding post-secondary participation were limited, or because of its earlier publication date (2005) the person was not aware of the report?

In 2009, a watershed moment occurred for youth in the system when 14 Crown Ward Education Championship Teams (CWECTs) funded by the MTCU were assembled in Ontario communities. These CWECTs created resources and supported FY in transition to higher education. The teams were given \$150,000 to start-up in their first year and were a partnership of Children's Aid Societies, school boards, post-secondary institutions, employment services, and the government (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2009). A website, YouthCAN (Communication, Advocacy & Networking) was also established and focused on providing information and support to youth in educational transitions. The teams and the site were designed for youth in, and aging out of care, to provide essential support with college and university transition.

In 2013, there were 21 CWECT teams across the province (Youth Leaving Care Update: Policy and Program Design, October 1, 2013). Despite the fact that the initiative was facilitated through the MCYS and the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) it appears there has been little centralized organization. The affiliated YouthCAN site provides support and describes the annual conference for youth in care. The 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference was held in 2015 at Humber College. The 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, held from August 8-10, 2016, was co-hosted by McMaster University in Hamilton and the YouthCAN conference webpage describes the

conference goal as “...to expose high school youth in care to post-secondary options and career opportunities....to develop leaders, build character, motivate and inspire youth in care to make their own successful story through communication, advocacy, and networking opportunities (YouthCAN conference, 2016, para 1).” The annual conference is largely staffed by former youth in care. I found no data on the impact of this annual conference.

Even though individual researchers (e.g., Finnie, 2012) and national and provincial reports have brought attention to the issue of FY access and persistence in post-secondary education, it is clear that more research is needed to inform policy and practice, and to ultimately improve post-secondary access and attainment rates among FY. As American researchers Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005) state, “Although former foster youth are among those least likely to attend college, the attainment of a college degree could contribute to their future financial stability and the promotion of enhanced developmental outcomes throughout adulthood (p. 382).”

### **Statement of the Problem Situation**

The problem my research investigated is multifaceted and complex. The primary issue is that Canada’s FY appear to be accessing higher education at much lower rates than the average population. According to Robson (2018) nearly 70% of young people in Ontario continue on to post-secondary education following high school (Ontario 360, Policy Papers, para. 3), and according to the latest census, in 2016, 54% of Canadians 25-64 years of age had obtained either college or university qualifications (Statistics Canada, 2017). In this province, FY enrol in PSE at an alarmingly low rate of around 50% of the participation rate of the general population (Conference Board of Canada, 2014). This is highly problematic for their futures. FY are an already disadvantaged group who often experience multiple intersecting inequities in society. For

example, there is an over representation of Indigenous children in care within Canada (Conference Board of Canada, 2014). Children in the system are also more likely to have few to no familial supports, often struggle with significant emotional, behavioural, and learning challenges, and have usually experienced educational disruption, poverty, abuse, neglect, and/or domestic violence (Miller & Flynn, 2014; Day, Reibschleger, Dworsky, Damashek & Fogarty, 2012). As Finnie (2012) identifies, “what we do know is that equalizing post secondary education opportunities is central to equalizing life chances for children in care (p. 1170).”

Because of inadequate research into post-foster-care life and educational outcomes for this population across the country, we have not been able to fully understand or make conclusions regarding this limited access. Therefore as a society we lack the ability to respond with legitimate and meaningful actions that could assist our FY in experiencing better life and employment outcomes through improved access to and success in our higher educational systems.

For those Ontario and Canadian FY who do access post-secondary education (PSE), we know very little about what helps these learners to persist and experience success in their studies- also due to a paucity of research in the Canadian context. In this study I sought to gain insights into the actual lived experiences of this population to examine our policies, current initiatives, services, and programs to ensure adequate responsiveness and support to address any issues identified.

### **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this research study was to explore and describe data related to FY access to and persistence within PSE in Ontario. Barriers to access and persistence, and conversely factors that support access and persistence, were identified and discussed. Based on the findings,

specific CAAT initiatives, services, policy, and programming that can assist this population were examined and research-informed implications for additional FY targeted supports were identified.

Attending and experiencing success in PSE could play a crucial role in lifting FY out of poverty and into opportunity. Through the application of research findings to practice and policy this research has the potential to create life-altering opportunities for one of Canada's marginalized populations.

As a population, FY are not only under-represented in higher education but also under-represented in the literature/practices/initiatives related to all underrepresented groups in Canadian higher education; they are a hidden demographic. For example, the recently released Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) report titled "The Recruitment of Underrepresented Groups to Ontario Colleges: A Survey of Current Practices" (Stonefish, Craig & O'Neil, 2015), the designation of FY, or any other term used to describe youth in care, such as society wards, or crown wards, is completely absent. The purpose of my study was to raise the awareness of this socially disadvantaged population with the hope that it may lead to some positive interventions.

### **Study Rationale/Significance**

This study was well warranted because it addresses a huge gap in the literature and the findings contribute to the academic and social discourse on the unique inequalities and challenges facing FY, a vulnerable population, with respect to one specific and important aspect of their lives, their participation in post-secondary education.

As publicly-supported institutions, we must ask if our post-secondary institutions and programs are reaching all of our citizens, and providing quality and supportive educational programming which meets the needs of diverse learners.

Post-secondary institutions and programs exist for students, and students need higher levels of education for greater employment opportunities and economic stability in their lives. The Ontario Child Welfare Report, the last of which was completed in 2014, identified that there were approximately 5,600 Ontario youth aged 16 and older in care in 2013 (Ontario Child Welfare Report, 2014, p. 12). As a demographic, this group does not appear to have sufficient access to or equality of opportunity to complete higher education. This raises several questions. Are FY a group of potential learners whom our higher education systems have largely disregarded? Are we letting down an important and vulnerable segment of our young people and limiting their potential? In Ontario, only approximately 44% of FY graduate from high school compared to 81% of the general population (Conference Board of Canada, 2014). These greatly divergent statistics contribute to fundamental inequalities and an opportunities vacuum for FY.

There is also an over-representation of Indigenous youth in care. According to Statistics Canada, in 2011, there were approximately 30,000 children under 14 years of age in foster care. Of these children, nearly 50% were Indigenous, yet Indigenous children comprised only around 4% of the overall Canadian population. (Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: First Nations People, Metis and Inuit, 2011). In Ontario, Indigenous children and youth represent 3% of the population but more than 18% of those in care (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2014, p. 14). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015), under the section on Education, states “We call upon the

federal government to develop with Aboriginal groups a joint strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians (Item 7, p. 1-2).”

In November 2017, in response to Statistics Canada’s report that over 4,300 Indigenous children four years of age and younger were in care, the federal Minister of Indigenous Services, Jane Philpott, called this over-representation of indigenous youth a “humanitarian crisis”.

Minister Philpott equated it to the residential school system’s removal of children and youth from their homes and cultures (CBC News, November 2, 2017), and called for a meeting of the provinces’ Indigenous Child and Family Services to address the crisis which she saw as primarily an outcome of poverty. The first of these emergency meetings was held on January 25-26, 2018, and a report has been produced (McKaye, 2018). The report indicates that the causes of over-representation of Indigenous youth in care and possible solutions were the focus of the panel sessions and collaborative discussions. The voices of elders, grandmothers, and youth were all included in the meetings, and many stories were heard. During the meeting Minister Philpott shared the six federal government commitments to system reform to address the over-representation of Indigenous children and youth in care in Canada. They read as follows:

1. Continue to fully implement the orders from the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal including Jordan’s Principle, and reform First Nations child and family services including moving to a flexible funding model.
2. Work with our partners to shift the focus of programming to culturally-appropriate prevention, early intervention, and family reunification.
3. Work with our partners to support communities to draw down jurisdiction in the area of child and family services, including exploring co-developed federal legislation.
4. Participate and accelerate the work at tripartite and technical tables that are in place across the country in supporting reform.
5. Support Inuit and Métis Nation leadership in their work to advance meaningful, culturally-appropriate reform of child and family services.
6. Create a data strategy with provinces/territories and Indigenous partners to increase inter-jurisdictional data collection, sharing and reporting to better understand the rates and reasons for apprehension. (Government of Canada, January 26, 2018)

The outcome was that First Nations, Metis, and Inuit leaders, along with the federal, provincial, and territorial governments made a commitment to take action to address this serious problem. The establishment of a working group was proposed and 14 specific calls to action were developed for the various levels of government and First Nations, Metis, and Inuit leadership (McKaye, 2018).

Learn Canada 2020, a national agreement and joint declaration between provincial and territorial Ministers of Education (Orders, 2010), also identified access to PSE as one of the four pillars crucial to enhancing the nation's educational system, its citizens' economic and social prospects, and preparing for the future. In a democratic society with a knowledge economy, education should not be a privilege afforded only to those with economic, social, cultural, and familial capital (Bourdieu, 1990).

### **Researcher's Personal Rationale**

From a young age I have worked with and volunteered in organizations serving populations traditionally disenfranchised. I have always had a strong social justice inclination and actively pursued both personal and professional paths to get involved and contribute to social change. I am a passionate advocate for those who are marginalized. One of these groups is foster youth.

Although I am a privileged white woman, as a daughter of, sister to, and mother of former foster youth, I have extensive first-hand experience with the complex challenges faced by those who have spent time in Ontario's foster care system. On an intimately personal level I have witnessed the socio-emotional, attachment, self-efficacy, and identity struggles of my family members. Although my family members were adopted (at differing ages and in different ways-

kinship vs. public) and did not “age-out” of the system, there are thousands across this country who never find permanence before emancipation.

At the age of 14, due to maternal mental illness (resulting in my mother’s institutionalization and a permanent move away) I became a substitute primary caregiver to my three siblings-ages 12, 8, and 7, two of whom were foster children adopted by my family four years previously. I was a highly parentified youth experiencing many of the challenges of youth in the system. I threw myself into work to help pay for our food, phone bill, and basic necessities and dedicated myself wholly to school the rest of the time, determined to go to university and become successful.

Professionally, I have also supported and counselled youth in care through the Children’s Aid Society of Simcoe County (now called Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions) and court diversion programming at the Elizabeth Fry Society. For the past seven years, I have taught within, and coordinated, an Ontario college post-secondary access program (Community Integration through Co-operative Education) in which a high number of former crown wards, former foster youth, and current foster youth with disabilities are enrolled.

As a critical theorist, I approached this research study with the intent to give voice to those it concerns. This is fundamentally a study which was designed to assist in the construction of understanding around the issue of access and persistence in PSE by Ontario’s FY. This enhanced understanding, discovered through exploratory research, and a review of comparative literature, is intended to develop or improve supportive initiatives, services, and programming to meet the needs of FY and increase their successful participation in PSE. At the heart of this study is the transformative worldview which gives voice to the marginalized group of FY under investigation and “...contains an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of the



participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live, and the researcher's life" (Creswell, 2014, p. 38). However, it is also constructivist and pragmatic; the reality and truth about post-secondary education for the FY sample is constructed by each person's specific experiences and ways of thinking, and this research is intended to be used as a tool for positive change.

## **Research Questions**

The overarching questions for this study were "What are the perceived barriers and challenges for FY in accessing and persisting in PSE within Ontario?" and, conversely, "What are the perceived supports for FY PSE access and persistence in Ontario?" An investigation into these questions, with both sufficient breadth and depth was required to fully understand and articulate how post-secondary access and persistence rates among FY can be improved. This study also focused on the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology. I asked: "What are Ontario's CAATs currently doing to address FY under-representation and support greater rates of access and persistence by this demographic"? The specific research questions that drove this study, and information on who was asked to respond to them and how, are detailed in Chapter Three.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In investigating factors involved in FY under-representation and participation in Ontario's PSE institutions, I utilized and referred to a number of relevant theoretical perspectives primarily aligned with Bourdieu's theories of social reproduction.

I now present a brief overview of theoretical perspectives and concepts that I utilized to collect and analyze data related to FY PSE access and persistence. Each of these lenses were applied to interpret FY access and persistence, and the study's findings.

**Pierre Bourdieu's Theories on Social Reproduction.** Critical theorist Pierre Bourdieu formulated a strong sociological theory that helps to explain societal power dynamics and inequality that influence individuals. Bourdieu explained that status inequalities in society are passed down through the generations. He viewed social reproduction of inequality "...as an interplay of social structure, (collective) agency, and crucially, the internalisation of inequality that makes social disparities appear natural" (Wagner & McLaughlin, 2015, p. 209). The four main theoretical concepts he postulated to explain the process of social reproduction were capital, habitus, practice, and field (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). These concepts interact and influence one another to explain an individual's place and privilege (or lack thereof) in society. Symbolic violence, another of Bourdieu's constructs, must also be explored. All have relevance to the study and, used as a lens to view the under-representation of FY in PSE, facilitate the understanding of, and illuminate the power differential between individual access and persistence within PSE. These concepts and their relation to one another are described below.

**Capital.** Bourdieu differentiated three forms of capital-economic, social, and cultural. Access to and persistence in post-secondary education is not simply a question of an individual having access to economic capital or being able to financially afford post-secondary education (Batsche, Hart, Ort, Armstrong, Strozier & Hummer, 2014; Finnie, 2012); it is much more complex. Instead, it could be envisioned as an interplay between economic, social, and cultural capital; social capital refers to the interpersonal and societal networks and connections a person has or acquires (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Cultural capital, which includes educational and skill attainment, provides an individual with the tools necessary to navigate and flourish in certain environments (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

Finnie (2012) focuses on the importance of cultural capital; where society teaches a child from a young age to value PSE, academically prepares the child for PSE, and ultimately imbues a desire in that child to attend PSE. Education creates cultural capital as children and youth develop greater knowledge and skills, but not everyone starts at the same place, with the same capital holdings. Some children start with far more cultural capital than others based on social status and privilege, life experiences, and opportunities, while others gain far less. So, the level and attainment of cultural capital is not uniform across the classroom. For example, a child who experiences educational enrichment opportunities (aligned with the middle- and upper-class values and norms which imbue educational curriculum) all year long (e.g. museum and art gallery visits, historical re-enactments, trips to famous sites and new geographical destinations, outdoor education activities) may enhance their cultural capital holdings compared to a child who does not have the same opportunities. As Bourdieu (1990) astutely identified in his theory, the educational system is a key player in formalizing and supporting social inequality. He explained,

The educational system succeeds so perfectly in fulfilling its ideological function of legitimating the established order only because this masterpiece of social mechanics succeeds in hiding, as if by interlocking of false-bottomed boxes, the relations which, in a class society, unite the function of inculcation, i.e. the work of intellectual and moral integration, with the function of conserving class relations characteristic of that society. (p.199-200)

There is a hidden curriculum present in educational systems and institutions which holds up and validates middle - and higher - class norms, standards, values, and ways of thinking. Educational content is taught within this context, and formed by it, legitimizing the “rightness” of middle- and higher-class thought, behaviour, and approach. Children and youth who do not conform or fit in this hidden, yet pervasive and influencing model, develop less social and cultural capital, and may receive messaging that could affect their educational expectations and aspirations.

Okpych and Courtney (2014) highlight the importance of capital, stating that FY may be at a disadvantage as,

youth in foster care may also be more likely to come from families with limited economic, human, and social capital that are critical for educational advancement, and may be more likely to have resided in low resourced neighbourhoods and attend underperforming schools. (p. 25)

Disadvantage is not a choice, but an outcome of social inequality, where power and influence are afforded to the wealthy and middle-class who, regardless of intention, hold more resources and control. Access to power and a person's position in the social order is determined by capital (Garrett, 2013). Bourdieu described capital by comparing it to differential holdings in a game, where each player carries a different degree of power within the game, and to make plays, depending on their status relative to the pieces they hold. He stated,

We can picture each player as having in front of her a pile of tokens of different colors, each colour corresponding to a given species of capital she holds, so that her relative force in the game, her position in the space of play, and also strategic orientation to toward the game...the moves she makes, more or less risky or cautious, subversive or conservative, depend both on the total number of tokens and on the composition of the piles of tokens she retains, that is, on the volume and structure of her capital. (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004, p. 99)

In Bourdieu's theory, whether or not a child is exposed to a pro-education culture may be a reflection of the capital afforded to the people in that person's life and, through reproduction, to that child. Unequal access to resources creates inequity in capital holdings. In a society formed largely by the values and norms of the middle and upper classes who hold the clear majority of power, there may be a lack of privilege, and therefore capital, imposed on people who do not hold membership in those classes. It is important that we understand how the micro (individual experiences within a family unit) is affected by the macro (societal constraints and the production of privilege). If a family, and a young person, does not consider higher education, the

question we must ask is “Why?”. To simply accept this as a personal choice is to ignore the forces of societal programming regarding class and place. A former foster youth turned youth-development researcher, Seita, coined the term “family privilege” to describe the disparity in social-cultural capital between foster youth and youth from stable families (cited in Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2012, p. 81). Whitman (2018), in his exploration of best practices and supports for foster youth in higher education describes how a lack of family privilege in the college environment or field may manifest itself. He shares that “...privileges such as an advocate, fallback housing, somewhere to go for the holidays, someone to borrow money from, someone to send them care packages, and an emotional confidant do not exist for most of foster youth students” (p. 87). These deficits in familial privilege place foster youth outside of the norm and may limit their capital resources; this is significant as capital affords and facilitates greater integration and success within the field. Bourdieu (1996) stated,

...the family in its legitimate definition is a privilege instituted into a universal norm: a de facto privilege that implies a symbolic privilege-the privilege of being *comme il faut*, conforming to the norm and therefore enjoying a symbolic profit of normality...one of the major conditions of the accumulation and transmission of economic, cultural, and symbolic privileges. (p. 22-23)

Bourdieu viewed these privileges, or forms of capital as interacting and dependent on one another. Edgerton and Roberts (2014) describe the interplay between the varying forms of capital in this way:

...economic capital affords the time and resources for investment in the development of children’s cultural capital, which is associated with future educational and occupational success and, in turn, contributes to the accumulation of capital. Socioeconomic success is also associated with greater social capital in that one’s social network becomes broader, more influential, and more conducive to opportunity and further enhancement of one’s other capital stocks. (p. 195)

**Habitus.** Habitus is deeply embedded in each person. According to Wacquant (2005), Bourdieu's concept of habitus encapsulates "the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them" (Wacquant 2005, p. 316). So, habitus refers to the way in which people become socialized to feeling, thinking about, and interacting with the world around them. For Bourdieu, habitus "...is rooted in family upbringing (socialization within the family) and conditioned by one's position in the social structure" (Edgerton & Roberts, p. 195). A person's habitus is a conditioned way of thinking or perceiving the social world, deeply rooted in and influenced by the stratification of power in that world and it can lead a person to accept societally-imposed limits and confines as natural (Wagner & McLaughlin, 2015). Do people question what they see as natural? Are they aware of how they have been shaped? Do they have an appreciation for how their own habitus, built on socially assigned personal capital-economic, social, and cultural-is produced? "Expectations generated by habitus depend on capital holdings, either inherited from the family or accumulated in a career" (Swartz, 2002, p. 655). Can they become aware of how and why they think in certain (societally prescribed) ways and then choose to think, and act, differently than expected or desired? Bourdieu indicated that habitus can be countered, however with difficulty as it functions like an a priori conclusion. He stated,

Habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable but not eternal! Having said this, I must immediately add that there is a probability, inscribed in the social destiny associated with definite social conditions, that experience will conform to habitus, because most people are statistically bound to encounter circumstances that tend to agree with those that originally fashioned their habitus. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004, p. 133)

Involvement in the child welfare system often means FY experience family instability.

This raises many questions. How does their family background and experience within child

welfare inform their habitus? Though Bourdieu identified family as a social construct, he recognized that it is seen as natural and universal, and as such the family exerts great importance as a socialization agent in forming individuals and their habitus. He called the family a “structuring structure” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 21), one that acts as an internalized collective in the individuals within it and reproduces itself to maintain the social order. It also acts as foundational in our structuring and understanding of the social world and influences how we navigate and form relationships (Bourdieu, 1996). Does a FY’s family then, and our society’s socialization of FY through interaction with child welfare, inculcate in them an understanding of their place; how they should think and feel, where they do and do not belong, and what they can and cannot do? Are we sending and reinforcing messages, a hidden curriculum that is different for, and specific to, our FY-which communicates that successful post-secondary attainment is not probable, possible, or encouraged, if you are in, or aging out of, the child welfare system? Do we tell, and even demonstrate to, young children in the system that they are not college or university material because they are foster youth or crown wards? As a society, are we raising FY with a different set of norms, values, and roles, and teaching them to think and feel differently about their abilities and higher education fit in comparison to their non-FY peers? These are all relevant questions as “habitus shapes the parameters of people’s sense of agency and possibility; it entails perceptual schemes of which ends, and means are reasonable given that individual’s particular position in a stratified society” (Edgerton & Roberts, p. 195). As Wagner and McLaughlin (2015) indicate, applying the concept of habitus to better understand society “...puts structural power relations and their reproduction into focus and problematizes them on a fundamental level” (p. 204). People internalize and accept their habitus, and this influences how

they think, feel, and behave-including the level of education they see as a fit for them and choose to pursue.

**Field and Practice.** Capital is afforded, and habitus developed, in the context of fields. In Bourdieu's theory a field refers to the norms that govern a specific social environment or sphere (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). For instance, child welfare and higher education would be fields; they are unique cultural environments with specific norms (i.e. for protection and for teaching and learning respectively), governance, and policy development, among others, both at the macro-sector wide level and the micro level-the individual agency or institution and its stakeholders. Fields are organized around specific forms of capital. For example, "...educational institutions not only validate certain kinds of knowledge and skills but are themselves shaped by the force of already legitimised social and cultural capital" (Wagner & McLaughlin, 2015, p. 203-4). In higher education there are processes and procedures specific to the post-secondary environment and an appreciation for, and an understanding of how to engage in, these would represent cultural capital. An individual's habitus and cultural capital in interaction with these processes or procedures constitute their practice (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus and field are all relevant to this study. How do Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus play out in the field of education? In a book entitled "Children's Bodies in Schools: Corporeal Performances of Social Class" (2014), Henry utilizes Bourdiesian theory to examine how inequity between children, in terms of educational opportunity and expectation, is created by teachers' perceptions of, and in response to, the physical comportment of children, or how they carry themselves in foundational education. According to Bourdieu, this is reflective of children's body hexis, a concept that describes the physical manifestation of social class. In Henry's words,



Body hexis is the corporeal performance of one's habitus, which is influenced by social class conditions growing up, and the fields in which one finds himself...Body hexis describes the way in which beliefs developed in one's habitus come to be corporeally performed and lived out. (p. 66)

So, the body of the child communicates class status as she interacts with the established norms for behaviour in the field of education. Then disparities between children and youth are created when educators treat them differentially based on how they carry themselves within this environment. If their physical comportment aligns with the rules, spoken and unspoken, about how to carry one's body and interact with others in classroom environments, the child or youth experiences an alignment between their cultural capital and the field of education; they have a stronger practice. If there is less of an alignment, they may be at a disadvantage.

Are FY disadvantaged in the field of PSE, as they may experience reduced economic, social, and cultural capital? How does this inequity in capital, and a habitus that potentially limits their educational expectations, influence their practice-the actions they take-regarding PSE and within PSE environments? This study aimed to address these questions.

**Symbolic violence.** According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (2000), symbolic violence involves the communication of dominance in the relationship between a dominator and the dominated. In symbolic violence the dominated party's power is symbolically usurped through an action which communicates their submissive position. This could include a subtle non-verbal communication like a questioning glance or quiet negative utterance, a belittling comment, a decision made on behalf of the dominated which affects them negatively, a media message, discrimination, even a physical attack. Even raw physical force "has a symbolic dimension" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2000, p. 172).

If those in positions of dominance within the fields of child welfare and education (i.e., child welfare workers, foster carers, teachers, counsellors, educational advisors etc.) communicate a message of FY inadequacy, difference, or inferiority (subtly or otherwise) this would be an act of symbolic violence, as it is designed to oppress-consciously or not. If this status of oppression is then internalized by FY it could be exceedingly limiting to their future potential, in the field of PSE, among others. For example, a FY may not consider PSE if they have internalized messages telling them they are not a fit for PSE. Alternatively, if they do access PSE and are subjected to symbolic violence that questions their right to access, or ability to succeed, they may struggle to persist. Without adequate social and academic supports communicating a contrary message, do FY experience symbolic violence and hence greater rates of attrition than their non-FY peers?

FY are often victims of actual or symbolic violence in their homes before entering care. If a parent, sibling, or anyone else in their social environment has dominated over them and contributed to a fracture in their power and opportunities this, in my interpretation, is symbolic violence (Ferguson, 2016). If a young person grows up in a home environment where they consistently submit to others this can become internalized and act as a frame of reference, and action, for future relationships. In the act of symbolic violence toward someone, both positions of dominance and subservience are communicated. As this message lodges itself in habitus, the submissive position of the dominated relative to those who have dominance over them can become accepted as natural or the norm (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2000). FY may also hold membership in groups who have experienced symbolic violence through societal prejudice and discrimination (e.g. Indigenous FY, FY who identify as LGBTQ2S). These identities create multiple intersecting inequalities all of which are subject to symbolic violence.

When persons are denied opportunity, subjected to ideology that emphasizes their lower social status, or have had their powerlessness or limited power reinforced at the hands of someone or something (e.g. an institution) they have been victims of symbolic violence.

**Conclusion on Bourdieu's framework.** Related to, and from a Bourdieusian perspective shaped by habitus, capital, field, practice, and symbolic violence, are the specific educational expectations and aspirations of FY. After all, “the relation to what is possible is a relation to power” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 4). Hoping to achieve higher education (aspirations) and their belief about whether or not they will be able to (expectations) are distinct yet equally important. “Both educational aspirations and educational expectations may be considered examples of academic-focused possible selves” (Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen & Colvin, 2011, p. 309). In the OnLAC study (Miller & Flynn, 2014), Ontario FY were asked about the levels of PSE they hoped to achieve (aspiration) and about the perceived reasons why they may not complete PSE (expectation). Although 38% 16-22 years-old FY surveyed indicated they aspired to complete college and 16% university, of the 18-21 years-old FY who responded many identified expected barriers to completion, such as health reasons or disability, lack of interest, financial situation, proximity of programs to home, and not having the requirements, among other obstacles (p. 19). From their investigation into the educational aspirations and expectations of foster youth in the United States, Kirk et al. (2011) found that all foster youth (n=895) had lower post-secondary expectations than aspirations and significantly lower educational aspirations than the non-FY (n=482). Only 43% of FY compared with 67% of non-FY identified a desire to obtain a four-year degree. Based on these finding, the researchers recommended “a deeper exploration of educational expectations...to erase the educational disparities which put former foster care youth at risk. Intervention programs may want to place increased focus on building expectations, in

addition to “pumping kids up” about college” (p.319). I interpret this form of intervention an attempt to explicitly reframe the habitus of FY.

**Burton Clark’s Theory of Cooling-out and Warming-up.** Burton’s Clark’s theory of cooling-out and warming-up (1960) is related to Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction and a FY’s educational expectations and aspirations. The cooling-out process involves an aided progression of less academically capable college students out of transfer/higher education. However, Clark agreed that the process could be appropriate, and argued that cooling-out is due to a combination of factors; open-door college admission policies, societal preference for having students identify vocational/educational paths only as they approach college age, the perceived lower status of vocational routes, and higher standards of student performance than are achievable by many who gain admission (Clark, 1960). Cooling-out involves a series of concrete steps to assist underperforming students in accepting that their aspirations, that is-their current program or transfer to higher levels of study-are not suited to their abilities. Instead, to retain them, cooled-out students are funneled into more suitable “terminal” programs. Students are supported and encouraged to realize that their idealized path is not realistic and encouraged to lower their expectations. Of course, from a Bourdieusian perspective, the question becomes; is this an individual student issue or one that is societal? Are those who are cooled-out less likely, based on their socialized habitus, to have the required capital for success in the field of higher education? Are we judging who is not a fit based on the field’s standards and required capital, without regard for the disparities in capital that may be held by students who are more likely to be cooled-out?

Clark focused on cooling-out as a process that occurs once students are enrolled in college. However, for the purposes of this study, we could extend Clark’s application and ask

whether FY in Ontario are cooled-out of (even thinking about) higher education long before many of them have the opportunity to attend PSE through the social reproduction of social inequality. Once enrolled in PSE, we can also ask how often FY are cooled-out once they are engaged in their studies. According to Hellmich (1993), “The cooling out process is fair, according to meritocratic principles, if factors extraneous to academic ability do not significantly predict which students are cooled out” (p. 17). However, if FY are being cooled-out, are they being cooled-out fairly or are other factors, related to inequity, at play?

In addition to cooling-out, colleges are also agents of warming-up (Clark, 1980). Citizens in and around college communities are warmed up to the possibility of a higher education (building aspirations). The warming-up process begins pre-entrance in a student’s consideration of post-secondary options. Applicants may be warmed-up to post-secondary education when it was not previously considered or aligned with an individual’s habitus.

So, in Clark’s theory educational institutions do both; cool-out (adjust expectations) and warm-up (build aspirations) of students. What are our institutions doing with FY? Are FY/FFY warmed up to the field of PSE? Do our institutions have marketing and recruitment strategies designed to warm-up this population of potential students? Or, are our institutions assisting in pre-emptive cooling-out, or cooling-out FY college students in greater numbers? What role do these concepts and processes play in higher education access and persistence, or practice, for FY? These are the questions I sought to explore in this study.

**The capabilities framework.** The capabilities framework is a person-centred perspective developed by economist Amartya Sen in 1979 (Reindal, 2009) and expanded on by Martha Nussbaum (Garrett, 2008). It is another critical theory that can be applied to understand FY access and persistence in PSE, and inform policy and practice to enhance this group’s

participation. At its core the framework is focused on an individuals' equity of opportunity and life quality as it is affected by society. As a group which participates in PSE at roughly half the rate of their non-foster youth peers (Conference Board of Canada, 2014), it is useful to apply a capabilities lens to better understand, and ultimately improve, rates of access and persistence by this under-represented group.

Capabilities theory defines a person's capabilities (or capability set) as "...opportunities to achieve particular states of being or to undertake particular activities" (Burchardt, 2004, p. 738). Sen's focus (1999) is on what people can be and do - termed functionings. Capabilities refer to potential, and functionings are actualized actions based on capabilities and choice.

Nussbaum (2000) developed the concept of capabilities further, into three divisible types that then interact and inform life opportunities and outcomes. Basic capabilities are peoples' innate abilities; the foundational building blocks for more advanced capabilities. Basic capabilities are innate to the individual. Then, the environment in which a child grows up and how their basic capabilities are nurtured, determine if and how these are further developed (or not). Internal capabilities then represent the product of the person's basic capabilities interacting with the environment. Internal capabilities are those built on a person's basic capabilities and nurtured through various life experiences such as education, exercise, training, social engagement. For example, a person's vocabulary is an internal capability; possible only with the basic capability of picking up on, and articulating speech and language, but refined in each person through their distinct environmental exposure and experiences. Lastly, combined capabilities refer to the opportunity a person has to act; to utilize or employ their internal capabilities as the option is available in their environment (Garrett, 2008). In capabilities theory

inequality can be conceptualized as people having an unequal opportunity to convert these capabilities into functionings. The individual must not only have the means to achieve certain goals but experience the right conditions (or conversion factors)-personal, social, and environmental-in order to make the choice (direct their agency) to employ their capabilities, and achieve their functionings (Bryson, 2015). Individuals essentially experience differences in access to all their capabilities within their capability set; the degree of ease of access may be affected by the environments in which they engage with the world and can even include messaging about themselves and their capabilities and agency that they receive from those who surround them. This has implications for policy development in higher education. If we want to consider access and persistence within higher education for an under-represented group, like foster youth, we can adopt capabilities focus. When the capabilities perspective is donned by those with the power to influence policy, they are "...actively guided to consider the complex range of influences on those for whom policy is intended" (Bryson, 2015, p. 557).

The capabilities approach recognizes that institutional/societal factors limit or diminish a person's ability to perform functionings; the external environment is important to a person's overall capabilities. It provides a balance between individual and societal factors, as in seeking to understand the contributions of both to the educational experiences of a person. Within the capabilities framework, both the individual and society are interacting, and the quality and character of the interaction determines whether the individual experiences equality of opportunity and well-being, or discrimination.

Applying the capabilities framework, post-secondary success is possible as two integral parties (both the student and institution) have the required components for action (internal capabilities) and have the opportunity to effectively interact (combined capabilities). The

individual has the capabilities required to achieve the combination of functionings (to engage in all of the being and doing required by the post-secondary process) and the external circumstances and capabilities, those in the institutional domain, are positioned in such a way that they can do so (Ferguson, 2017).

Capabilities thinking recognizes that barriers exist to peoples' full participation in society, and societal institutions must reflect on their role in building them and play a central part in breaking them down. Walker (2005) describes the capability framework as one that "...is about freedom and the development of an environment suitable for human flourishing" (p. 103). In an ideal case all potential post-secondary students have the freedom and capability to access and persist in a higher educational environment designed to meet their needs and help them achieve their potential. However, according to Sen (1999), "Individual freedom is quintessentially a social product" (p. 31). That is, our capabilities are shaped by society and our decisions and choices, our ultimate actions, are a reflection of this socialization.

This model can assist in understanding issues with access to higher education, student well-being, persistence, and inequality between groups of students in our post-secondary institutions. As Burchardt explains, "...disadvantage experienced by people with impairments is best understood in terms of a limitation of capabilities,...to do or to be various things in life, which may be constrained by personal characteristics and/or the social, economic and physical environment" (p. 742). As an access program coordinator, I interact with students with disabilities on a daily basis. Many of the students in the Community Integration through Co-operative Education (CICE) program have been, or are, foster youth. In my experience, the students who experience the most success in the program are those whose capabilities are nurtured; students who experience greater social and economic privilege, access to needed



resources, or those who are resilient, possess confidence in their agency, and who are strong self-advocates.

Could FY, through often diminished social and cultural capital, be a group considered to be “impaired” on another dimension and therefore experience limitations in their capabilities to access and persist in post-secondary? As Merdinger et al. (2005) identify, “the generally poor educational outcomes found among former foster youth likely are caused by numerous factors and stressors often associated with growing up in out-of-home care and transitioning to young adulthood” (p. 872). Utilizing a capabilities approach, the external environment, through improved government and institutional policies and practices, can build better services and supports to help FY experience greater educational opportunity and success. For example, Dworsky and Perez (2010) report that directors of campus support programs designed specifically for FY in the United States identify real

...concern about foster youth not having access to information about post-secondary educational options, college admission requirements, financial aid availability, or campus support programs. They [the directors] also lamented that foster youth are often not encouraged to pursue postsecondary education despite its importance to labor market success. (p. 258)

As Philibert, Allen, and Elleven (2008) emphasize, “Higher education must reassess the composition of their audience to ensure that they are meeting their needs” (p. 593). Ideally, this would involve not only an investigation into student capabilities, but also a review and revision of the capabilities of the institution-manifested in its policies, programs, services and supports-to meet diverse student needs.

**Resilience theory.** However, what explains good educational outcomes among FY, especially when it comes to PSE? How do some of these youth overcome the barriers and

stressors to achieve access and persistence in higher education? This is where literature and theory on resilience are relevant.

Foster youth often experience chronic adversity, or exposure to various life stressors “...over a considerable period of time and [that] may have a pervasive impact on a person’s life” (van Breda, 2018, para 16). Resilience describes an ability to persist and overcome barriers to achievement despite having the odds stacked against you. As Kirk and Day (2011) describe, “Resilience is a positive adaptation where difficulties-personal, familial, or environmental-are so extreme that society would expect a person’s cognitive or functional abilities to be impaired” (p. 1174). Resilience is conceptualized in many different ways in the literature but involves mediating protective factors that lessen the impact of negative life events, whether they be acute or chronic (van Breda, 2018). For example, based on the input of their study participants, Hines et al. (2005) found several interacting and dynamic protective factors at three different levels-in the individual, the family, and the system/community-which influenced FFY high school completion and post-secondary entry. Self-efficacy and the presence of a supportive adult or mentor are among the protective factors they identified.

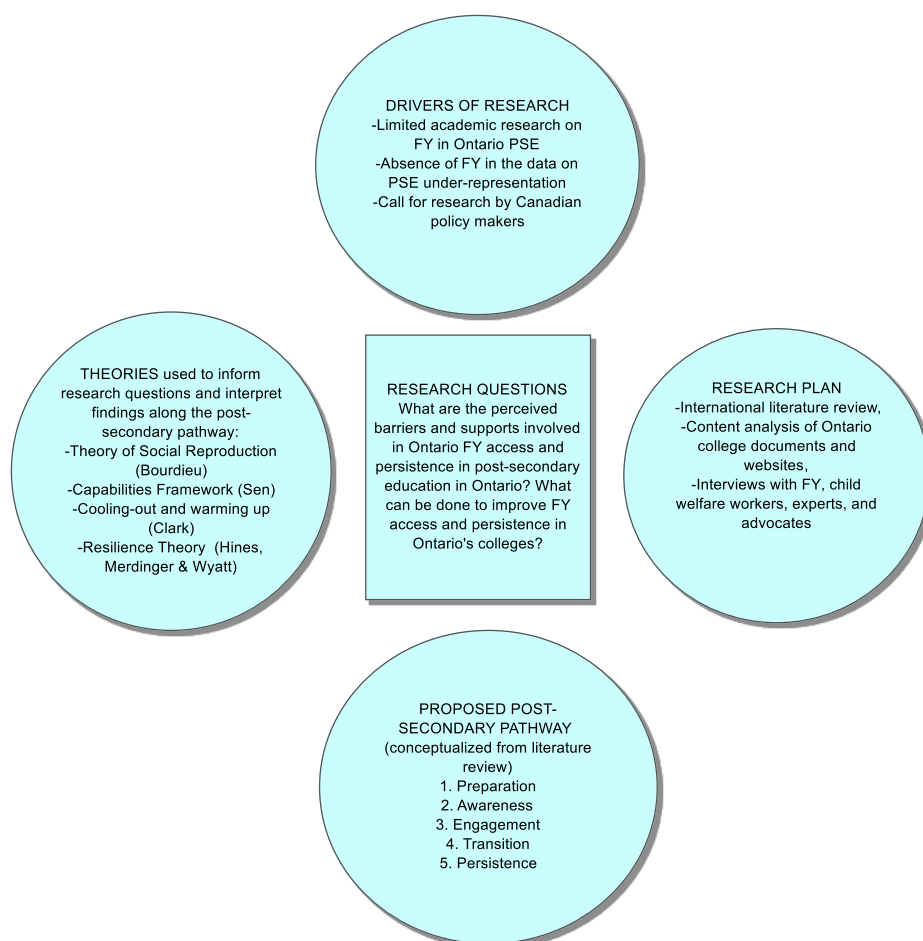
Zimmerman (2013), writes that resilience theory is a strengths-based approach to research that can inform practice related to adolescent health and wellbeing. He draws on his previous research to identify the positive variables which assist youth in overcoming hardship and avoiding poor behavioural, emotional, and health outcomes as promotive factors (p. 381). Promotive factors internal to the individual, such as self-efficacy, are categorized as assets, and those factors outside of the individual, for example supportive adults and programs, are resources. As Zimmerman (2013) states, “Assets and resources provide youth with the individual and contextual attributes necessary for healthy development” (p. 381).

Adverse experiences are present in the lives of all foster youth; at the very least they experience family disruption when they are placed in care. However, decisions to place children and youth in care are made only with a determination that they require protection (Zuker & Kirwin, 2015). By the time the child or youth is placed in care they have been exposed to maladaptive experiences and situations. The disruption of family stability, housing impermanency, and school moves, among many other realities of life in foster care, often mean that foster youth are exposed to chronic adversities across their childhood and youth (Finnie, 2012). As resilience theory suggests, promotive factors provide protection to youth. These factors “...operate to moderate or reduce the association between risks and negative outcomes” (Zimmerman, 2013, p. 382). As this is highly relevant to explore for foster youth, I examine adversity and protective factors in the individual (assets), and in the family and community (resources), both in the literature review and in the analysis of this study’s findings.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Although I did not utilize a single theory to inform my study, all of the theoretical perspectives and concepts outlined above are interrelated/intersecting and have relevance to the focus of this study - FY access and persistence in PSE. I have presented a graphic conceptualization of this study in Figure 1 below.

I believe that the post-secondary educational trajectories of FY can be framed by the intersection of these theoretical constructs. When I asked the overarching question “What are the barriers and supports to FY access and persistence in PSE within Ontario?” I believed that the FY, their caseworkers, child welfare experts, and advocates would point to factors, elements, and experiences that these theoretical constructs address or conceptualize. Figure 1 provides an overview of the intersecting variables and lenses that this study researched and addressed.



*Figure 1. Study Overview (©Copyright 2019 Renée J. Ferguson)*

## Scope of the Study

Initially, due to the limited research on this issue across the country, I wanted to complete a Pan-Canadian study. However, after speaking with Justice Marvin Zuker, a renowned Ontario court justice who has worked in family law and with this population for over 35 years, I decided to begin with Ontario. Firstly, Canada is vast and, like its higher education system, the child welfare system is decentralized – its jurisdiction is assigned by the Constitution to each province or territory. There are a number of qualitative differences between systems. To begin, I believe it is better to problematize the situation in one context and then extend future inquiry to comparative research based on an initial investigation. Secondly, the research has the potential to have greater

impact on its environment as it was focused on one province's child welfare and higher education systems.

However, my hope is that the findings of this Ontario-Canadian research will enable further research across the country that I can continue to investigate post-doctorally. I am passionate about all Canadian FY having access to higher education, not just those in Ontario. Since I found little research across Canada on this topic there is certainly a need for continued academic inquiry.

The scope of the data collected and analyzed was limited to FY and FY services in the province of Ontario as described by the participants. The Ontario government has recently increased post-secondary funding for FY who enrol in post-secondary education. The Living and Learning Grant through the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (Crown Ward Education, para. 1) extends support when the Continued Care and Support for Youth allowance ceases (at age 21) and provides financial support to youth 21-24 years of age who are enrolled full-time in PSE. There are also Ontario college and university grants available to FY students. Overall funding has increased since 2013. In terms of a watershed moment, this may be the closest at the intersection of child welfare and post-secondary policy. However, since this study was exploratory and investigated multifaceted barriers and supports in accessing and persisting in PSE by Ontario's FY, it did not constrain the primary research to participants involved in PSE either before or after the date of increased funding.

For the purposes of this study the terms "post-secondary education" and "higher education" are treated as synonymous and the concept includes all forms of recognized education following high school (apprenticeship, college, university etc.), regardless of high school educational attainment. Data were collected on the varied post-secondary experiences of

participants. However, there is a predominant focus on literature that addresses the college and university systems and this demographic. In my discussions of supports, programs, policies, and initiatives of Ontario's colleges receive the most attention, due to my own sector focus and a review of what is currently offered to support FY access and persistence, either directly or indirectly, by the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs).

I conducted research with both current and former foster youth 18-28 years of age in an attempt to capture a range of post-secondary exposure and experiences (e.g., direct entry vs. mature students) and to ensure any post-secondary experiences have occurred in the recent past. Aside from the lower and upper limits on age, the other exclusionary criterion was former foster youth who had been adopted. Though it is certainly not the case for all youth who are adopted, the expectation/assumption is that being adopted affords greater capital. In this study I intended to capture the perceptions of those experiencing the greater degree of disadvantage in terms of access and persistence to post-secondary. Those who have established family permanence, even though they may still experience barriers and suffer from foster-child related trauma, may not be in the same situation as youth without permanent and stable family support.

Data gathered from the study and the subsequent discussion of findings are only applicable to the province of Ontario. However, the findings should be of interest nationally. It is hoped that similar studies will occur across the country with the intent of improving higher education access and persistence for this under-represented group. Since this is one of the first academic studies of its kind with FY in Ontario the intent is that the findings will assist in understanding the under-representation of FY in higher education in this province and provide an impetus for further research.

## **Limitations of the Study**

The most important limitation of this study is the non-generalizability of the findings because of the research design (exploratory) and the purposive recruitment of key informants. Generalizability of findings is not the purpose of exploratory/descriptive design, rather it is a deep understanding of the issues explored. The study was designed to problematize the issue(s) of under-representation, suggest implications for policy/practice around these issues, and identify additional questions for further research.

The study included the analysis of data related to FY access to and persistence in Ontario post-secondary institutions. Though I made a great effort to reach a variety of FY through social media, connection with child welfare agencies, and provincial PSE advocacy networks, the eventual sample was small, and is not representative of FY in the province. There is also great variation in institutions and post-secondary education (colleges, universities, apprenticeships, training institutes, etc.) across the province and this is not reflected in the responses by FY. In addition, the child welfare workers and the supports they provide FY with post-secondary access and persistence are different. Though Ontario college initiatives, services, policies and programming that can assist FY were investigated, these may not be representative of all available supports across the Ontario college system or reflective of what the universities and other institutions provide.

Finally, as the primary researcher, I am cognizant of my bias. I am a white, middle-aged and middle-class female with a long history of experience with FY which is both a strength and a limitation in this study. It is a strength because I have deep insights into the issues addressed, but it may be a weakness as it inevitably colours the lens through which I approached this study and interpreted the findings. However, I made every effort to reflect on and check my stance to

ensure that I was as objective as possible. I also had three professionals review my analysis and interpretation of the data to validate my findings.

I believe that our systems - both child welfare and post-secondary - can do more to prepare, make aware, engage, and assist this group of learners so they transition successfully and persist in PSE. As a critical thinker, I am always open to shades of grey and to rethinking a priori conclusions. I greatly enjoyed the research process and looked forward to surprises along the way, especially if they countered my personal assumptions.

Despite all of these limitations, I am confident that, since I found little prior research specific to the topic of interest in Ontario/Canada, this study does contribute considerable value to the field and begins to address the gap I found in the literature.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I have described the purpose of the study, provided background information related to the problem and placed it within a geographical context, explained the rationale for the research-both from societal and personal perspectives, identified the overall research questions, introduced theoretical and conceptual frameworks for understanding the problem, and discussed the scope and limitations of the research. I now include the following list of terms and acronyms, and in the next chapter I describe my analysis of the relevant literature I reviewed.



## Glossary

**Access:** The ability to apply to, enrol, and attend an institution of higher education or a formal post-secondary program.

**Aging-out:** Foster youth begin their transition to independence after 16 with the goal of being independent by 18 years of age. The province and child welfare society in which the youth was involved are no longer responsible for their care. This is typically referred to as “aging-out”.

**Crown ward:** A child whose parent is the state. A child who was previously a society ward but who the court deems is in need of, and orders, full care, custody, and control without access to biological parents.

**Emancipation:** An alternative, and more formalized, term for aging-out (see above).

**Foster care:** A home environment provided to FY by trained foster parents or carers. There are different types of foster homes (i.e. group foster homes vs. single family foster homes). Regulated by the province’s child welfare agencies through the Ministry of Children and Youth Services.

**Foster youth (FY):** Youth and young adults currently living in foster care environments.

**Former foster youth (FFY):** Youth and young adults who have lived in (and have since voluntarily exited or aged-out/been emancipated from) foster care environments

**Higher education (HE):** Formal studies beyond the high school level.

**Persistence:** The continuance of post-secondary study through to program completion or transfer.

**Post-secondary education (PSE):** Formal studies beyond the high school level.

**Society ward:** When a child or youth is taken into the care of child welfare. The goal is to have the ward return to their biological parent(s) after a court-determined period during which the parent(s) have time to make positive change.

## Acronyms

**CAATs**-Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (Ontario’s colleges)

**CWECTs**-Crown Ward Education Championship Teams

**FY**-Foster youth

**MCYS**-Ministry of Children and Youth Services

**MTCU**-Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities

**OnLAC**-Ontario Looking After Children Project (Centre for Research on Education and Community Services, University of Ottawa)

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

To clearly and concisely organize and review the academic literature pertaining to FY access and persistence in higher education, I discuss relevant concepts under five headings that I identified in the academic literature on the post-secondary experience. Barriers and supports are identified under each of the following headings: Preparation, Awareness, Engagement, Transition, and Persistence. This chapter reviews foundational research into FY academic issues, in addition to expert testimony, policy papers, and other credible grey literature. All of this literature relates to the grounding theories outlined in this study as interpretive lenses.

Because I found a scarcity of research on this demographic with respect to PSE across Canada, this review consists primarily of relevant international literature that investigates the early and continuing barriers, and conversely the supports, to PSE access and persistence among FY. It would be beneficial to replicate many of these studies in our own country.

### **Barriers and Supports in Preparation**

Early life and educational experiences matter. In this section the literature considers factors in the educational histories and lives of FY that influence post-secondary access and attainment. Canadian children who are placed into government care in alternative living arrangements like foster homes are a highly vulnerable population. These youths have been removed from sub-standard life circumstances and situations that have compromised or posed a risk to their safety and security. However, even though transition to government care is intended to provide a more secure and stable environment, many foster youths continue to struggle with emotional, mental, academic, behavioural, and physical challenges during and post-care (Barker, Kerr, Alfred, Fortin, Nguyen, Wood & DeBeck, 2014).

Bourdieu (1990) identified that life experiences and the messages young people receive about themselves during socialization are crucial to the development of a person's habitus, that is, the way in which they become socialized to feeling, thinking about, and interacting within their social context. Social reproduction, the passing down of status equality or inequality, occurs during these years as young people learn where they fit into society from the world around them. This information is then internalized as habitus and can greatly influence the paths they take in the future. All children and youth in care experience adversity during their formative years. How does this adversity affect them in the short and long term?

In the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies' (OACAS) provincial report "In Ontario: Good Parenting, Good Outcomes" (Miller & Flynn, 2014), the reason for admission to care is provided for participants in the study sample. Caseworkers selected all circumstances that applied to the youth in their care. Among the 1,894 16-21-year-olds in the sample, 47% experienced neglect, 30% emotional harm, 23% physical harm and/or problem behaviours, 21% abandonment, 17% domestic violence, 8% sexual harm, and 10% other harms (p. 4). Almost half of these youth (49%) lived in foster care, 18% in group homes, 6% in kinship care, 18% on their own, and 9% in other living situations.

In a large-scale Swedish study (Berlin, Vinnerljung & Hjern, 2011), investigating the impact of academic performance in primary school on psychosocial problems in young adults who had left care, the authors concluded that to improve life chances for young people exiting care, society must treat their early education as critical, and effective supports must be in place to help them succeed. The authors concluded that

Youth who age out of long term foster care have very high excess risks of future psychosocial problems compared to other peers. Up to 55% of these over risks were statistically attributable to their dismal school performance...Poor educational performance should be regarded as a main determinant for care leavers' future life

chances. (p. 2496)

Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky and Damashek (2012) investigated the self-reported barriers to PSE in FY. Young adults, 15-23 years of age (n=43), who were in, or emancipated from, foster care in Michigan, and enrolled in high school or college, spoke in two fora before state policy makers about their educational experiences. In response to the question “What do you believe are barriers foster youth face in high school completion and college access?” (p. 1009), the youth identified several major hurdles: poverty, abuse, placement disruption and multiple moves, poor coordination between child welfare agencies and schools, disabilities, grade level repetition, and behavioural and emotional difficulties.

When the same youth were asked, “What suggestions do you have for policymakers to eliminate these barriers?” (p. 1010), eight major themes emerged from participant responses. These themes were the need for: permanent relationships with caring adults outside of school, connections with teachers and other adults at school who understand the unique challenges faced by FY, teachers to be sensitive to individual student learning needs, resources to address basic school-related needs, extracurricular activities, school safety, trauma-informed counsellors to support FY students with mental health issues, and preparation and support for independent living (p. 1010-1012). Foremost among these needs was that of a caring adult. The authors (Day et al., 2012) report,

Young people viewed the emotional support these relationships could provide as critical to their academic success. Equally important is the educational advocacy these adults could provide. This would help ensure that the educational needs of youth in foster care are being met. (p. 1012)

Research into the importance of mentoring for FY supports the young peoples’ assertion regarding the importance of a caring adult, and not just for education related tasks. When foster

youth age out of care, they often have little to no family support. Unlike their peers who have family supports, FY face developing into adults while dealing with all of the demands of adult life largely unaided. This can put them at risk for negative life outcomes. As Greeson, Usher and Grinstein-Weiss (2010) indicate,

Youth in the general population primarily observe, imitate, and model their parents when it comes to succeeding with developmental tasks...A natural mentor may also serve this critical purpose by role modeling. This implication is particularly salient for the former foster youth sample, given the decreased likelihood of them having appropriate adults available for such purposes (p. 575).

In Ontario, during the 2011 Hearings on Youth Leaving Care held at the provincial legislature, hundreds of youth in care in Ontario shared their experiences growing up in the child welfare system. The impetus for the Hearings, and gathering submissions from youth who were in or who had experienced care across the province, came from a small group of youth who engaged in initial talks with the, now former, Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, Irwin Elman. From discussions, it was evident to both the youth and Elman that there were concerning issues in the child welfare system, and that reform was needed. Elman pointed to the fact that the issues the youth raised were similar to those he had been hearing since the 1980s (Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2012).

In the culminating product of these Hearings, the voices of 183 youth were collected, and published in *My Real Life Book* (2012). A small team of youth, under the guidance of a research advisor, reviewed each submission and coded, organized, and analyzed the data. Six key themes emerged “We are vulnerable, we are isolated, we are left out of our lives, no one is really there for us, care is unpredictable, care ends and we struggle” (p. 7). These Hearings and the *My Real Life Book* publication are relevant to the discussion of PSE access and as they capture the voices

of older youth and young adults who have experienced, and/or who are exiting, care, at a time in their lives when PSE may be a consideration or accessed.

Dworksy and Perez (2010) also prefaced their research into pre-PSE entry campus support programs with a discussion of PSE barriers. They explained that FY are often not encouraged to pursue PSE by the child welfare system - possibly due to low expectations regarding educational success and social workers not trained in or aware of PSE options themselves. If social workers expect little of FY, or do not discuss PSE with FY, what influence does that have on a young person's educational pathway? How does a young person build educational aspirations and expectations for themselves if they are not being encouraged by those around them, or worse told they are not a fit?

Along with foster parents and teachers, social workers, as substitute parental authorities, are crucial disseminators of cultural capital to the young people in their care. Building confidence in youth in care, in their ability to attend and succeed in post-secondary education, and ensuring they have the information they need to prepare for that eventual access, helps to equalize their opportunity. In terms of the capabilities framework, it builds and improves on their capabilities and increases the likelihood that they will be able to convert what they desire to be and do, into functionings, or actions (Otto & Ziegler, 2006). Finnie (2012) states

What we do know is that equalizing post-secondary education opportunities is central to equalizing life chances for children in care, that "culture" is critical to this, and that we must make progress in this area to bring children in care more fully into mainstream society. (p. 1170)

Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen and Colvin (2011) studied educational aspirations and expectations among youth - both in the foster care system and those who were being raised in their families of origin with no child welfare involvement. These researchers found that along with the FY's

lower educational aspirations when compared with their non-FY peers, FY scored significantly lower than non-FY on measures of academic self-perception and parental support - two primary factors (identified by regression analyses) involved in predicting both educational aspirations and expectations. According to this study, not only do FY lack parental supports, they also struggle with how they perceive their own academic abilities - they have a tendency to view their academic abilities more negatively than non-FY (p. 317). If this is the case among FY in Ontario, and this self-perception is not countered in the schools or by foster care workers, how many FY are being underprepared for PSE or discounted as future students? If significant people in the lives of FY do not counter negative educational expectations and aspirations, in Bourdiesian terms, this generates the social reproduction of inequality; a contribution to a habitus that communicates that FY are not fit for higher education (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004).

However, according to the Ontario Provincial Report (Year 13), among the Ontario Association for Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) youth sample, it is unclear if self-perception of academic ability is a concern (there is no comparison group of non-FYs and no credible data on actual FY academic performance with which to compare the ratings). When asked to subjectively rate their feelings about their own school success, 38% of youth 10-15 years of age (n=2,662) and 30% of youth 16-17 years of age (unidentified, a segment of the 1,894 16-21 year olds in the sample) indicated they were doing very well or well in school. Seven percent of youth 10-15 years of age and 12% of youth 16-17 years of age indicated they were doing poorly in school. Those remaining indicated average performance in school. However, when the caregivers of these same youth were asked to subjectively rate their FYs' school success, the numbers changed. Among caregivers of the 10-15 year olds, 20% (compared to 38% of the youth) were identified as doing very well or well, and 19% as poorly (compared with 7% of the youth).

Among the caregivers of the 16-17 year olds 21% (compared to 30% of the youth) were identified as doing very well or well and poorly (Miller & Flynn, 2014, p. 16). That is, caregivers rated youth as doing less well overall than the youth rated themselves. This incongruence raises the question of why there is a disparity in perception. Do FY and their carers define academic success differently? Are their differences in educational expectations?

Dworsky and Perez (2010) also pointed to frequent placement instability experienced by FY in elementary and secondary education. These moves disrupt FY's academic readiness and potentially result in their being misplaced and unable to access college preparatory courses. In Ontario, this might mean a student is placed in a locally developed or learning skills stream in high school when they are capable of applied level work and require applied credits for college entry. This lack of academic preparation then translates into a deprivation in the development of their capabilities and/or a decrease in their ability to act on and realize their established capabilities, lessening their opportunity to expand their educational attainment (Nussbaum, 2000). As Otto and Ziegler (2006) indicated, "education might be a means to expand capabilities, a means to convert assets into capabilities and it might also be considered as a capability itself" (p. 279). If FY are maximally educationally prepared, their opportunities for higher levels of education expand, and they are more likely to access and persist in post-secondary education. If, on the other hand, they experience inadequate educational preparation, the end product is diminished capability and cultural capital, with FY lacking the skills and knowledge needed to support higher education success. Many studies "...provide clear evidence that children who become wards of the state and are served by foster care systems fail to complete high school at alarming rates and are therefore unable to access higher education opportunities" (Sim, Emerson, O'Brien, Pecora & Silva, 2008, p. 112).



In a York University study of the educational pathways and opportunities available to high school students enrolled in the Toronto District School Board (Parekh, Killoran & Crawford, 2011), extensive statistical analysis revealed opportunity restrictions for students from lower-income households, students whose parents did not complete university programming, and students who had utilized special education services. The authors point to these findings as evidence of "...a marketized system that is reproducing the embedded inequities present in Ontario's society as a whole – a system that apportions resources to students who mirror the identity of those who already have economic power and privilege" (p. 27). This is an example of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction at play. FY as a group often experience all three of the above criteria related to disadvantage. They are often born into lower income families, with birthparents who lack formal higher education; they may have learning challenges, academic disruption between care placements, and disabilities, and often do utilize special education services. If we map the same criteria in this study (Parekh et al., 2011) on to the FY population, these multiple intersecting inequalities experienced by FY (in addition to other possible disadvantages) may determine inequitable educational opportunities. FY may experience diminished capital for, and a socialized habitus that communicates a lack of fit in, higher levels of education. It would be interesting to obtain greater sampling specifics from this research to determine how many youths in the study sample were FY.

In my personal communication with The Honourable Justice Marvin A. Zuker, of the Ontario Court of Justice, who presided over family courts for over 30 years, an additional barrier to PSE is created by the fact that many FY in Ontario elect to terminate their wardship or foster care status at 16 years of age. In doing so, they no longer receive society support for their basic living needs, let alone further education, and are entirely on their own. Justice Zuker expressed

an interest in knowing the numbers of voluntarily terminations of care as there is currently no reliable data. High school dropout rates are also very high among this group so preparing to access PSE is not even a consideration (Personal communication, Judge Marvin Zuker, February 19, 2016).

Nevertheless, some FY do go on to attend PSE. Jackson and Ajayi (2007) studied young people in care who went on to university in the UK. They identified foster-carers as a support to young people, assisting in post-secondary preparation, and helping them to access and persist within PSE. In their interviews with youth in care, they learned of the many benefits positive foster-carers provided. Their study concluded that “Foster families can play a crucial role in raising aspirations, enabling young people to achieve the qualifications they need to access further and higher education and supporting them through their degree courses” (p. 72). Of course, this is assuming the foster care placement is positive. Not all placement experiences are positive or involve a supportive foster parent. However, if they are positive, capital and capabilities for higher education may be expanded.

What are other early indicators that a child/youth in care may successfully access and complete PSE? In studies of resilience, and FY post-secondary success, individual factors are one piece of the puzzle. Merdinger, Hines, Osterling and Wyatt (2005) profiled American FFY who succeeded in PSE in the Pathways to College study. These researchers found that the youth who experienced academic success were intelligent, often identified as gifted in their elementary school years, and were enrolled in college track courses to prepare them in high school. Retrospectively, these youths were identified well before post-secondary as having potential to pursue a college or university education. There is no detail regarding who identified them or helped them access the appropriately levelled high school courses to prepare for higher

education. In addition, all of the youth reported enjoying school. The authors identified that school played a larger role than simply preparing these students academically, as “...throughout childhood and continuing into adolescence, school was often the only stable and supportive place where they were able to find escape and refuge” (p. 389).

In semi-structured interviews with 19 FFY who successfully completed post-secondary studies in California, Hass, Allen, and Amoah (2014) investigated turning points (events the youth considered significant in providing opportunities and changing their own life’s direction). The qualitative data amassed by the interviews assisted the authors in creating a conceptual model that explains how turning points in these young peoples’ lives activated opportunities. The authors explain that there was an interaction between three crucial players; the youth themselves (who had a sense of autonomy), supportive people (who acted as essential social supports to the youth), and the environment (which was safe). When all of these came together during a turning point, that is a period when the youth were facing an opportunity to change their lives, they facilitated that opportunity. The authors compare the interactions between these different components of resilience to those identified by Hines et al. (2005), who found that interaction “...between an internal locus of control, social support, and supportive systems played a key role in youth in foster care gaining entry into higher education” (p. 391).

### **Barriers and Supports for Awareness**

For people to make the decision to attend PSE they must be made aware of their opportunity and the options available. Post-secondary education must be demystified and treated as a real possibility, a goal to be achieved. Following their qualitative review of 10 diverse pre-entry college support programs designed specifically for FY to help them access and persist in

higher education, Dworsky and Perez (2010) concluded that there are many challenges to assisting FY in PSE. They state,

To begin with, program directors expressed concern about foster youth not having access to information about post-secondary educational options, college admissions requirements, financial aid availability, or campus support programs. They also lamented that foster youth are often not encouraged to pursue postsecondary education despite its importance to labor market success. (p. 258)

If we are not encouraging FY to think about and plan for PSE, what are we communicating about their capabilities? Why might FY not have access to the essential information necessary to pursue PSE? In studying this population, it is very important to recognize that, “most children raised by their birth families have built-in, lifelong support networks of parents, siblings, extended family, and family friends - networks that are not ensured for youth who have spent time in the foster care system” (Kirk & Day, 2011, p. 1174). If this is the case, then the role of the supportive person, or mentor, in the FY’s life, becomes crucial. The presence of a caring and supportive teacher, adult, or mentor, who encourages and supports youth in pursuing further education is identified as a critical component by FY themselves and in resilience theory (Hines et al., 2005; Hass et. al, 2014, Greeson, Usher & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010). “Foster youth are further challenged by low expectations for their future potential; extra support can really make a difference” (Kirk & Day, 2011, p. 1174). Preparing FY for PSE, building their awareness of what to expect, and then engaging them in processes necessary to get them in the doors of higher educational institutions provides FY with the “...equal capacity to launch rational life plans” (Otto & Ziegler, 2006, p. 271), alongside their non-FY peers. They are more likely to experience an equality of opportunity and functionings from a capability perspective.

For FY often the responsibility for communication, awareness-building, and encouragement around PSE then falls to other caring adults; hopefully found in supportive

extended family, foster parents, high school teachers, supports, guidance counsellors, post-secondary contacts, and child welfare organizations. As Jackson and Ayaji (2007) state,

...local authorities have a special responsibility towards children and young people separated from their parents, a responsibility to ensure that being in care makes a positive difference to their life chances. The best way to do this is to enable as many as we can to continue their education to the highest possible level. (p. 71)

For example, in *Pathways to College for Former Foster Youth: Understanding Factors that Contribute to Educational Success* (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling & Wyatt, 2005), teachers were cited most often by the study's participants (n=216) Former Foster Youth (FFY) in university) as the role models who encouraged the young people to attend post-secondary. Participants reported that these teachers "...often did something extra or special that kept the student in school or on the path to college, intervening in or advocating for the youth in the place of a parent or caregiver" (p. 875).

Post-secondary institutions can also develop specific programs and supports to educate FY about their PSE options. Many Ontario colleges do have marketing programs that aim to provide young people in general with a college experience in the hopes of later recruitment. Georgian's Grizzly Cubs program is one such venture as is Youth Enrichment at Humber (YEAH). Both programs provide on campus events and immersion experiences and activities to give youth a taste of college. The Georgian program focuses on youth in Grades 7-8 while Humber's program invites youth from Grades 5-10 to get involved.

In collaboration with YouthCAN, Humber College's YEAH program hosted two annual YouthCAN conferences, the last of which was called "Gear Up for Success", held August 10-12, 2015. (YouthCAN, nd). The conference invites FY from across the province to attend the annual conference. They hear from successful FFY mentors and professionals about educational and

employment possibilities and engage in various pro-social learning, team, and recreational activities.

Kirk and Day (2011), in a mixed methods longitudinal study, profiled the work of the Michigan Educational Opportunities for Youth in Care (MEOYIC) program at Michigan State University. This was a pre-college program for youth in care/formerly in care. Youth attended the program on campus and engaged with curriculum that provided them a variety of experiential learning opportunities led by faculty and students who were foster care alumni. Peer support and mentoring were an essential feature built into the program structure. The researchers pre-and post-tested the sample of program participants (n=38) on their perceptions of, and attitudes toward, higher education before and after program attendance. Participants reported increased life skills, enhanced self-concept, and a greater sense of empowerment or purpose. These comments are reflective of FY experiencing growth in their capability sets and improved cultural capital for higher education. The researchers concluded that

...a campus based experiential learning program for transitioning foster youth can improve participant perceptions of educational and developmental outcomes. It can, for example, contribute toward a perceived increase in knowledge and information about college life, securing and managing related money and admission procedures. (p. 1179)

Similarly, the Kansas Kids @ GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) at Wichita State University was developed to increase the educational aspirations and readiness among youth from low-income families and foster youth. Of the 1377 participants in the program, 895 were FY. Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, and Colvin (2011) studied the educational aspirations and actual higher educational attainment among all of the participants in this program. They found a difference between the aspirations of foster care and non-foster care youth, with the foster care youth having significantly lower aspirations. Based on additional

findings related to lower levels of parental support in foster care youth and academic self-perception, the authors recommend that "...future intervention should focus on building academic self-perception, providing increased support, and increasing both access to information about college funding activities" (p. 319). In other words, in Bourdiesian and capability framework terms, the researchers recommend that FY be provided with messaging that may counter an engrained and previously socialized habitus that indicates they are not a fit for PSE, given opportunity to participate in activities which to grow their capital and capabilities for higher education, and enhance their functionings, chosen actions which support their access to and success with post-secondary goal attainment (Henry, 2014; Bryson, 2015).

### **Barriers and Supports for Engagement**

Once FY are made aware of the possibility of higher education and decide they would like to attend, to make this a reality, they must engage in a number of pre-entry processes and procedures to eventually register and enrol. "While research studies estimate that 70 percent of foster youth desire to go to college, only about 20 percent of college qualified foster youth enroll, compared to 60 percent of youth not from foster care" (Unrau, 2012, p. 1). Although this is an American statistic, it highlights a potential breakdown in the process of realizing PSE entry. When FY decide they are interested in attending PSE, should they follow through and act on that interest, they face the process of applying, accepting, and readying themselves for entry. Once FY are educationally prepared for, and made aware of PSE opportunities, they must have the opportunity to engage in the actions that will facilitate their entry into a post-secondary program. The capabilities framework explains that not everyone experiences the freedom to utilize their capabilities and achieve their functionings as this is affected by "...the personal (education,

competencies, literacy, etc.), material, and social resources available” (Otto & Ziegler, 2006, p. 274).

In 2014 a group of researchers (Batsche, Hart, Ort, Armstrong, Strozier & Hummer) in the southeastern United States conducted interviews with 27 youth who had been emancipated from foster care and who were enrolled in, or had completed, higher education (ranging from a two-year community college program to a four-year university degree program). The purpose of their study was to investigate how these FFY felt about the PSE engagement initiative titled, Know How 2 Go (KH2GO), originally developed for First Generation students. Since most FFY are First Generation students as well, they wanted to test the program’s applicability to the FFY demographic.

The KH2GO program involves four steps: Find someone to help (a support), push yourself, find the right fit (institution), and put your hands on some cash. The FFY pointed to four unique areas of concern beyond the program’s content for their situations: how they were going to live, the abrupt transition to independence (due to added adult responsibilities of being a FFY), facing the financial aid process without family support, and the stigma (real or perceived) of having been in foster care.

As Dworsky and Perez (2010) explained, often financial and emotional supports from FY families are minimal or absent and although college applicants may be financially independent, it is possible that they are unaware of financial aid programs available for post-secondary.

Batsche et al. (2014) concluded that institutions should develop support programs specifically for FFY and ideally identify a go-to person on campus. As Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek and Fogarty (2012) identified, “...many foster youths are on their own



when it comes to applying to college and patching together the resources to pay for their education. Assuming they cannot afford college, some may not apply.” (p. 1009). If there were a professional on campus, aware of the needs of this specific group, who could engage in community outreach, act as the first point of contact for FY, and connect them to the required resources, would we see an increase in the numbers of FY enrolling in our institutions? A support person, or mentor, could assist in equalizing opportunity for FY; building their economic, social, and cultural capital, and helping them to convert their capabilities into functionings, thereby negating some of the barriers which may prevent access to PSE.

In Ontario finances need not be a primary barrier for FY access and persistence in PSE. Ontario has a number of financial resources and supports available to FFY who are aging/have aged out of care in general and additional supports for those who pursue PSE. These financial supports seem to target full-time FY students and those who finish their program of study within four years. This may be problematic for FY who pursue PSE on a part-time basis for reasons equivalent to, or which extend beyond those of their non-FY peers. What follows is a review of current financial supports available to FY.

The Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) offers youth 18-20 aging out of care a Continued Care and Support for Youth (CCSY) stipend of \$850 month to assist with living expenses. For youth in school 21-24 years of age, who are receiving or eligible for CCSY, and who are in OSAP-eligible programs, there is a Living and Learning Grant of \$500 per month. Additionally, the Ontario Access Grant (OAG) for Crown Wards/former Crown Wards covers up to 50% of tuition (up to \$3000/yr.) for those receiving or eligible for CCSY in programs two or more years in duration. More recently, the 100% Tuition Aid for Youth Leaving Care Program through the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU), offered

crown wards/those receiving or eligible for CCSY free tuition (up to \$6000/yr.) to Ontario's universities and colleges. Fifty percent of the cost is covered by the OAG, and the other half by the participating institutions themselves (Youth Leaving Care Update: Policy and Program Design, October 1, 2013). It is important to note that not all institutions opted to participate. As the Ontario colleges are the focus of my thesis research it is pertinent to identify which of the 24 colleges opted to provide the free tuition. The Colleges Ontario website identifies 14 institutions that did so: Boréal, Cambrian, Canadore, Centennial, Conestoga, Confederation, Fleming, Humber, La Cité, Lambton, Northern, Sault, Sheridan, and St. Lawrence (Colleges Ontario). FY are also eligible for a reimbursement for the application fee to PSE in the province. Also, in February 2016, Premier Kathleen Wynne made an announcement during the provincial budget, that Ontario would provide tuition coverage for youth whose household income was less than \$50,000 annually.

From their data collected on former FY scholarship recipients Sim, Emerson, O'Brien, Pecora, and Silva (2008) found that students received pre-entry evaluation of learning and emotional challenges to help them with eventual transition in addition to support services such as tutoring, learning skills remediation, advising, and guided class selection. Why? "At the post-secondary level, preparing these students to transfer support systems from pre-emancipation caregivers, caseworkers, and agencies, to more college, peer, and community-based supports seems necessary" (p. 124). This recommendation is also supported by researchers who study student success more generally. In Chapter 6 of the text *Strategic Enrolment Intelligence: Canada's First Book on Strategic Enrolment Management* (2010), authors Skinkle and Hutson indicated that it is vital to regularly assess the needs and strengths of your institution's students beginning before they are admitted. They point to these incoming assessments, which measure

academic strengths, needs, and both educational and personal motivations, as useful for the both academic and support staff. Having this information can assist the staff in supporting students with their individual academic needs and helping to ensure their first-year experience is positive and tied to their educational and personal goals.

For youth, still in care, a UK study by Jackson and Ajayi (2007) recommended that “Education Foster Carers” be recruited and remunerated to provide FY age 14 and older with an educationally enriched home environment. These individuals would work closely with the schools when the foster youth are younger and help direct the children through the foundational school system toward higher education including support with college application and entry. Tweddle (2005), in her Canadian report, also recommended that youth in care, and aging out of the system, receive supportive ongoing professional and peer relationships, life skills training for independence, increased access to monetary support, and support in accessing post-secondary education, as well as training and employment.

The capabilities perspective views education as “...a process of expanding capabilities as well as a process which decides whether individuals have to remain in or are able to move beyond their ‘sense of place’” (Otto & Ziegler, 2006, p. 276). If this is the case, education is a doorway to opportunity and a better future. However, this doorway may be a bit more difficult for FY to open on their own. As such, we must support them in doing so by preparing them for PSE and encouraging them to pursue PSE, by making them aware of their opportunities, and facilitating their access by directly supporting their engagement in the tangible processes and procedures necessary for application and eventual access.

## **Barriers and Supports in Transition**

Transitioning to college can be challenging for all students (Belch, 2004), and present further challenges to students who are defined as non-traditional and under-represented in the literature (Conference Board of Canada, 2015). There are numerous qualitative differences between secondary school and college, and new college students need to adapt and transition to the college culture, environment, and academics. According to Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo (2007), the first year of college shapes how much students will learn and how competent, socially and personally, they will become over their college journey. As Sim, Emerson, O'Brien, Pecora, and Silva (2008) explain, the transition to PSE can be additionally challenging for FY, especially as they often face a complete and final transition out of care at or around the same time.

Philibert, Allen, and Elleven (2008), in their study of non-traditional students in American colleges explained that "...the higher the number of non-traditional traits a student possesses, the more likely he or she is to choose a community college" (p. 583). "Traditional student" attributes included: direct entry from high school, access to parental financial support, and unemployment during the school year. If we were to define Ontario's traditional student population in this way, a great proportion of Ontario college students deviate from this standard. For example, only 29% of accepted students in 2013 were direct entry from high school. In the same year, 20% of Ontario college applicants worked full-time and 43% worked part-time (Colleges Ontario, 2014, p. 14-16). The great majority of FY, by virtue of their status as FY, often have unstable family connections, increased experiences of poverty, and lower rates of academic success and high school completion. As such, FY definitely do not fall within the definition of "traditional students". In US national research on employment outcomes for FFY

compared to the general population, Okpych and Courtney (2011) found that FFY are more likely to attend programs at community colleges rather than universities.

The majority of FY attending post-secondary are first generation students (Batsche, Hart, Ort, Armstrong, Strozier & Hummer, 2014); the first in their family to attend higher education. As such, FY may not hold the same capital as students who grow up in families where there is greater familiarity with PSE. Even if it is discussed, if the families of FY have less experience with PSE they may not be able to provide important information, or direction, about PSE. As persons who have not attended PSE themselves, they may lack resources, and not be as prepared to support their child regarding what to do or what to expect. As Henry (2014) noted about the habitus and capital holdings of younger children, those

...who come to school already being familiar with these expectations bring with them a sense of internal knowledge and familiarity of this new social field; children who are less familiar with these implicit notions have more to learn about navigating school. (p. 81)

Though this statement is applied to elementary school transition, based on the literature presented here regarding FY, first generation learners, and those who belong to groups that are traditionally under-represented, the same might be argued for the transition to higher education.

So, what can be done to facilitate a more successful transition to PSE? Jehangir (2010) examined and analyzed the self-reported experiences of first generation (FG) students who participated in a supportive Multicultural Learning Community (MLC) during their university transition. Seven students with diverse cultural backgrounds reflected on what the MLC meant to them in their initial year and how it contributed to their sense of belonging at school. The author identified belonging as a complex construct; involving both being welcomed into, and contributing to, a community. The MLC was designed to create a space of belonging as, "...each

student experienced a sense of being alone and apart from others, and they questioned how they would get a foothold in this first year of college” (p. 121).

The students participating in the MLC spent roughly nine hours of class time together each week. They were encouraged to get to know one another and share their life histories, experiences, and opinions. The students testified that they began to feel less alone and more connected, establishing relationships of “mutual understanding” (p. 123). Students also reported that relationships extended beyond the classroom; for many the group became a kind of family, not always in harmony, but there for each other through challenging times in their first year. The faculty and staff working with the MLC cohort helped to create a feeling of shared community.

This type of program may have great utility with FY who also report requiring extra resources and feeling different from their college peers (Hines, Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005). However, instead of funneling FY into first generation programming and support more commonly provided by our higher education institutions, we need to recognize that these students may require additional support and guidance in programs tailored to normed experiences of their population, while cognizant and supportive of the individual’s experiences and needs. As Dworksy and Perez (2010) stated, “Even programs that target low-income and first-generation-in-college students were not designed with the challenges faced by former foster youth in mind” (p. 256). In their study of 10 diverse American university transition programs designed for FY in Northern and Southern California and in Washington State, the authors detailed the services and supports utilized and valued by the students. The 96 student respondents, 18-26 years of age, who participated in the web-based survey were asked what they used, and felt, was important or very important to their access and persistence. Academically, course selection assistance, dedicated computer labs, tutoring support, and study skills training

were utilized by largest number of students in the sample and ranked as important or very important by the majority who did utilize them. Though used by fewer students, priority enrolment and summer bridging programs were also identified as an important or very important resource. When asked to rate the importance of contextual supports for post-secondary access and persistence, financial aid, used by 82% of the sample, and housing assistance, used by 72% of the sample, were identified as important or very important by 98.6% and 96.9% of the participants respectively (Dworsky & Perez, 2010, Tables 5 & 6, p. 260).

Program participants also shared their feelings about how the programs assisted them. Eighty-six percent of the students reported a “sense of family” during their involvement with the program and in their interactions with the program staff. One student stated,

The students get to build a family within the [campus support program]. We get to support each other and the [campus support program] staff and sponsors are our parents in school, so they look after us like a family does for their children. (p. 261)

Seventy-one percent of the study’s participants also responded that their campus support program helped them to cope with feelings of loneliness or feel less alone (Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

Regardless of whether or not a potential college student is direct entry from high school or a few years older, youth in care face additional life challenges in the transition to adulthood and PSE than do their peers. In the midst of these additional challenges, FY are expected to grow up and become independent adults much sooner than their modern-day peers. Tweddle (2005) pointed to the trend of young adults living with and relying on their parents into their mid-to-late twenties even after college or university completion, while “youth in care face considerable challenges in making the transition from state care to independence and adulthood. They bear the

scars of physical and emotional trauma, yet are expected to function independently, usually with little social or financial support” (p. 3). In a study of resilience among the former FY population, Jones (2012) found a strong negative correlation between former FY returning home to live with their biological family and their resiliency. “Youth who returned home did more poorly than youth in other living arrangements. Youth may be reentering family systems that still have significant problems such as poverty, mental illness, substance abuse, and violence” (p. 529).

In Hines, Merdinger and Wyatt (2005), a sample of 14 former FY, 19-35 years of age, responded to questions about their college experiences and transition to young adulthood. Despite the small sample size, the study provided worthwhile information and discussion pertaining to adversity and resilience in former FY. In analyzing participant responses, the authors identified common experiences. For example, all study participants reported that they felt different from their college non-FY peers and the majority identified a stigma attached to being a foster youth. One youth stated,

I needed to be better than the image I had in my own head of a foster youth, or the image of someone who came from this abusive family. I needed to be. I had to be...the residential center I went to, the first one, I would sneak up on to the roof and just sit there. Just so I could say to myself that I’m different and somehow, I’m different from all this and I’m going to succeed. (p. 388)

Participants also reported they had difficulty understanding and relating to peers who had not been in the system; they felt a lack of connection to family and had ongoing concerns over housing and financial stability. These were conceptualized as adversity factors.

Students’ responses were analyzed, and themes identified to reveal important factors, at individual, family, and community levels, involved in their resiliency. It must be acknowledged that the individual factors such as intelligence, optimism, resourcefulness, patience, assertiveness, responsibility, independence, goal-orientation, flexibility and adaptability, and



internal locus of control were identified through self-report, not objective measurement. Family level characteristics including a strong network of friends and supportive significant others who acted as parenting figures were deemed important. Community level attributes, which included an educationally connected foster care system, were also identified as the important variables related to the resiliency of the sample. This resiliency allowed them to access, transition, and persist in PSE (Hines et al., 2005).

It is important to note that the authors (Hines et al., 2005) found that, regardless of their academic successes,

All of the respondents reported having some degree of difficulty in the area of psychological functioning and emotional health. Ten spoke of problems with rigidity that led to difficulties achieving balance in their life...Five of the respondents reported feeling stress, anxiety, and pressure related to school, finances, housing, and career as well as an overarching fear of failure. (pp. 390-391)

Other emotional issues mentioned by participants included sadness about the past and lost childhoods, and a continuing lack of connection to their family of origin. As Sim, Emerson, O'Brien, Pecora, and Silva (2008) explain, in addition to academic and learning supports, higher education institutions should consider the development of more intensive emotional/social support systems carefully designed to meet the needs of this student population.

Unrau, Font, and Rawls (2012) conducted a study of college engagement among former FY. Their study is discussed in detail in the next section on persistence. However, there is one conclusion drawn from the study that aptly sums up the discussion of FY transition to PSE and the importance of additional campus programming and services. These authors closed with the following caution and recommendation:

Child welfare workers may mistakenly perceive the optimism or hopefulness that foster youth display at the start of college as a sign of competence that they have successfully achieved independence, while college professionals may overlook foster youth needs if

they view the students through a lens of family privilege that does not exist for them. Thus, outreach by professionals is needed to help students from foster care transition to using campus-based services versus child-welfare services, and to provide additional guidance through the many practical and developmental challenges of the college years. (p. 82)

It is vitally important that faculty and all those who support FY in PSE, through transition and beyond, recognize and understand the potential barriers that exist for FY, so that they can assist FY in negating those which threaten their successful adaptation to and movement through higher education. For example, poverty, a barrier often experienced by newly independent former FY who have recently aged-out of care, is related to health, school achievement, and neurological development (Henry, 2014).

### **Barriers and Supports for Persistence**

In my experience, few PSE programs, aside from those available at private career colleges, Ontario college certificates, and upgrading programs, are one year in duration. As such, it is vital that we explore the continuing educational experiences and needs of FY beyond their first-year transition to ensure we assist them in realizing their goals and achieving educational success.

I found there to be an absence of Canadian data on PSE completion rates for FY. American experts point to a similar problem and identify a real concern. Sim, Emerson, O'Brien, Pecora, and Silva (2008), in their review of pertinent literature, stated:

Although college enrollment rates for students who have been in foster care are not reported by national or state higher education systems, several studies and reports provide information that suggests college attendance and completion rates [for FY] are significantly less than the general population and even that of other underrepresented groups. (p. 112)

Some data suggest that fewer than three percent of FY earn a degree in six years compared to 24% of non-FY (Unrau, 2012).

If these data reflect the status in Ontario and/or across the country, we need to find out why. FY often experience intersecting inequities in their lives through membership in under-served societal groups. In Bourdeisian terms, they often experience social inequality through its cross-generational reproduction, and through more limited capital resources for success within the field of post-secondary education. They may have a habitus which limits their potential, as it “...works as an overarching system establishing norms and expectations for individuals, based on the social class status one inhabits” (Henry, 2014, p. 7). Due to fewer capital resources, and possibly a habitus that communicates they are in the wrong place, when they do access PSE FY may not have the resources to persist once enrolled. FY are often from families with lower incomes than the average, are more likely to have a diagnosis of disability, struggle with mental health challenges, and belong to ethnic/racial groups who are marginalized. In Canada many of the children and youth in care are Indigenous peoples - a group that our nation recognizes has been very unfairly treated and who have experienced great inequality of opportunity across society. When these under-served group affiliations and the difficult life circumstances involved in being a FY are combined, clear challenges to persistence in PSE appear (Salazar, 2012).

Institutions play a vital role in supporting student persistence and success. As Reason (2009) states, “the institutional effects on college student outcomes (including student persistence) are less about what an institution is than about what an institution does” (p. 669). Our higher educational institutions need to meet the needs of a wide, diverse, and changing demographic of students in our communities. Most importantly, applicants-turned-students can be warmed-up to success through supportive educational processes and programming. Institutions need to assist students in their post-secondary journey to increase the likelihood that they persist. As such, institutions must be reflective and look inward to ensure that they are

providing necessary supports. The institutional culture, faculty, programs, and student success initiatives need to be student-centered. “While setting student success goals are essential elements of planning, they are really a statement of the direction the institution wants to move in” (Hutson & Skinkle, 2010, p. 140).

For instance, Ontario’s colleges educate many learners with unique needs and in many cases their socio-demographic characteristics necessitate additional support. If students struggle and do not have additional supports available, or do not access them, this may prevent them from persisting. According to Dietsche’s (2012) research, based on the self-report of over 62,000 Ontario college students, “approximately one third indicated they could benefit greatly from additional support in the areas of study skills, test taking, and career guidance.” (p. 73). Students also identified the need for improved math, writing, reading, and language comprehension skills. Dietsche’s research points to what he called a “needs-use gap” (p. 82); there is a substantial self-reported need for support services among our students, however, perhaps surprisingly, they are not utilizing the available services. As a result, Dietsche indicated that a new model of service delivery is needed in Ontario’s colleges. He advocated for intrusive advising (structured and mandatory) which contrasts the current passive delivery model that “...assumes that students have enough knowledge, social skills and motivation to seek out and make use of available services” (p. 85). Dietsche outlined the barriers to service access such as stigma, poor self-advocacy, lack of knowledge, and denial, and Dietsche advocated for change. In short, the services may be available in the colleges, but due to the needs of students who would benefit from them, and the way in which access to these services is structured (student-driven), the supports are maximized to assist students with college persistence.

The challenge is “...many institutions discover that they are unprepared or unable to provide adequate programs for students who are unconventional by all traditional criteria” (Sherer & Anson, 2014, p. 10). Although colleges welcome student diversity, they are not always prepared to meet the continued learning needs of diverse students. If our institutions do not provide students with access to needed services and supports, they carry a large burden of responsibility and could be contributing to increases in the incidence of cooling-out practice (Clark, 1970). As Dowd (2007) astutely identified, “Students with greater educational needs require greater resources in order to achieve at rates equal to those with fewer needs” (p. 410). FY face a more difficult transition from adolescence to adulthood than the general population (Hines, Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005) and this can influence PSE transition and persistence. If institutional resources are minimal, poorly advertised, or inaccessible, students with higher needs will suffer. Okpych and Courtney (2011) indicated that

...school quality has been shown to have a significant effect on students' likelihood of completing their degree for the general population of college students and for first generation, underrepresented students. Research also shows that some older youth in care take longer to finish their secondary education and start college. (p. 27)

Of course, one must keep in mind that not completing a program does not immediately indicate failure on the part of the school or the student. Students often transfer to other programs at the same institution or pursue a qualitatively different, more advanced, or transfer program at another school. This does not mean that the institution the student leaves is automatically lacking. However, it would be interesting to investigate factors that may contribute to persistence, and conversely attrition, across Ontario's colleges and universities, and identify and explore different models of student support that are effective in supporting student persistence.

How can Ontario's higher education institutions meet the needs of diverse students, including FY, and help them persist? According to the literature we need to ensure that our

institutional cultures, our faculty, our programs, and our student support services are ready to effectively serve those we admit. As institutions, we need to “warm up” to increasing diversity-through valuing and promoting social justice and equality (Dennison, 1995). We need to first understand our students’ complex lives and responsibilities-consider what the students themselves bring and their whole college experience (Reason, 2009). We then need to provide proven, efficacious, educational supports and quality individualized academic advising and services to enhance student success (Bahr, 2008). Our programs, classrooms, and instructional methods must be learning accessible (Marquis, Jung, Fudge-Schormans, Vajoczki, Wilton, & Baptiste, 2012). It is crucial that our staff and faculty, our programs, and our student support services are prepared to serve students who are diverse in a multitude of ways (Orr & Goodman, 2010). As Hutson and Skinkle (2010) clearly explained, “...the characteristics of the student, including academic preparedness, study habits and values, expectations, past experiences, goals, and aspirations interact with the culture and programs of the institution to define the nature of the student experiences (i.e. student success)” (p. 134). In short, we need to make it possible for our students to continuously engage with our institutions, their faculty, and their learning experiences, and ensure accessible supports are available and responsive throughout the student journey to foster success.

Several American studies have reviewed on-campus support services, groups, and programs specifically designed for FY (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Kirk & Day, 2011; Rassen, Darla & Mery, 2010; Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2012). These programs are diverse but a commonality they appear to share is the focus on social-emotional support for this group of learners in addition to academic and learning skills assistance. These programs attempt to fill a frequently present gap in the lives of FY. They offer and build supportive, professional,

interpersonal relationships with FY. Through these supportive relationships, FY can then build their cultural and social capital holdings, and have persons on whom they can rely, as other students would their families, throughout their PSE career. Participants in a post-secondary support program studied by Dworsky and Perez (2010) indicated that the participating FY had achieved a sense of belonging. One student commented, “They provided a...nurturing environment on campus, I felt emotionally safe and felt that someone cared. The emotional support was very important, and, having talks with the program directors on campus really helped” (p. 262).

Salazar (2012) investigated five categories of factors involved in FY persistence—academic skills (time management, study skills, problem-solving, leadership skills, and communication skills), college fit (supports, extracurricular involvement, connectedness), maltreatment/trauma history and mental health, independent living stability, and social support. Her sample included 329 former FY who were recipients of foster care-related scholarships across the US (43 states) with educational levels ranging from no degree to a doctorate (71% with Bachelor’s degrees). The participants completed standardized and reliable survey tools related to all of these factors and it was found that tangible academic skills support, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the youth, and other emotional or behavioural problems were most strongly related to persistence. Supports were positively correlated with persistence while PTSD and other mental health issues were negatively correlated with persistence. Greater student persistence appeared to be related to greater supports, while poorer persistence appeared to be related to increased mental health challenges.

As a part of the California College Pathways Project, Rassen, Darla, and Mery (2010) studied how 12 California colleges support former FY with persisting in PSE. The study

included surveys of staff, former FY students, and interviews with those working directly with former FY in the colleges. The study results called for

...improved data collection and program evaluation, additional assistance with financial aid and housing, the creation of a broad network of support within each college, the utilization of a case management approach, and increased resource development to support programs that serve former foster youth. (p. 24)

The research data clearly uncovered the additional challenges to persistence that many former FY face while attending PSE: limited finances, housing insecurity, demanding work and class schedules, difficulty trusting others and forming healthy and supportive relationships with adults, and academic skills deficits, among others. The case management approach is strongly recommended by the researchers to assist former FY in building and maintaining trusting and supportive relationships between themselves as individuals and essential program and college staff. As Rassen, Darla, and Mery (2010) note, “it is critical that foster youth students have positive experiences with college staff members since many of them have been neglected by parents and other adults” (p. 34).

Unrau, Font, and Rawls (2012) studied the self-reported readiness, and its relation to first year academic performance and persistence of 81, 17-20-year-old, FY to engage in PSE at Western Michigan University. These authors defined and measured readiness using several constructs and accompanying survey tools. Readiness was operationally defined as academic motivation, social motivation, receptivity to student services, and general coping. FFY responses and performance measures were then compared to the general 1<sup>st</sup> year student population at the school.

The study revealed the following: the FY sample had more positive attitudes toward their faculty and a stronger desire to complete their studies compared to their non-FY peers, were



more self-reliant than their non-FY peers, were more receptive to seeking general support from campus student services than their non-FY peers, but struggled more highly to cope with the demands of college life than their non-FY peers. They hypothesized that the lesser ability to cope among the FY group is related to past trauma. These authors demonstrated this possibility by detailing and breaking down a common college scenario. It is lengthy, but I have chosen to include it as I believe it captures the unique perspective a FY may have in response to common college stressors. The authors detailed barriers and challenges that can interrupt a student's academic life and threaten persistence. They stated,

...daily stressors of college life can 'trigger' deep-seated unresolved issues that were the source of the stress. For example, when a college student from foster care finds that she is \$25 short of funds to purchase the books needed for classes, she is reminded that her parents are not there for her to call and ask for the difference, and this memory may trigger unresolved emotional distress related to abuse and neglect, removal from her parents, and feelings of rejection or unworthiness. Such emotional triggers unravel fears and hurt that trace back into childhood and can paralyze the student in a way that prevents her from resolving the seemingly minor problem of a \$25 shortfall. (Unrau et al., 2012, p. 81)

Trauma can be triggered by events and experiences that appear low stakes or innocuous and completely derail a student from their studies as they try to navigate life, and cope, with the emotional fallout of the memories of their experiences. Many students in PSE may struggle with persistence, but FY may have additional hurdles to overcome on their journey to successful completion.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Because I found there exists a paucity of research related to the Ontario or Canadian context in the literature, the content of the academic research reviewed here is primarily American, and focused at the university level. Therefore due to a host of American-Canadian

societal differentiators (culture, politics, policy, population, economy, distinct higher education and child welfare systems and terminology, etc.) it is not necessarily transferable to the Ontario-Canadian context. FY, by virtue of their involvement in the child welfare system, may experience many of the same early life experiences regardless of citizenship.

In addition, many of the studies' samples were small and purposive (by nature of the FY designation), FY participants were not always compared to their non-FY peers to better understand differences in PSE experience, access, and success between the student groups, and research was specific to singular institutions (i.e., Western Michigan University, Wichita State University) or institutions in particular states (i.e., Michigan, California, Kansas, Washington) and therefore not generalizable to the entire FY population in PSE in the United States. Another issue I see is that a majority of the studies were retrospective, investigating the experiences of FY already enrolled in PSE. There is little information on the experiences of pre-PSE FY as they contemplate, make decisions, and/or prepare for PSE "in real time".

A strength of the studies reviewed here is that the majority included the voices of the FY in their sample. Though surveys were the most commonly employed data-gathering tool, interviews were also used to understand PSE barriers and the support programs that assist FY in achieving post-secondary success. Nevertheless, this form of data, albeit very useful qualitatively, does not measure program effectiveness empirically. Salazar (2012) cautioned that there is

...insufficient empirical evidence on support program effectiveness" and "...also very little empirical information regarding what factors differentiate foster care alumni who do and do not drop out of college (i.e., what factors may be most likely to interfere with successful college completion. (p. 141)

It is clear that additional research needs to be done on both sides of the border. The US appears to be further ahead - there exists a body of work, while Ontario still needs to

academically investigate the basic yet multifaceted question of why FY are under-represented in PSE. This study starts gathering data to identify supports and barriers for FY who persist in PSE and those who do not.

In this chapter, I analyzed the literature I found that was relevant to this study. Completion of higher education in today's society is a worthwhile and necessary endeavour, both for personal and professional growth. Higher education is the key that opens doors to opportunity in the workplace and life for our communities' citizens. FY are no exception. "Without a trajectory to college, former foster youth face the realities of unemployment, homelessness and incarceration in their young adult years" (Unrau, 2012, p. 1).

However, like the American youth predominantly profiled in the literature, Ontario's FY are under-represented in our province's post-secondary institutions (Conference Board of Canada, 2014). As I have identified in the literature, FY are often unprepared for the academic demands of higher education. Many struggle to complete high school creating drop-out rates much higher than those of their non-FY peers. It also appears that many FY lack the awareness of, and/or access to, supports necessary to engage with and transition to PSE. Finally, even when they are enrolled and attending PSE, many FY struggle to persist.

It would be a grave injustice to adopt a deficiency perspective and point to the FY as responsible for these findings. In contrast, if we apply the theoretical frameworks utilized by this study, FY may experience inequity of opportunity due to the social reproduction of inequality and a reduced capacity to convert their capabilities into action due to externally-imposed limitations. However, from the capabilities perspective, education is a key resource in "...enabling people and structuring the effective opportunities of people to live a life they have reason to choose and value" (Otto & Ziegler, 2006, p. 269). Our institutions, as the hubs of PSE

and the recruiters of students, must be alert and responsive to the needs of this population if we are to see them enter higher education and experience success. FY, both before and during PSE, experience great inequality when compared with their non-FY peers. As educational institutions, we must appreciate and respond to this reality. Kirk and Day (2011) put it this way:

Systemic potential for change needs to be grasped by policy makers, including legislators, child welfare administrators and higher education institutions. Young people in foster care deserve the same opportunities to achieve their education and employment goals as their non-foster care peers. (pp. 1179-80)

Through a targeted focus on the needs of FY who will/do enrol in our post-secondary institutions, and a recognition of, and responsiveness to individual student needs throughout the educational journey, I believe we can increase our FY enrolment and help more of these students persist and experience PSE success.

In the next chapter, I describe in detail the research design and methodology of the study.

### **Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to explore barriers to post-secondary access and persistence, as well as factors and supports that facilitate successful enrolment in and completion of post-secondary education for Ontario's foster youth (FY). Specific Ontario college initiatives, services, policies, and programming that can assist this population were examined. The lived experiences and perspectives of participants who were or had been FY themselves, and those of other key informants, are presented in the qualitative data to gain a better understanding of why FY are so greatly under-represented in Ontario's post-secondary educational institutions. The findings provide research-informed implications for increasing this population's attainment of post-secondary education.

In this chapter, I describe the research design of the study, the specific research questions that drove this study, the methodology for data collection, the analysis and interpretation of the data in relation to the grounding theoretical frameworks and the literature reviewed, and finally ethical considerations.

#### **Research Design**

To my knowledge, this study is the first in Ontario, and in Canada, to investigate FY as under-represented learners in higher education. Tweddle (2005) brought attention to the need for research on this population in higher education in her briefing paper "Youth Leaving Care: How do they Fare?". To address the gap on this topic in the Ontario literature, my study engaged in initial and preliminary research. This study investigated FY post-secondary educational experiences, through exploratory research designed to uncover and problematize issues and challenges. Exploratory research is introductory, qualitative and helps to stimulate further research (Creswell, 2014). It "...is perhaps better thought of as a perspective, a way of

approaching and carrying out a social study (including, importantly, reporting what has been learned)” (Stebbins, 2001, p. v). This study is also rooted in a transformative worldview, aimed at improving societal circumstances and conditions for a marginalized group (Creswell, 2014).

Since FY are a marginalized group, and I found a huge gap in the literature on FY access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education, the exploratory research design was very appropriate. Exploratory research allows the investigator to gather information and evidence related to the research question(s), generate discussion based on this learning, and encourages further investigation, acting as a stimulus for future research (Fry & Dwyer, 2001).

This study was designed to start a conversation around ways to improve educational, employment, and life outcomes for a group who has been largely unexamined in the literature, and that often does not feature in reports on under-represented learners in Canada-specific literature.

### **Theoretical Frameworks Grounding the Study**

This study was grounded in the theoretical frameworks used to understand the current literature and guide the collection and interpretation of data. As was described in Chapter Two, FY have additional and unique barriers to accessing and succeeding in PSE when compared to their non-FY peers. Bourdieu’s Theory of Social Reproduction and Sen’s Capabilities Framework, along with the connected theories of educational aspirations and expectations, Clark’s cooling-out and warming-up, and resilience, were used in framing the study and articulating a person-centred, qualitative data design to engage the voices of FY and those working with, for, and alongside them in child welfare.

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital assist in understanding how inequality of power and privilege passes down generational lines and is pervasive across societal fields. For example, the habitus, a deep and impactful internalization of place, by social class, and conditioned in people throughout their childhood and youth, "...offers individuals an insight into how to act and respond throughout situations they encounter in their lives; it gives individuals a "feel for the game" (Henry, 2014, p. 61). Otto and Ziegler describe the capabilities approach as "...an enlightened framework for promoting social justice in education (p. 270), one which facilitates the consideration of "...personal and societal characteristics that influence the construction and achievement of the various aspirations" (p. 276). Together these theories informed a method designed to capture both first-hand accounts and observations of the barriers and supports for FY, from early educational and life experiences onward, in accessing and persisting in post-secondary education. The literature driven post-secondary pathway articulated by this study, through which the findings are interpreted and understood, interweaves these theoretical perspectives with the study findings.

## **Research Questions**

The overall research question the study asked was: What are the perceived barriers, challenges, and supports for foster youth in accessing and persisting in PSE within Ontario? The specific research questions that were answered were:

**Research Question 1:** What are the English-speaking Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs) currently doing to directly or indirectly support foster youth in accessing and persisting in post-secondary in Ontario?

**Research Question 2:** What are the barriers that may prevent foster youth from accessing post-secondary education in Ontario as perceived by foster youth, child welfare workers, child welfare experts, and child welfare advocates (hereafter referred to as the participants) ?

**Research Question 3:** What are the barriers that may prevent enrolled foster youth from persisting in post-secondary education in Ontario as perceived by the participants?

**Research Question 4:** What factors and/or supports could facilitate foster youth access to post-secondary education in Ontario as perceived by the participants?

**Research Question 5:** What factors and/or supports could facilitate foster youth persistence in post-secondary education in Ontario as perceived by the participants?

## **Methodology**

Consistent with an exploratory research design, this was a study based on both primary and secondary data, and involved different forms of investigation - document/website analysis and interviews. This study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary research tools. FY, child welfare workers, child welfare experts, and child welfare advocates participated in this study. The interviews investigated demographics on the FY, and barriers and supports related to FY access and persistence in PSE within Ontario. I analyzed the responses of the FY and child welfare workers/experts/advocates and identified and compared themes. During the child welfare worker interviews, information on each regional agency's size, service area, and client demographics was collected for more in-depth interpretation of the interview responses.

Secondary research into Ontario college supports, services, programs, and initiatives that could support FY access and persistence was conducted through document/website analysis.



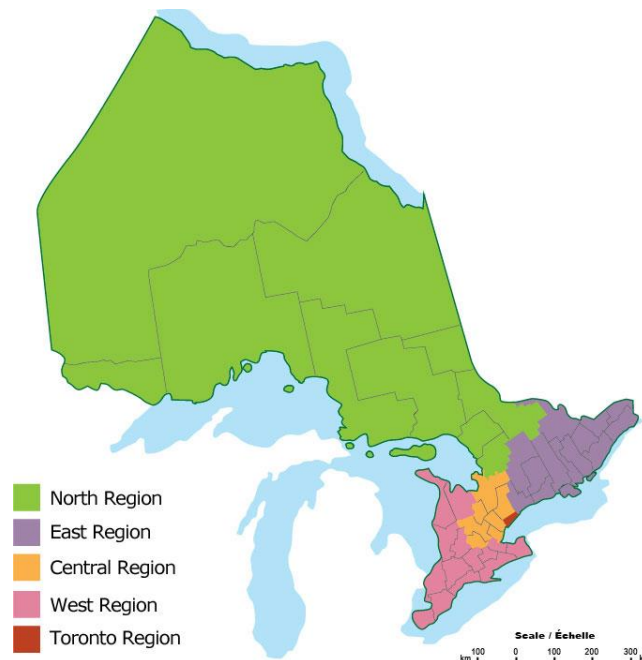
## Site Selection

According to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services website there are 48 Children's Aid Societies (CASs) across the province. Nine of the CAS organizations are identified as aboriginal, two are Catholic, and one is Jewish. All of these regional agencies were contacted and their child welfare workers, and FY who fit the inclusion criteria, were invited to participate in this study. Even though individual participants may not have elected to participate in that site location, that is how they were originally targeted. For example through the FY call for participation (Appendix A), distributed through the province's governing public child welfare body, the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS), to all of its member agencies, and to connected and relevant child welfare advocacy and policy development organizations (e.g., Youth in Care Canada, YouthCAN, and the Children's Aid Foundation) with provincial reach. Those interested in participating in the study were asked to connect with me by any means.

Child welfare caseworkers in the five Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS)-identified geographic regions of the province (Figure 2) were invited to participate in interviews. OACAS disseminated the interview invitation (Appendices C and D) to its respective head child welfare agencies in the five regions of Ontario-Central, East, West, North, and Toronto on my behalf. Potential participants were asked to connect with me by any means.

The 22 English-language Ontario CAATs, which span the province, were asked (Appendix F) to share secondary information on relevant policies, programs, services, and initiatives that directly or indirectly serve FY learners. Ontario's colleges are identified as belonging to one of four regions (Western, Central, Eastern, and Northern) as defined by Colleges Ontario. All English-speaking colleges, in all four regions, were contacted through

email and asked to share information. The institutional sites in the western region include Conestoga, Fanshawe, Lambton, Mohawk, Niagara, and St. Clair. Institutions in the central region include Centennial, George Brown, Georgian, Humber, Seneca, and Sheridan. In the eastern region of Ontario, Algonquin, Durham, Fleming, Loyalist, and St. Lawrence colleges were contacted. Finally, in the northern region, Cambrian, Canadore, Confederation, Northern, and Sault colleges Central, Eastern, and Northern colleges are included. These four regions are mapped to the MCYS regions in Figure 2 (with the central region Toronto colleges-e.g. George Brown-located in the MCYS identified Toronto region).



*Figure 2.* Ontario's Ministry of Children and Youth Services Regional Identification.

The goal was that at least one college in each of the five identified MCYS regions would provide information (Appendix F).

## Participant Selection

This study's participants, and other sources of information, were purposefully selected. As this was a study of foster youth (FY) access and persistence to PSE in Ontario, the initial goal was that Ontario FY, 18-28 years of age, would compose the majority of participants. I expected that the FY sample would include a smaller proportion of youth still in the care of a child welfare agency while the majority would include those who voluntarily left care (first possible at age 16) or transitioned to independence (referred to as "aging-out" of the system), which usually occurs at 18 (Zuker & Kirwin, 2015). For the purpose of this study if an Ontario child welfare organization was responsible for the care of the young person, not their family, for a minimum of six months before they turned 16 years of age, then participants were defined as eligible to participate in this study as a FY. Those entering temporary care after 16 years of age were not included because, as Zuker and Kirwin in their *Children's Law Handbook* (2015) state,

If a report comes to a Children's Aid Society that a child is in need of protection after a child has turned 16 (and there have been no previous orders for the child's protection), then the Children's Aid Society cannot become involved other than on a voluntary basis. If the child over the age of 16 is already subject to a court order for protection, then ordinarily the Order would simply terminate on the child turning 18 years of age. (p. 61)

It is important to note that this was recently changed with the Legislative Assembly of Ontario's approval of Bill 89, *Supporting Children*, in the *Youth and Families Act*, which passed on June 1, 2017, and was designed to allow youth over 16 years of age to enter care in Ontario (Bala & Birnbaum, 2017). Previous to this Bill, youth could only enter care before age 16. However, as this change was so recent, the parameters for inclusion of participants in this study were those who entered care before 16 years of age, to obtain a sample of youth with sufficient child welfare experience.

I distributed the call for FY interview participation (Appendices A and B), and Child Welfare Worker interview participation (Appendices C and D) to individual agencies through OACAS and to FY directly through child welfare advocacy organizations that focus on helping FY transition to post-secondary studies (the Children's Aid Foundation, YouthCAN (Communication, Advocacy, and Networking), and Youth in Care Canada, a national advocacy group run by FY for FY).

On my behalf, and with the approval of their ethics board and the OACAS Director of Learning, Dr. Parm Bhattal, the email (Appendix N) containing the study's recruitment documents (Appendices A-D) was distributed to all member agencies and organizations to Directors of Service, Resource Managers, and the YouthCAN Network on Friday, June 23, 2017.

These groups were then asked to disseminate the information through their employee teams. Given an overview of the study and the researcher's contact information through these sources, child welfare workers (Appendices D & E) and FY (Appendices A & B) could then elect whether or not to contact me, the researcher, to learn more about the interview process, and make a decision to participate or not.

The size of the population of current and former FY 18-28 years of age within Ontario is difficult to determine (as the majority will have left care). To capture a sufficient diversity of FY post-secondary educational expectations, aspirations, and experiences and receive feedback on the barriers and supports to their PSE access and/or persistence, my initial goal was to interview 20 FY with a variety of PSE experiences. If this variety did not naturally occur in the call for participants, my intent was to ask child welfare agencies/workers to share information about the study's need for participants with FY individuals whose PSE experience reflected a perspective that had not yet been included. With dissemination of the call for participation through OACAS,

Children's Aid Foundation, YouthCAN, and Youth in Care Canada, who all have provincial-wide mandates and work with youth across Ontario (and the latter across Canada), I believed it was feasible to reach youth from across the province. Furthermore, I also used social media, specifically Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn, to disseminate the FY invitation for participation. Social media calls included an online link to the foster youth call for participation document through the University of Toronto's Survey Wizard. These calls went out most frequently on Twitter. The information was retweeted by OACAS, Irwin Elman (Ontario's, with the November 2018 budget, now former, Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth), the First Nations Caring Society, and other child welfare related organizations and groups. Posts through Facebook also stimulated over a dozen shares through the researcher's professional and personal social network. No non-consent driven information was used in any recruitment endeavours.

Child welfare caseworkers were also invited to participate in interviews through the OACAS, who disseminated the interview invitation via email to its respective child welfare agencies (Appendix N). Full-time child welfare workers who work directly with children and youth in foster care were asked to participate (Appendices C & D).

I invited specific child welfare experts to participate in a semi-structured interview to discuss the study questions (Appendix E). Finally, I invited child welfare advocates with lived experience to participate in a one-on-one interview (Appendix L). Participating in this research study gave voice to both the FY, child welfare workers', experts', and advocates' perceptions on the important issues that are the focus of this study.

### **Data Collection and Recording**

In this section I describe the study instruments: the FY interview questions (Appendix I), child welfare worker (CWW) interview questions (Appendix J), child welfare expert (CWE)

interview questions (Appendix K), and the questions for the child welfare advocates (CWA) (Appendix M). Concrete steps were taken to establish research credibility, determined by content and face validity, and data collection reliability. The importance of triangulation is also detailed. Finally, the study's phases of data collection are outlined. Table 1 identifies the data sources that answered the research questions that drove this study.

**Instrumentation.** The FY interview Guide (Appendix I), the discussion questions for the child welfare caseworker interviews (Appendix J) and child welfare experts (Appendix K), and the questions for child welfare advocates (Appendix M) are included as appendices as indicated. All instruments contain closed and open-ended questions. These tools were created by me based on what I identified in the literature as important factors in FY PSE access and persistence, and through my many years of personal and professional experience with this population.

**Establishing credibility.** Data collection tools were tested for content and face validity as follows.

**Content validity testing.** To establish content validity, Creswell (2014), asks “do the items measure the content they were intended to measure?” (p. 206). To do so Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), both within higher education research and in child welfare, critically reviewed the data collection tools to ensure that the questions were current, relevant, and did, in their expert opinions, gather valid information related to the research questions.

Four content experts who were not participants in the study provided feedback on the Interview Guides by completing the Content Validity Index developed by Lawshe as adapted by Lalonde (2015). These content experts were a CAAT Vice-President Academic, and three other

**Table 1. Sources of Data to answer the Research Questions**

Research Question	Data Collection Tool	Targeted Questions
#1: What are the English-speaking Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs) currently doing to directly or indirectly support FY in accessing and persisting in PSE in Ontario according to shared and publically available information?	Document/website analysis	Answered through document/website analysis
#2: What are the barriers that may prevent FY from accessing PSE in Ontario as perceived by FY, CWWs, CWEs, and CWAs?	FY Interview	2 a-c, g, h
	CWW Interview	4, 5, 7, 8
	CWE Interview	3, 4, 5
	CWA Interview	1-4
# 3: What are the barriers that may prevent enrolled FY from persisting in PSE in Ontario as perceived by the participants?	FY Interview	2 d-e, g, h
	CWW Interview	4, 5, 7, 8, 10d
	CWE Interview	3, 4, 5
	CWA Interview	1-4
# 4: What factors and/or supports could facilitate FY access to PSE in Ontario as perceived by the participants?	FY Interview	2 a-c, g, h
	CWW Interview	6, 9, 10c, 11
	CWE Interview	6, 8
	CWA Interview	5-7
#5: What factors and/or supports could facilitate FY persistence in PSE in Ontario as perceived by the participants?	FY Interview	2 d-e, g, h
	CWW Interview	6, 9, 10d, 11
	CWE Interview	7, 8
	CWA Interview	5-7

college employees (i.e., an academic program assistant and two learning facilitators within a college access program which supports many youth, and former youth, from care).

**Face validity testing.** Face validity tests whether an instrument's questions are worded in a non-leading way, and ensures their question sequence is also not leading (Anastasi, 1988). To establish face validity I asked colleagues in higher education and child welfare to review the tools to identify whether the questions were clear and whether they were leading in any way, by their wording or sequence. Through my work, child welfare connections, and history, I had professional contacts across these groups. Based on their feedback I then made minor revisions (e.g., creating more open-ended questions through a one-word change) to the instruments based on their feedback.

**Reliability.** Creswell (2014) describes reliability as a determination that "...scores to items on an instrument are internally consistent..., stable over time..., [and]...consistency in test administration and scoring" (p. 295). Procedural precautions were taken to ensure the integrity of the data and the data collection process. Participants were all given equal opportunity to respond to the study's questions. The same processes and procedures were followed in the handling and secure storage of all data.

**Triangulation of data.** The study involved both methodological and data triangulation, engaging and drawing data from different sources. Qualitative research obtained data from multiple sources (i.e., FY, child welfare workers, child welfare experts, child welfare advocates, colleges), and my engagement in content and document analysis, allowed for rich and indepth data and thematic analysis. Regarding the benefits of triangulation, Holtzhausen (2001, n.p.) states,

By not relying on a single method, researchers can be more confident of their research results, due to increased reliability and validity. Furthermore, by following a multimethod



research approach (i.e., triangulation) a more complete, holistic and contextual portrayal can be captured of the units under study. The understanding of human nature and social reality, where these phenomena are so enmeshed, is increased as well.

The interviews informed the study's questions on barriers and supports to access and persistence in PSE. Document analysis related directly to the initiatives, supports, policy, and programming at Ontario CAATs, provided a response to the first research question regarding what currently exists in the colleges to support FY in accessing and persisting in PSE.

### **Data Collection Process**

In this section I explain, and provide a rationale for, the four phases of data collection this study employed.

**Phase One: Document analysis.** In addition to engaging the voices of FY and child welfare workers/experts/advocates on FY PSE access and persistence through interviews, I investigated Ontario College of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT) initiatives, programs, policies, and services that (directly or indirectly) can assist FY on their PSE journey, from awareness through to persistence. I requested publicly available information from the colleges (Appendix F) and sourced these from college websites and marketing literature. To gain an understanding of the various Ontario CAAT initiatives, programs, policies and services targeted to, or that can assist, this population of learners (Research Question 1), I researched college offerings between June 2017 and May 2018. I reached out to each of the 22 English-speaking colleges to obtain access to relevant documents through email communications. I connected with the colleges by beginning the search for a Crown Ward Education Championship Team (CWECTs) contact (found in five colleges), and if that did not yield a contact, in descending order, a first Generation contact (found in eight colleges), Student Service contact (found in six colleges), Student Advisor contact (found in two colleges) or by general inquiry (found in one

college). I asked all 22 English language Ontario colleges to share documents and information to reflect as accurately as possible what is already offered in the system. If they did not share materials I investigated initiatives, programs, policies, and services that were profiled on the college websites by searching for key terms such as “crown ward”, “foster youth”, and “first generation.”

**Phase Two: Interviews with child welfare workers and experts.** To further clarify the status of FY PSE participation, and provide a professional perspective, I interviewed three child welfare workers and three child welfare experts in Ontario. They were asked to provide their perspective on the potential barriers and supports to PSE access and persistence among the FY demographic (Research Questions 2-5). With the participants’ consent, interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for content analysis. Transcripts were then sent to the interview participants for their review and revision as they saw fit.

Child welfare workers were interviewed in a private room at their agency location, or by phone. Again, this decision was made by each participant. Child welfare experts and advocates were also interviewed in their work locations or, if they preferred, by phone.

**Phase Three: Foster youth (FY) interviews.** A total of four FY were interviewed, three of whom were college students, and one was a university graduate. One was interviewed in a private space at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), one at Georgian College (Orillia campus), and two by phone. The decision regarding travelling to an interview location (with reimbursement) or completing the interview over the phone was made entirely by the FY participants. With participant consent, all four interviews were digitally recorded (audio only), and then each individual audio recording was transcribed and validated by the participant.

The interview questions (Appendix I) captured demographic information and elicited responses identified as relevant to access and persistence in PSE in the literature (Research Questions 2-5).

**Phase Four: Child welfare advocate interview.** Initially I wanted to include a focus group discussion with child welfare advocates working in the province, each of whom had lived experience of the system. However, the advocates, during my introduction to the research, expressed greater interest in one-on-one interviews rather than participation in a focus group. Only one of the child welfare advocates agreed to participate in an interview. I asked her the same questions I intended to use for the initial focus group discussion (Appendix M). The focus group questions also captured information relevant to FY access and persistence in PSE (Research Questions 2-5), in addition to inquiring about the advocate's lived experience of child welfare.

The child welfare advocate was interviewed, and she elected to do so over the phone. She did not consent to her interview being audio-recorded, instead opting for handwritten notes. These notes were then transcribed and sent to the advocate for her approval, any desired revision, and validation. She made minor revisions to her responses.

## **Data Analysis**

After collection of the data from the different sources, I conducted content analysis (Creswell, 2014) of the documents and all participant responses. I identified and compared themes from my analysis of transcribed interviews.

**Qualitative data analysis.** Following transcription of foster youth, child welfare worker, child welfare expert, and child welfare advocate interview responses, I identified barriers and supports along the post-secondary pathway this study has detailed. Creswell (2014) outlines six

steps in qualitative data analysis, from raw data collection through to theme interpretation/description. This research study was informed by this research analysis process as follows:

Each interview was transcribed into raw data using the audio-recording, or handwritten notes (in the case of the child welfare advocate interview). Once the interviews were closed, and the transcripts were reviewed by the relevant participant, I organized and prepared the data for analysis, grouping the different participant group (FY, CWW, CWE, CWA) transcripts. I then read through and coded all of the data using the study's research questions and the literature-informed post-secondary pathway, which includes five stages-preparation, awareness, engagement, transition, and persistence. This coding identified participant reported barriers and supports at all stages of the post-secondary pathway. I did this work by hand; I wrote in margins, underlined, and highlighted participant responses related to each stage. For example, when a FY spoke about educational disruption in early childhood due to having to move schools while in care, that was coded as a possible preparation stage barrier to access and persistence in PSE. From this coding, several themes emerged both within and between participant groups; the interrelatedness of responses became apparent. I kept reviewing the literature, and found that these themes were reflective of what had been identified by other researchers. As this study also included the voices of child welfare, experts, and advocates, in addition to foster youth themselves, subject matter experts were direct participants in this study. Additionally, my personal experiences with the child welfare system, and my occupational background as a one-to-one and supervised access worker for an Ontario child welfare agency, youth and adult counsellor in court diversion programming, and as an access program coordinator who works closely with students in and from care assisted me in identifying and extracting themes that were

aligned with the literature. In the final stage I engaged in interpretation of the most commonly identified barriers and supports throughout the post-secondary educational pathway, tying it back to the literature and theoretical constructs utilized to interpret the findings.

I followed a similar process in my review of the documents related to support programs and initiatives in participating Ontario colleges. Through the website searches during the data collection process I was easily able to identify whether each institution offered direct stand-alone programming and services for FY/crown wards, offered indirect programming and services through first generation or at-risk programming and services, or did not offer programming or supports. I then calculated the percentages of institutions offering various types of programming and services across the system, and tied the findings back to the literature, theoretical frameworks, and post-secondary pathway. The data provided a snapshot of the system's current, potentially efficacious, offerings at different stages of the post-secondary pathway. I also utilized my experience as a faculty member and program coordinator in the Ontario college system to speak to programming and services at Georgian, and the Community Integration through Co-operative Education program offered by the system.

**Quantitative data analysis.** Though this study was qualitative and utilized research methods designed to yield rich narrative responses, using the FY participants' demographic data I created a basic descriptive profile of the participants. I reported numbers and percents of data related to participant demographic characteristics. I did the same for Ontario college offerings system-wide.

### **Methodological Assumptions**

As Creswell identifies, a researcher's approach to study "...involves the intersection of philosophical assumptions, designs, and specific methods" (Creswell, 2014, p. 295). In this

study I utilized a qualitative research approach to begin the exploration of FY experiences with access and persistence in Ontario PSE. All interviewees lent their voices to provide rich and detailed responses to the interview questions which began the construction of a themed narrative around the topic.

It is an assumption, albeit a reasonable one, that the FY participant responses represented their honest perceptions as they recalled them. Since I had no line relationship, real or perceived undue influence over any of the participants, it is reasonable to assume that there was no perceived power differential between the participants and myself; participants had nothing to gain or lose based on their responses.

To provide additional insight, FY child welfare workers, experts, and advocates were also engaged. It is my assumption that together the voices of FY and child welfare workers, experts, and advocates across the province provided greater insight into the questions that drove this study. Their voices helped to begin to problematize the issues, and begin a conversation that could be used to improve post-secondary outcomes for FY. This latter belief, that this research could begin work in the advancement of social justice and evoke positive change, is in itself an assumption of the transformative philosophical worldview (Creswell, 2014).

Another assumption involved the belief that my lack of personal and professional relationship with these participants, and my role as interviewer, will not have influenced their responses. Additionally, I assume that, the child welfare workers, experts, and advocates, by virtue of their roles in child welfare, desired to contribute wholly and honestly to the interviews. As all participants' identities were also protected by the use of pseudonyms, there was no disincentive to their full participation and an honest reflection on both the positive and negative issues regarding FY PSE experiences.

## **Methodological Limitations**

The main limitation of this study is that the findings are not generalizable beyond the study participants. However, generalizability is not the purpose of qualitative or exploratory research (Creswell, 2014). To engage participants who were classified as FY, child welfare workers, experts and advocates, the sampling was purposive and not a random sample, hence generalizability is not possible.

Another limitation is the absence of data to enable direct comparison between FY and non-foster youth access and persistence in post-secondary education. However, the Canadian and international data point to inequity in rates of PSE enrollment and attainment by FY when compared with their non-foster peers (Conference Board of Canada, 2014; Finnie, 2012; Kirk & Day, 2011). To provide an indepth profile and explanation of the state of FY access and persistence in Ontario PSE, I decided to focus this exploratory study solely on problematizing PSE access and persistence, and ultimately these lower rates, from the perspective of the FY themselves, and child welfare workers, experts, and advocates whose primary employment role was to protect and/or advocate for FY.

A well recognized limitation is related to the self-report methodology. Hoskin (2012) identifies several potential issues that may exist, among them participants' honesty and desire to manage their image, varying introspective abilities, potential problems with comprehension, and an incorrect interpretation of the questions. However, the latter may have been remedied through interviewer question clarification. However, academic literature also suggests that the opportunity to reflect in self-reporting can produce valuable insights not only for the researcher but for the participants themselves.

Another limitation is that some of the data requested relied on recall of past experience and human memory is fallible; some memories decay and our memories for events is not always accurate. For example, our emotional states, both during memory formation and recall, also affect what we remember (Williams, Conway & Cohen, 2008).

As has been extensively identified in the literature, (e.g., Batsche et al., 2014, Day et. al, 2012, Hines et. al, 2005, Kirk et. al, 2011, Merdinger et. al, 2005, Rassen et. al, 2010) that FY are a vulnerable and disadvantaged population. Many FY have been traumatized at one or more points in their lives. The information they provide and the questions they are asked to respond to could trigger negative memories or experiences and potentially cause emotional distress. It was very important to ensure that experts and resources in crisis and counselling support were immediately available to study participants. All FY participants were provided (at the time of the interview) with a list of crisis, mental health, and counselling supports and resources in their home community. I also made clear on the informed consent form (Appendix G) in advance of interview participation that they could decline to answer any questions or cease to participate at any time. The child welfare workers, experts, and advocates were told the same, as they too may have experienced stress in answering interview questions. None of the participants overtly demonstrated an undue stress or anxiety in my interviews with them.

### **Ethical Issues and Considerations**

All study participants were required to provide informed consent (Appendices G & H) as described in the invitations to participate. After they indicated their interest to be interviewed, I negotiated a time and confidential place for our interview-whether in person or by phone. In person interviews were conducted in private meeting rooms at child welfare agencies, in the OISE library, or at the Georgian College Orillia campus library. All phone interviews were



conducted behind a closed door in my private office. Before the interview began, I reviewed the informed consent documents and main ethical considerations with participants, answered any questions they had, and then asked them to sign the consent form. All who had agreed to participate signed the form. Those participating by phone were asked to email me a copy of their signed consent forms, which were sent to them digitally in advance.

All the participants were assured that participation in the study was entirely voluntary, that they were free to decline any question(s) they did not wish to answer, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without explanation or penalty. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the interview by terminating the interview without explanation or study anytime after the interview by contacting me by any means. Until data aggregation began all information they provided would be deleted and not included in the study findings. After this it was not possible to delete data previously provided. No participants withdrew from this study post-interview.

Participants were assured that they would be non-identifiable in all reporting of the findings in publications or professional conference presentations; only pseudonyms would be used. Digital recordings of all interviews were deleted as soon as they were transcribed. Additionally, all participants had the opportunity to review their transcripts, and revise or delete their responses before data aggregation. Following interview transcription, I sent a copy of the interview to each specific participant. Two participants modified one original response each to study questions, to improve clarity or expand on their meaning.

Data collection did not begin until I received official approval for the protocol from the Research Ethics Board of the University of Toronto (U of T), and from the participating child welfare agencies in Ontario (through the OACAS ethics approval process). Participants were

provided with the contact information of the U of T Research Ethics Board in all call for participation and informed consent documents (Appendices B, D, E, F, G, H & L) in case they had any questions about their rights as research participants. All Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and University of Toronto ethical guidelines were followed. I successfully completed the TCPS2 Course on Research Ethics (CORE) months before initiating active research.

In February 2018, I pursued an official amendment to the study's research protocol with the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board to allow the inclusion of another participant group, child welfare advocates. This transpired as I was contacted by an individual who was connected to a child welfare advocacy group. They had heard of my research (through dissemination of the foster youth call for participation), and believed there may be child welfare advocates interested in participating in a focus group on the study topic at an upcoming meeting. I received ethics approval for this amendment-the inclusion of a child welfare advocacy focus group, based on the proposed child welfare interview guide (Appendix M), originally intended to be asked in a focus group format. In the end, after phone-in attendance at one meeting of this child welfare advocacy committee, where I was given the opportunity to briefly outline the research, potential participants shared that they would prefer a one-on-one interview. As such, individuals were invited to participate in a one-on-one interview, structured exactly as those conducted with the other participant groups. In order to receive specific details on the study, each potential participant had to express an interest in writing (through an email communication) following the meeting. Individuals were not approached and coerced into participating, but came forward following my introduction of the research via phone at the meeting. The call for

participation (Appendix L) and informed consent form (Appendix H) was emailed to each interested potential participant.

Participants were informed of the true nature of the study, and no deception was used. Due to the sensitive nature of the information the FY and child welfare workers, experts, and advocates provided, consistent with the requirements of research ethics, participant non-identifiability (through pseudonyms) and confidentiality of data were kept secure and protected throughout the research process and beyond the study's completion.

As someone who has had personal life experiences related to the child welfare system, I remained cognizant of my own story and its potential ability to interfere with my own experience, and interpretation of participant responses. I am highly aware that my own experiences, and those of my family members are not generalizable to the whole. They are simply the stories of one person, one family, just as my study participants' experiences do not reflect the experiences of all foster youth, child welfare workers, experts, and advocates in this province. I made a concerted effort, and approached every participant interview from the perspective of a researcher seeking knowledge, intentionally setting my personal biases aside to ensure I did not taint participant responses, or create a leading tone as I asked the questions. I asked the questions plainly, as they were written, and recorded and transcribed participant responses, verbatim. When I asked for clarification on a particular response it was done so in a non-leading manner and only when required to enhance the clarity of a participant's response. For example, I asked participants to provide full names for programs and services they initially referenced by acronym, or asked them to provide additional detail regarding something they mentioned for which I had no knowledge.

## **Summary and Restatement of Research Focus**

This study asked the compelling, timely, and important question of what the challenges and barriers were and what could be done to enhance access to and persistence in PSE among FY, currently an under-represented group among learners in Ontario's post-secondary educational institutions. This exploratory study offers initial insights into barriers and supports involved in FY access and persistence within post-secondary education in Ontario. This is vital as "understanding factors related to the educational success of former foster youth is a critical step in efforts to improve program and service delivery to all youth whose lives have been affected by childhood maltreatment and its accompanying stressors" (Merdinger et al., 2005, p. 893).

My intention in conducting this study was to bring attention to the plight of FY in our province and to improve educational outcomes for this marginalized group. Why does this matter? As Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, and Colvin so succinctly state, "Although the experience of foster care presents a number of challenges to youth, the hope of obtaining a college education presents a way to move beyond those challenges and into stable adulthood" (p. 319).

## Chapter Four: Findings

As Otto and Ziegler (2006) who write on capabilities and education explain, “...educational and welfare institutions should be evaluated according to their impact on people’s present and future capabilities” (p. 275).

In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of the participants, and then describe the findings of the research efforts in phases one through four. This chapter provides an overview of the information discovered about the diverse Ontario college system supports, services, and programs designed to serve foster youth/crown ward learners on their post-secondary journey. I also touch on initiatives, supports, services, and programs, which, though not specifically designed for FY as a group, may indirectly support FY post-secondary preparation, awareness, engagement, transition, and persistence.

### Participants

Table 2 depicts the number of participants in each group. As it was not possible to identify how many individuals received the invitations to participate, because of the varied recruitment methods required, it is not possible to calculate response rates for most of the groups.

I now present the findings from all sources that answer the specific research questions that drove this study. In the next chapter I discuss these findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks that grounded the study and the relevant literature reviewed.

**Ontario College Resources.** In Phase One of this study, Ontario Colleges were contacted in effort to answer **Research Question 1: What are the English-speaking Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs) currently doing to directly or indirectly support foster youth in accessing and persisting in post-secondary in Ontario?**

**Table 2 . Study participants by participant group**

<b>Participant Category</b>	<b>Number Invited (through Call for Participation documents)</b>	<b>Number Participated</b>	<b>Response Rate</b>
<b>Document Analysis:</b>			
Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts & Technology	22	0	All 22 college websites reviewed as no documents shared
<b>Interviews with:</b>			
Foster Youth/Former foster Youth	Unknown	4	Unknown
Child Welfare Workers	Unknown	3	Unknown
Child Welfare Experts	7	3	42.8%
Child Welfare Advocates	3	1	33.3%
<b>Total Participants Interviewed</b>		<b>11</b>	

Of the 22 college websites searched Centennial, Sault, and St. Lawrence (n=3;13.6%) advertised support programs within the school which directly targeted crown wards, though not necessarily exclusively (these will be described in greater detail below). Durham College was also recognized by the Durham Children's Aid Society in 2013 for its work in partnering with the agency to advance educational opportunities for youth in care.

Another form of support offered by several colleges involved outreach into the child welfare community. Algonquin and Cambrian (n=2; 9.1%) offered recent stand-alone day-long marketing and experiential events for future crown ward students (Algonquin-Crown Ward Event Day on March 24, 2017 and Cambrian-Explore Your Possibilities Day on March 10, 2017). Humber, Seneca, Sheridan, and Conestoga (n=4; 18.1%) offered events, several years ago (Humber two YouthCAN annual conferences (2014, 2015), Seneca-a CWECT symposium in 2013 and five YouthCAN annual conferences (2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013), Sheridan two annual YouthCAN annual conferences (2007, 2010), and Conestoga-a crown ward workshop in 2010).

Algonquin, Cambrian, Georgian, Loyalist, and Niagara (n=5; 22.7%) offered more indirect support mentioning crown ward students in their first-generation programming, or by providing a Crown Ward Education Championship Team (CWECT) contact.

Many colleges across the system identified financial supports to crown wards. Cambrian, Centennial, Conestoga, Confederation, George Brown, Fanshawe, Sault, St. Clair, and St. Lawrence (n=9; 41%) colleges advertised specific financial supports to crown wards, often with a reference to the monies and funding available through the MCYS (Living and Learning grant, Extended Care and Maintenance) based on their status as crown wards, or the Children's Aid Foundation, and some referred to tuition coverage after the province's encouragement that PSE institutions cover the cost of tuition for crown wards (Sault, Centennial, St. Lawrence). One institution (Cambrian) offered a stand-alone scholarship; the Evelyn Koski Crown Ward Assistance Award, a legacy gift from a woman who spent her career as an educator and child welfare advocate. Another (St. Clair) has a memorial scholarship and it identifies that the applicants outline their experience with the Children's Aid Society.

Of the 22 English-speaking Ontario CAATs, Canadore, Mohawk, and Northern (n=3; 13.6%) made no mention of crown ward or foster youth supports on their websites, though they do have information on first generation programming.

The three colleges (13.6%) that offered the most extensive supports were Centennial, Sault, and St. Lawrence. Of these, Sault College's stand-alone model, which specifically targeted crown wards, was highlighted as an exemplar in a 2016 Colleges and Institutes Canada report on supporting disadvantaged learners. I review it first and then provide details on the other two college offerings.

Financially, Sault is one of the Ontario colleges that supplements the child welfare funding to provide foster youth with free tuition. However, their learner engagement, transition, and persistence supports were where they stand apart. Sault staff on the CWECT, along with team members from the local school board and child welfare agency, have undertaken many initiatives to reach youth in care and to provide them with support throughout their post-secondary career. They created a video to highlight the realities of life faced by students in care, and hosted a Championship Day where crown wards, teachers, counsellors, social workers, and foster parents gathered to explore and discuss student needs and develop plans for support. They also held an information night on college specifically for youth in care, solidified a memorandum of understanding between the college and the school boards to allow data sharing to support these youth, and created both an information page for crown wards on the college website and a promotional page on the child welfare agency website. Finally, all students from care were guaranteed residence, assigned a specific contact person, and provided tailored transition and resource guides to support them as they entered and completed their college educations (Colleges and Institutes Canada, 2016, *Changing Lives through Championship*, p. 47).



Centennial College offered crown wards, and other students who were at an economic and social disadvantage, from underserved neighbourhoods in Toronto, the HYPE program, which stands for Helping Youth Pursue Education. The program provided access to a six-week, no-cost (tuition and resources covered) college course offered from a breadth of the college's program portfolios. Students also received life skills instruction, and additional academic preparation if they were interested in pursuing post-secondary education. If they completed the course within the HYPE program, they were eligible for full-time entry to Centennial, and for bursary funding if, and when, they pursued post-secondary studies at the institution.

St. Lawrence College in collaboration with the regional CWECT, offered an on-campus Dare, Dream, and Do mentorship and peer support program for youth in and exiting care to help them build awareness, engage, and transition to post-secondary studies at the institution.

Georgian College offered no direct programming or support for youth in care or aging out of care. For the last seven years, I coordinated a program at the College which has a high proportion of foster youth and former foster youth. Three years ago one of my incoming students emailed the crown ward contact a question regarding foster youth-specific bursaries and funding. The inquiry was forwarded to the Community Integration through Co-operative Education (CICE) program office where staff were asked if they could assist and were aware of the funding. As the post-secondary funding in question was specific to youth in the care of child welfare the CWECT was intended to be the bridge between the two sectors. Aside from Community Nights which invite everyone in the community to visit the College's campus locations and learn about its programs, and what it takes to become a college student, I am uncertain of any targeted FY/crown ward initiatives, through partnership with child welfare agencies or school boards, at Georgian College.

The Ontario College program, Community Integration through Co-operative Education (CICE), is an example of a Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU) governed post-secondary certificate program that, though not designed specifically for foster youth, assists many FY across the system to become aware of post-secondary options, engage, transition, and persist in PSE. CICE is currently offered at 13 Ontario English-speaking colleges (Conestoga, Confederation, Durham, Fanshawe, Fleming, Georgian, Lambton, Loyalist, Mohawk, Niagara, Sault, St. Clair, St. Lawrence) in addition to the French-language college La Cité in Ottawa. Though there are qualitative differences between the college CICE programs a core feature common to all is additional in-program transition and persistence supports. The program offers its students a supplemental orientation to college, and daily academic support through a complement of academic support staff who attend classes with students, note-take, facilitate group work integration, accommodate and modify learning materials and assessments to individual learner needs, and provide tutor and support sessions outside of class to scaffold and facilitate optimal learning. The program also provides support with college community integration in the form of intentional and guided connection with college supports, services, and extracurricular programming. Though foster youth are more likely to experience disability or learning challenges, of course not all do. However, utilizing a universal design perspective, the supports CICE programs offer Ontario college students could be of benefit wide-scale. In the Georgian program, it is common for students outside of CICE to seek the support of CICE Learning Facilitators (LFs) in their classes. However, since LFs are unique to the CICE programs at Ontario's colleges, they are not able to assist students in other programs when they attend the same classes to support CICE learners.

More generally, system-wide, Ontario's colleges offer high school presentations and open houses to market and spread awareness about program offerings, summer transition programs specific to all students with disabilities (e.g., at Georgian, a two-week course designed to build college readiness is offered to incoming students on the autism spectrum before the semester begins for which they receive a college credit), and college-wide orientation in the first weeks of classes.

In addition to secondary research pertaining to Ontario College offerings, I asked four primary research questions. Each of these is identified, and their data sources (and specific questions) detailed in Chapter 3, Table 1. I outline the findings of the qualitative data gleaned from each of the interviewed groups for each of these questions below. All participant names, unless otherwise indicated, are pseudonyms.

**Research Question 2.** The second Research Question, answered through primary research, asked “**What are the barriers that may prevent foster youth from accessing post-secondary education in Ontario as perceived by foster youth, child welfare workers, child welfare experts, and child welfare advocates ?**”

All participant groups: foster youth, and child welfare workers, experts, and advocates, answered questions designed to obtain this information during their interviews. The specific questions in each interview guide, by participant group, which relate to this question are outlined in Table 1, and interview guides for all groups are located in Appendices I, J, K, and M respectively.

**Foster youth interviews.** My initial target for foster youth participants was 20. Despite extensive efforts to share information on the study, and invitations to participate sent to 18-28-year-old foster, and former foster, youth who met the inclusion criteria only four individuals

agreed to participate in my study. The four foster youths provided insight into this question through their responses to several questions on the foster youth interview guide (Appendix I). These foster youths who consented to participate, and followed-through with the interview, were from Toronto, Peterborough, Thunder Bay, and Geraldton.

Embedded in the Interview questions (Questions 1-4) are several demographic questions designed to capture variables that I identified in the literature as possible barriers to foster youth access in post-secondary education. The foster youth participants interviewed in this study were primarily studying at the Ontario college level (three of the four participants), and ranged in age from 20 to 26. Two of the participants identified as being of Chinese or Asian background, one identified as having Indigenous heritage, and another said she was not aware of her racial-ethnic background but identified as European.

These FY entered care at different ages (ranging from three years of age through 13-14 years of age), and experienced different lengths of time in the care of the province's child welfare system (ranging from four and a half to 18 years in care). Two of the FY participants had disruptions in care and entered the system twice. The number of foster care placements experienced by the FY participants ranged from one to a staggering 25 times. All participants attended more than one elementary school. Three of the four participants graduated high school with an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD), while one participant did not graduate high school, leaving after Grade 11.

As all four FY participants had attended, or were attending, college or university, they had accessed post-secondary, and either persisted, or were in the process of persisting, to graduation. So, even if they experienced some of the barriers presented in the literature, they

were able to access PSE. Two of the FY sample accessed PSE as mature students. Table 3 depicts in detail the demographic profiles of these four FY participants.

These FY provided many insights into potential barriers to post-secondary access Ontario's FY may experience in their other responses. For example, in sharing her thoughts about her academic performance in high school (Question 1 d.), Elaina stated

I was missing school earlier on...because I've kind of had bumps the whole way through because of emotional things going on or stuff in my family or in foster homes. So, it kind of brought my grades down. I didn't want to go to school.

Elaina also shared experiences of trauma in the child welfare system, stating

...I've cried to my worker many times about the same emotionally abusive foster home for four years, and only at the very end when the foster mom kicked me out did the worker then say, 'I should have listened to you Elaina.' And, I was 14 years old. By then the damage was already done.

Mike, in describing his awareness of PSE options (Question 2 a. iii) stated, "...finding out what options were available to me, I had to really go for that. I felt that no one really approached me with that". Mike also eventually applied to a college because he felt that university would be out of reach for him due to his poorer academic performance in high school. He indicated planning to pursue Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Social Work following the completion of his Social Service Worker diploma.

Louise also shared her challenge with attending school as a child,

...Growing up I didn't go to elementary school that much so, like reading, I was very low on everything. Like I wasn't where I needed to be, so I found it very hard...when I lived with my mom, because she was either not home or sleeping-she wouldn't get us up in the morning-so I didn't go to school that much. Or, if I did go, it was like a half day-like whatever time we got up.

**Table 3. Foster Youth Demographic Overview**

<b>Foster Youth (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Age (Q 3 a.)</b>	<b>Age entry to care (Q 4 a.)</b>	<b>High school (Q 1 b.)</b>	<b>Special education resources utilized (Q 1 c.)</b>	<b>High school academic performance (Q 1 d.)</b>	<b>Age aware of PSE options (Q 2 a.iii)</b>	<b>How learned about PSE options (Q 2 a. iv)</b>
Mike	23	6-7 and 13-14 yrs	No.	None	“For things I tried in, I did well...but mostly low”.	“I guess grade 9ish...but the bridge from high school to college was like, totally not clear to me”	High school, but it was unclear. “I didn’t want to be that one person asking”.
Kaitlyn	26	8 yrs. and “back in for good at 13”	Yes-OSSD	IEP (gifted)	“...I did fairly well...had a dip in my performance toward the end of high school but overall I was a strong student”	“...7 or 8, definitely during elementary school. I always had the expectation that I would go to university”	“I’d say through teachers and my parents.”
Elaina	21	5 yrs.	Yes-OSSD	Yes. Tests and homework in the learning centre. (dysthymia, PTSD, anxiety, insomnia)	“I was a really good student; my environment affected the way I did...I didn’t do the grade 11 or 12 exams”.	“Like 8 years old”	“My foster parent would sit down with me and make me memorize stuff, he would say “I want you to go to high school, I want you to go to college...”
Louise	20	3 yrs.	Yes-OSSD	IEP-used the student success room, and EAs	“School was definitely one of the biggest struggles growing up...”	14	“After moving in with my aunt and uncle...they talked to us about it...”

Kaitlyn, a University of Toronto law school graduate, who had, by all accounts, achieved success with her Juris Doctor degree, shared sentiments about the child welfare system, and her own living environment within the foster care environment. She believed the foster group home environment could act as a barrier to her PSE access, for some youth in care. She stated,

...the living environment is often not conducive to academic success because you don't have any privacy, you don't have any quiet working space, you are possibly living with other youth who are going through their own difficulties and that certainly doesn't, I don't think, encourage academic success.

Kaitlyn also shared her experience with aging-out at the same time as she was trying to pursue university studies in law and social work. She stated,

You age-out of the system when you are 18-you receive some extended financial support until you are 21-but you are often cut off entirely while you are in the process of pursuing your academic goals. So, you know, there is a lot of stress thinking about "Where is the money going to come from?" for rent, groceries, for just basic needs let alone entertainment or doing other things you want to do. So aside from the tuition I think that there is a lot of general stress and anxiety about where that is going to come from.

Kaitlyn further discussed the importance of messaging. She explained that what she heard from child welfare workers about her perceived educational possibilities could be limiting to other youth in care. Kaitlyn had workers tell her not to pressure herself in pursuing PSE. According to Kaitlyn, workers stated "You've already achieved a lot more success than other youth in your position. No one is expecting you to go to university or to graduate school." She indicated that because she expected to complete PSE from an early age she did not allow these sentiments to faze her! However, she did acknowledge that for other youth in care, as an authority's educational expectation for them, these comments could act as a deterrent from PSE access and persistence, preventing them "...from going, or even applying, to see if they would get in".

**Child welfare worker interviews.** I interviewed three child welfare workers for this study. These welfare workers worked in and around Bruce and Grey counties, Durham region,

and the London-Middlesex area. These agencies differ not only geographically but by size - with totals of youth supported estimated at 150, 630, and 760 respectively. These workers had worked between 12.5 and 24 years with children and youth in care, and two of the workers estimated that they supported four or five youth in high school and approaching adulthood each year, while the other estimated 12-13 of the youth they supported were approaching 18 or older in a given year.

Each of the workers had supported youth who did access post-secondary education in the province (though they did not necessarily persist as outlined later), including colleges, apprenticeships, and universities. The colleges their youth had attended included Georgian, Humber, Seneca, Centennial, Sault, Durham, Loyalist, and Fanshawe. The universities their youth had accessed included Wilfred Laurier University, Trent University, University of Ottawa, University of Windsor, and the University of Toronto. Collectively, the youth they had supported accessed Ontario's colleges with greater frequency than Ontario universities. They did not indicate why this was the case, only that it was.

Question 7 of the child welfare worker interview guide (Appendix J) asked the respondents to describe the level of interest in pursuing PSE among the youth they support. One worker, Joanne, stated

Level of interest is low. Very low. And the reason is believing they can't, through tons of messaging that they're hearing while they are growing up-through the education system, through family life, through prior workers, it is constantly a challenge.

Another worker, Faye, noted a decrease in interest in post-secondary education by foster youth in the past couple of years, indicating that the PSE support group run by her agency had been cancelled as a result. Ruthven, a YouthCAN champion at his agency, indicated that he has supported many youths aging out of care, and is an adoptive father of a former youth in care who is approaching adulthood. He shared,



I can only speak from my own experiences - I think that the youth genuinely want to go, in that they think that it is the next step in their lives, but the more that they find out about what it entails-the amount of dedication, the investment, and the time and energy it is going to take to be successful at that level, that's where I think some barriers start to occur. And again, it is that self-defeating, gaps in self-esteem, that feeling of "I can't do this" starts to creep in...it speaks to their age, chronological and developmental because there are going to be some developmental gaps given all the trauma they've experienced, so they tend to shut down. And that's where that supportive adult needs to be there.

In response to Questions 4 and 5 of the child welfare worker interview guide (Appendix J), each of the workers described their experience working with youth aging-out of the system and shared what they believed were the most serious challenges faced by youth aging-out of the system. In addition to a more pointed question later in the interview (Question 8), these initial questions were utilized to get at FY life factors that could influence their access to PSE. Some of their thoughts are outlined here.

Ruthven cited deficits in preparation for independence, and a lack of personal support, as the primary challenges faced by foster youth aging out of the system. He stated,

I don't think you can prepare an 18-year-old youth, regardless of their background, to be successful living independently, successful at least in terms of reaching their full potential. There are too many challenges. Our youth need people and our youth in care lack consistent, stable, dedicated, non-paid adults who are going to constantly be pushing them, picking them up, and dusting them up.

Joanne, who indicated that youth approaching the aging-out age dominated her caseload, indicated numerous struggles for this demographic. She stated,

...they haven't yet processed their grief, they are still trying to work through the relationship with their families, possible addictions and mental health that have not yet been addressed, involvement with the criminal system, developing a strong supportive relationship in the community they can turn to once they have aged out of care, housing stability, poverty, employment...

Joanne, in her response to Question 5, about specific barriers to access to PSE also pointed out that FY struggle with education in general. She indicated that not only is their attendance often affected by their status as youth in care, but that there is a lack of connection

with school systems which can act as a significant barrier. She shared, “Being in high school and struggling to invest in their education because they don’t feel their education system is invested in them...they may find a teacher who cares, but mostly not-especially in high school”.

In contrast, Faye indicated

Some youth have actually said it is nice to have the door closed because CAS has always been in their life, that it is a new chapter in a positive way. I would say that most youth though are very anxious about turning 21.

Faye pointed to financial barriers and concerns that they would not be able to complete their education, be it post-secondary or high school, as the primary challenges faced by youth aging out of system.

Question 8 (Appendix J) asked the child welfare workers “What would you describe as the biggest barriers, or roadblocks, to post-secondary education in the young people you support? Why?” As a group, the respondents identified awareness and navigation of the application process, emotional support, financial support, a lack of self-awareness, fear of failure, and a lack of self-confidence as the barriers to accessing post-secondary. One worker, Faye, highlighted the importance of supportive individuals in the lives of FY. She stated “Our agency is pretty big on family-based care, making sure that our youth are supported by family members or by a foster parent. So hopefully the support is there...they have other people surrounding them, encouraging them to graduate.”

**Child welfare expert interviews.** I interviewed three child welfare experts for this study. These experts worked in diverse areas. This included the following: a manager within a regional hospital mental health program supporting youth and aged-out adults from care, who worked on a Crown Ward Education Championship Team at an Ontario college in a previous role whom I identify by the pseudonym “Des”, a faculty member within a post-secondary institution (in the

Child and Youth Care, Social Service Worker, and Mental Health and Addictions programs) with a background as a foster care manager identified by the pseudonym “Richard”, and Jane Kovarikova, a child welfare system researcher and president of a child welfare advocacy group working to reform the child welfare system through political action. Of these three individuals, Jane Kovarikova, President of the Child Welfare Political Action Committee, consented to be identified. The other two remain anonymous at their request, and they selected their own pseudonyms.

I interviewed each participant using the Child Welfare Expert interview guide (Appendix K). Despite their divergent employment sectors and life experiences (two were crown wards in their childhood and youth), the opinion of the three experts converged when asked to share challenges, barriers, or roadblocks experienced by youth in the system, both generally and when they tried to access post-secondary education. Questions 3-5 of the interview guide asked the respondents about their opinions on the most serious challenges faced by youth while in care, as they age out, and in accessing PSE.

In response to Question 3, the three expert participants identified varied factors posing challenge to Ontario’s FY. On a micro level those identified included a lack of connection to others, inconsistent support in life, trauma and mental health, and impermanency (changing home and educational environments). On a macro, systemic level, Kovarikova, herself a former youth in care, stated

I think the absolute, most significant challenge for youth in the system is that the system imposes policies and programs on them that are not evidence-based, nor that measure their own impact. So, when youth go through the system, they are recipients of some services, programs, and even policies, but none of those policies ever check back to see if they actually improved children’s life outcomes.

Question 4 of the interview guide asked, “In your opinion, what are the most serious challenges faced by youth aging out of Ontario’s child welfare system?” Des noted that “...there are life lessons that you get at home that you don’t get when you are in foster care”, and Richard said, “Parental support...involves knowing that you will have the same consistent individual(s) checking in on you, providing statements of validations, affirmations, and compliments to you as encouragement on a regular basis.”

Question 5 asked the experts, “What would you describe as the biggest barriers, or roadblocks, to post-secondary education in the young people you support or represent and why?” Kovarikova, in response to question five, stated “Many foster children come from disadvantaged backgrounds and experience disrupted life trajectories so it leaves gaps in knowledge useful for future success”. Des and Richard identified numerous factors that can be access limiting for youth in and from care. Richard pointed to the system as the biggest barrier, indicating that “...children in care need to receive support up to at least the age of 25 to have the same chances and opportunities as everyone else.” He believed that if the system could help youth create meaning and connection in their lives, while maintaining greater home and educational environment stability in their younger years, their post-secondary opportunities and aspirations would have a greater likelihood of fulfillment. Des asked a highly poignant question, which elucidates her opinion on the greatest barrier to PSE for young people in and exiting from care. She shared “When you fundamentally don’t understand self-love, why would you do something that would produce self-fulfillment?” She identified trauma, lack of personal resources, lack of knowledge, and lack of encouragement as factors involved in decreased access, or barriers to access, among youth in, and exiting from, care.

**Child welfare advocate interview.** Though my intention was to engage a focus group of child welfare advocates through connection with the Child Welfare Political Action Committee, those advocates who indicated an interest in participating shared a preference for one-on-one interviews. Following an explanation of the study at a Child Welfare Political Action Committee meeting in May 2018, a total of three child welfare advocates indicated an interest in participating in the study and reached out to the researcher by email. However, after receiving the emailed informed consent (Appendix H) and call for participation (Appendix L) documents and learning about the focus of the study and the types of questions it would ask, only one child welfare advocate proceeded to complete the interview. This child welfare advocate, whom I refer to by the pseudonym “Ace”, worked as a forensic pathologist and coroner, and had lived experience in Ontario’s child welfare system.

Regarding Research Question 2 (Appendix M), on barriers to PSE access, Ace pointed to what she called the “disposable” nature of FY which creates a child welfare system that prioritizes physical shelter over everything else. Ace believed the lack of good parenting of children and youth in care, is the most serious challenge to setting them up for success and facilitating access and success in PSE and life beyond. She saw basic skills deficits, a lack of resilience, and poor outcomes as resultant of this poor parenting. She shared,

If the government is being a parent, it really needs to consider what that is...Instead, the roles a mother plays are siloed into different jobs by the system and there is a lack of communication between them. So, children’s holistic needs are not addressed, and they fall through the holes/gaps in care. Of course, youth still need opportunities to test limits and fail, but within the context of a good parenting environment. If the goal of the system was to ensure youth in care become contributing members of society, like parents for their children, then youth in care would not be handed a binder when they age out (on how to avoid STDs/not get pregnant, etc.), but be prepared.

Ace believed that the stigma around FY, their disposability, stress specific to being a youth in care and aging out, and the lack of positive role models (e.g., former youth in care who go on to be successful) also plays a role in limiting their access to PSE.

**Research Question 3.** The third Research Question the study investigated was **“What are the barriers that may prevent enrolled foster youth from persisting in post-secondary education in Ontario as perceived by the participants?”**

Each of the participant groups responded to questions designed to capture this information. Table 1 in Chapter One demonstrates how each participant interview guide links to Research Question 3.

**Foster youth interviews.** All four foster youth participants had post-secondary experience and had completed their studies or were in the process of doing so, at the time of their interviews. Though a disappointingly small sample, there were commonalities identified as barriers by participants. Question 2 d-h (d & e each with multiple sub-questions) of the Foster Youth Interview Guide (Appendix I) gathered information related to each participant’s unique experience with PSE, and elicited thoughts and beliefs about the importance of PSE and FY opportunity within it.

The most commonly identified barrier to success in PSE mentioned by the participants is an insufficient support system, ranging from financial to emotional support. Although he indicated he is experiencing success in college, Mike stated “...all my friends, they just have extensive support systems through family and friends. I don’t really have that”. Mike also mentioned that he was not taught or did not learn the skills some of his non-FY peers had that contribute to a good work ethic, and so dealing with a stressful school workload posed a

challenge. Mike did not find finances a barrier to his persistence unlike some of the other youth, pointing to the fact that he lived with his sister and paid cheap rent, and that the bursaries and extended care monies for crown wards in PSE was very helpful.

Kaitlyn had a different experience when she pursued graduate level studies. She ran into monetary barriers while trying to fund her law school education as “...their financial aid program is premised on assessing, not only the student’s financial situation but also their parents’ financial situation...there is an assumption that students are getting financial assistance from their parents”. Even after Kaitlyn disclosed that she was a crown ward, without access to parental financial information or support, the institution told her she was not eligible for financial aid. She ended up relying on OSAP and a line of credit to pay the full \$30,000 annual tuition. Kaitlyn also shared that unlike non-FY youth peers, who have better supports and an opportunity to rebound from a momentary struggle, or lapse in progress, within PSE “...a blip that former foster youth face while they are in school, it can turn into catastrophe, because, you know, they tend to fall like dominoes and there is an effect”.

Elaina, disclosed a very negative experience growing up in the child welfare system and shared that she regularly accessed counselling so that her emotional exhaustion did not cause her to procrastinate, miss classes, or her grades to suffer. She shared,

...if you are in college, your teacher might not even know if you were a foster kid and that still might be affecting how you do work if you have been in the care, for like 20 years, so umm, you have emotional scarring and I mean, if you have a disorder or a disability it might make it worse. They don’t know about your home, how many foster parents you had, and if they didn’t teach you how to read, or help you emotionally, or support you in any way.

Additional barriers identified by participants included trauma, and a chaotic living environment. Louise, who was in the midst of studying Child and Youth Care, pointed to past trauma as a potential barrier in her specific program. She indicated that, though she was loving

her program and had very supportive professors and classmates, "...it's very emotionally hard because you have to go through a lot of your past...to help kids, you have to get past your own things". Elaina, also in a Child and Youth Care program, described the program as "triggering" and underlined the importance of being able to ask for support when you struggle. As aging-out occurs between 18-21 years of age, Kaitlyn shared that many FY are still in care when they begin PSE, and that their home environments may be chaotic,

...often not conducive to academic success because you don't have any privacy, you don't have any quiet working space, you are possibly living with other youth who are going through their own difficulties and that certainly doesn't, I don't think, encourage academic success.

**Child welfare worker interviews.** At many points in the child welfare worker interview (Appendix J), the participants commented on factors involved in, and detracting from, FY PSE persistence. What they shared is largely congruent with that shared by the FY participants in this study, and themes that I identified in the literature. They highlighted a lack of support people and positive social connection to family and friends, inadequate preparation for academic success, and the extra adult-life demands FY face compared to their peers who are not in care.

Joanne shared that a focus on building educational connections, and fostering a sense of community, for FY would assist them in accessing and experiencing success within PSE. She said,

We need to build community so that these youths feel a sense of community in the education system... Within the college and university systems we definitely need people to attend the high schools on a regular basis, like a liaison...so that it [PSE] becomes familiar, and it doesn't become this unrealistic, unachievable, daunting experience.

Faye recalled hearing comments from former youth in care regarding the lack of familial support and feeling overwhelmed with life responsibilities while in school. She shared how this might feel from a foster youth's perspective,



My peer group doesn't have as much on their plate as I do because they have a mom and dad that is still doing their laundry or helping them out, floating some cash every now and then for things like gas money.

Faye expressed concerns over changing staff, and staff roles, within PSE institutions, and how these shifts can weaken supports for FY. She also indicated that PSE administration were inconsistent in how they responded to FY who found themselves struggling. While some were understanding, willing to consider circumstances,

...other deans are not as forgiving-it is what it is, they are not hearing that our youth may be having flashbacks, or they might be struggling because they are far away from home. So, some more empathy might be needed for our youth.

Ruthven expressed concern over the lack of preparation FY may receive for PSE success. He believed many in the educational system take pity on children and youth in care and as a result may do too much for them instead of teaching them the skills they need to succeed on their own. He stated, "They have a lot of adults in their lives that, rather than push them, or hold them accountable, almost say "Well, they've been through so much. We'll give them a gift and we'll pass them". This leaves FY ill equipped for PSE and academic success, something discussed extensively in the next chapter. Ruthven had not seen a single youth he supported graduate from PSE. In addition to poor preparation for higher education within the elementary and secondary school systems, Ruthven recognized that the intersection of aging-out and PSE is another real barrier to persistence. He shared:

I have yet to attend a college graduation. Factors being: too much all at once for them to manage and deal with. The competing demands of transitioning to independent living...take precedence over their studies. They wonder where their next meal is going to come from, where their next paycheque is going to come from, so they tend to turn to employment, if we are lucky.

**Child welfare expert interviews.** In a former role, Des, the mental health program manager at a regional hospital, worked with FY enrolled in an Ontario college. She was the

college member of the local Crown Ward Education Championship Team (CWECT). Her role involved direct support to FY accessing and attending the institution. However, she was only able to support those who self-identified. She shared, "...they didn't want to identify or be seen as youth who were involved with the CAS because ....there is such a high rate of stigma". Des understood this as a former youth in care herself and was concerned that the institution itself discouraged youth from identifying by engaging in tokenism and asking "...youth to represent all children/youth in care when we did events." However, she indicated that non-identification posed a real problem, hindering FY access to resources like grants, funding, and extra supports as a result. For those who chose to self-identify, she indicated they had more complex needs than those of their college peers, highlighting housing as a critical issue, particularly support for finding housing, or with figuring out where to go when dorms closed (e.g., during holiday periods). She identified trauma from life before care and in care, and a lack of personal resources, such as resilience (which she did not feel is fostered in the child welfare system), as additional barriers to persistence among FY who have accessed PSE. She asked, "If you are struggling to just function on a daily basis how can you function doing anything else?...How are you going to take on extra responsibilities and something that is as mentally draining as post-secondary education?"

Richard shared the stories of two young people on his caseload who were aging out of care at the same time they entered PSE. He reported that one young woman began college but got pregnant at 17 and decided to withdraw from her program. Another 17-year-old, this time a young man, demonstrated great promise from Richard's perspective, and had no evident issues or struggles while in care, failed out of his college program and fell into drug and alcohol addiction voluntarily removing himself from care before his official aging-out date. Richard also

indicated a case where a youth he supported was successful in PSE, however, he noted that he was in a highly-supported program (i.e., the CICE program discussed earlier). However, he viewed this youth as an outlier and felt "...they (FY) are on their own, trying to change their outcomes by getting an education and a better job. But there are too many additional pressures that lead to not succeeding". Richard shared that youth in care are up against many barriers (many of them systemic), and like Des, he underlined the importance of resiliency, and personal skills such as self-advocacy, in overcoming these odds and achieving success in PSE. For example, he referred to a disconnect between the secondary schools and post-secondary institutions, noting that communication between the educational systems is not optimal, and that, in the case of students with learning needs, there is inconsistent treatment of individualized education plans and psycho-educational assessments. He stated, "Colleges are getting better, creating a system where we'll follow their IEP's and other assessments for a certain period of time, such as first semester, but after that nothing will get done unless students advocate for themselves."

Jane Kovarikova also pointed to the importance of personal skills and familiarity with what is expected in PSE and connecting these back to the social network that is usually responsible for the development of these skills in youth – that is, the family. She stated, "Why don't foster kids persist? Well, because no one's actually teaching them, or modelling, the strategies required to be successful in post-secondary".

**Child Welfare Advocate Interview.** Ace believed that the deficits in parenting by the government create lifelong barriers to success. So, regarding PSE persistence, the skills and tools deficits that culminate from a life growing up in care, are not only a barrier to entry, but also to succeeding once enrolled.

She indicated that the stressors faced by youth on aging-out, and being forced to grow up fast, create additional challenge. Ace, herself a former youth in care, who was adopted, faced a financial barrier to persistence in her second year of studies. Her adoptive home was not a positive or supportive one, and her adoptive parents struggled with addictions and poverty. She shared,

My adoptive mother would not sign off on my OSAP loan for second year of university and jeopardized my future. My counsellor said it was ridiculous. It was such a paradox - I was in foster care, and was adopted, ending up in a worse situation.

The foster youth interviewed in this study had never found permanency in adoptive homes. However, Ace's experience, as a former youth in care who was adopted, points to the reality that even permanency is not always positive; that, at times the child welfare system places children and youth in families who may be ill-equipped to parent. This was certainly the case in my own family; my parents had a fractured marriage, and neither were emotionally prepared to parent additional children. Yet, they were permitted to foster four different children and adopt two of them. Four years after my siblings were adopted my mother left home permanently due to a mental health breakdown, my brother was back in the child welfare system as the result of adoption breakdown, and, when my father struggled to parent in my mother's absence, as the eldest child, I bore a lot of responsibility for my younger siblings. As foster youth have preceding trauma and loss, the experience of finding a permanent family and then recognizing that their new family is not safe, positive, supportive, or a soft place to land, must layer on additional trauma.

**Research Question 4.** To determine how post-secondary educational institutions are supporting FY access, and what could be done to better support access, the fourth Research Question asked **“What factors and/or supports could facilitate foster youth access to post-**

**secondary education in Ontario as perceived by the participants?”** Once again, the answer to this question came from my interviews with foster youth, child welfare workers, child welfare experts and child welfare advocates.

As each of the FY interviewed for this study had accessed, and graduated, or were persisting in Ontario’s PSE sector, they had insights about factors and supports that assisted them in applying and enrolling as college or university students in their respective institutions.

Kaitlyn’s birth parents and teachers encouraged her to go to university from the time she was seven or eight years of age. Her high school guidance counsellor also assisted her in planning her post-secondary educational pathway and was someone in whom she felt she could confide. A generous scholarship from the Children’s Aid Foundation assisted her in financially accessing her undergraduate studies. Following her undergraduate studies, Kaitlyn then accessed law school at the University of Toronto and persisted to graduation with a Juris Doctor. She credited her high school as integral in her access to PSE and her eventual success. She shared,

I think that being able to stay at the same high school, throughout my four years of high school, was key to making sure that I had the grades to get into university and to do well even though I was going through a lot.

She shared that her high school experience was not easy given her life outside, and she did miss classes, but the school staff understood and accommodated her. She recognized that it is not commonly “...the case, if you are switching schools and people don’t know, necessarily, what you are going through, or that you have the potential to do well, but you are just going through a difficult time”. Fortunately, for Kaitlyn, this was not her situation; she experienced both school stability, and consistent educational support and encouragement, during her secondary school years, factors she clearly recognizes as enabling her successful access to, and completion of, PSE. On a personal level, Kaitlyn also identified resilience and perseverance,

built through her years in care, as factors that facilitated her success in secondary and access to PSE.

Mike, pursuing a diploma as Social Service Worker at an Ontario college at the time of his interview, shared that he had a teacher who helped him with selecting courses for high school. When Mike tried to select essential courses (a lower level of academics), he reported that this teacher said, “Oh no...I know you are smart, you are going to do academic”. Mike described this Grade 8 teacher, and his Grade 10 English teacher, as influential as they believed in him and his capabilities. These individuals helped Mike to access PSE as they advised and directed him toward a more challenging level of learning and encouraged him. However, Mike did not complete high school, or pursue PSE right away. His living circumstances in care became too difficult (due to marital disharmony and conflict in the home) and he dropped out of school and became a roofer to support independent living. He made the decision to access PSE when he realized he wanted to help children who were experiencing challenges beyond their control, as he had. To access PSE, because he had limited knowledge of the processes and steps involved in getting in, Mike, by then 21 years of age, reached out to an admissions officer at his local college. He indicated that this individual was “super helpful”, communicating what he needed to do and what documents were required for application.

Louise recalled having a lot of support and encouragement from her birth family-mother, father, nana, papa, aunt, uncle, her boyfriend, and her CAS worker-to do well in school. Even when she was not living with her mother, she remembered contacting her to complain about school. She said her mother would tell her, “It’s ok, you’ve got this. You can do it”. When she lived with her aunt and uncle they would assist her with reading, spelling, and math. Louise described being proud of her brother, the first in her family of origin, to attend and graduate from

a college Police Foundations program. She indicated a strong personal conviction that she would do the same, stating “I want to succeed, and I don’t want to become a statistic. I want to show people that I CAN do this, like with my learning disability, or how my lifestyle was, I can still do this”.

Louise also expressed a very positive regard for her CAS worker, and it is clear she wanted to do what her worker did for her, with others. This is why she accessed college and was pursuing a Child and Youth Care diploma at the time of interview. She shared:

Growing up in care, the things my worker did for me, like she is my hero. Just how much she cared and how much she did for me, I want to do that for kids who grow up in similar situations as I did. And I feel like I can connect with them, so I can kind of get through to them, and I want to get through to them and help them succeed.

Elaina experienced a large number of barriers to attending PSE. She indicated struggling with comorbid mental health conditions, addictions, having missed a lot of school at both elementary and secondary levels, and experiencing a terribly scarring childhood and youth in care. However, she shared that one encouraging foster parent, and supportive teachers, especially the one who eventually opened his family home to her for the duration of her post-secondary studies, were integral in her access to PSE, and her stability at the time of the interview. She was offered a room in her teacher’s house in Grade 12. She shared,

...it was a little weird, but I figured I would give it a try because I was at rock-bottom kind of, and being here I couldn’t be more grateful, like if I wasn’t here I would have been having a lot more issues.

She also recalled wanting to grow up, go to college, and help others from a young age. Her grandfather also told her “Go to school, go to school. It’s your way out”, referring to her need to get good grades, obtain an education, earn money, and not repeat the cycle of family instability.

The common thread among all four experiences? Each of the foster youth identified specific people who encouraged and supported them in pursuing PSE.

**Child Welfare Worker Interviews.** In the child welfare worker interviews, each of the child welfare workers was asked to describe how their respective agency supported youth both with aging out (Question 6) and with accessing and persisting in PSE (Question 9). One of the smaller regional Children's Aid Societies utilized the services of the neighbouring Youth-In-Transition Worker to assist foster youth from 16 years of age beyond aging out. The agency considered this a bridging program that can assist youth with articulating and reaching their goals, post-secondary access among them. According to Faye, this personalized support, combined with additional community connections (e.g., the foodbank, Canadian Mental Health Association), Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) after-care benefits, and the Living and Learning grant, assisted foster youth in accessing PSE. Faye also indicated that her CAS agency attempted to connect their foster youth with the Crown Ward or First-Generation contact located at the post-secondary educational institution. She shared:

So, we try and identify our youth if they will let us, to that individual just so they will be taken under their wing or be mentored by another student who is in the same program. To go for tours at college and universities is huge; getting them up there so that they are comfortable, as often and as frequently as possible, really helps to de-escalate the stress and anxiety.

Another urban agency, in addition to the MCYS financial supports offered by all CAS agencies, offered the youth in, and on the verge of exiting care, financial literacy training, and had developed a youth resource centre, on-site, to support the development of adult life skills; food preparation, and how to develop healthy relationships, for instance. Youth accessing the centre also had access to a medical clinic, including a paediatrician. All of these agency-offered services and programs could be considered indirect PSE access supports, as they had the



potential to enhance a young adult's competencies and access to resources. However, Ruthven indicated he did not feel that these services were utilized to the extent that they could be; he believed this was because "...these kids don't have the self-direction, not many of them anyway, they need to be pushed". Ruthven's agency also supplied laptop computers to all youth pursuing post-secondary education, assisted with OSAP applications, supplied tutors, and cleared youths' accumulated OSAP debts if they had a surplus in a given budget year. He indicated they had positive relationships with the local and regional post-secondary institutions. However, overall, Ruthven saw more barriers to access than supports. He stated:

...my experience has been that these are youth that are transitioning out of foster care, into independence, at the same time they are transitioning into colleges and universities, so all of their support people tend to drop off at that point in time, so a lot is put on the worker [CAS] to support them. And it's just not realistic.

Joanne, at another urban agency, referenced an independent agency in her community that offered support with youth transitioning from care, connecting them with housing, food banks, financial literacy programs, employment, and anything else they may need. It was separate from the CAS as the agency lost all funding for the same type of programming. This independent agency was certainly not a direct PSE support service, but again it had the potential to facilitate the development of adult living skills that can benefit a FY in accessing PSE. However, like Ruthven, Joanne indicated that agency was not accessed as frequently as it could be by youth in and approaching the age of exit from care. She was concerned the location of the support centre was a barrier to the service; it was located in an area marked by criminality and at the heart of the sex trafficking area of the city. So, even if it were a potential indirect support to FY considering access to PSE, it was not necessarily, or safely, accessible.

In terms of direct PSE access supports, Joanne's agency, in collaboration with the local Ontario college, offered orientation programs/campus days for youth in care in Grades 9 and 10, and again in Grades 11 and 12. She described the distinction between the two orientation days:

...with the 9-10's it is just filling them in about the programs and that they can make career choices, see what [the College] can do for them, and letting them see that there are different programs at the school...With grades 11-12 at the orientation they literally do testing around their skills and abilities, and their learning style, and help them identify careers that they are best suited to based on how they answer the questions. It's a whole day event; they do that part, they get a tour of the college, and then our liaison there comes in and talks to them about how they are supported, what role the liaison plays in getting them transitioned, and then ongoing process through.

**Child Welfare Expert Interviews.** Questions 3-6 of the Child Welfare Expert Interview Guide (Appendix K) addressed factors each of the experts believe are involved in accessing PSE. Des, who had supported numerous youth in and from care through her work in a mental health facility, and as a CWECT resource in an Ontario college identified trauma and a lack of support-people as barriers to PSE access. She stated,

Foster families often times are in it for the money, they are not in it to support the youth and a lot of youth know that. They are alone, they have nobody...there is no drive, they don't have their people. And the people they do find, their experiences maybe are...they are socially negative influences on them.

In this discussion Des reinforced what the foster youth shared with her. Having people to support and encourage these youth matters. She also suggested that the social support circles that youth in and from care build around themselves, may detract from their success in life (not specific to PSE), through negative influence. Des expanded on this point during the interview. She discussed a youth shelter in her community intended to assist vulnerable youth and help them feel that they are a part of a family. Sadly, because of its location, the trauma the youth bring when they enter, and the prevalence of addictions and mental health issues, she felt it acted as a "crime college", exacerbating challenges and potentially assisting in the creation of worse life experiences and outcomes (e.g., sex and drug trafficking) for the youth who resided there.

Des described working one-on-one with youth in a form of therapy that assisted them in identifying their values. She had supported many youths who identified academics as a value and who wanted to access PSE. However, she noted, "...they don't even know about the resources they can get because they've left the system [child welfare] too soon or aged out ....and that information wasn't provided to them". So, as a former youth in care herself, and as someone who had worked in PSE, and community mental health, Des was able to help the youth identify and access resources, make referrals to other community supports they may require in advance of PSE, and help them make concrete plans for advanced schooling. In this way, Des is representative of one of the support people identified by the foster youth in this study. The role she plays is one which is identified as important and needed for PSE encouragement and access. As a former youth in care herself, this can be powerful, and Des recognized this, and imbedded it in her practice. She said, "If it is valuable to that individual, (my) self-disclosure is important to connect with them and they can actually see that you can be in foster care and obtain an education and do something".

Richard, a college faculty, former child welfare worker, and adoptive father, echoed the need for support. He reflected on his role as a parent, and how he experienced the child welfare system as an employee:

As a parent, I do not want to set my child up for failure, but if they fail, I want to let them know that there is a back-up plan, there is a safety net, there will still be support offered to them. It is my personal experience that children in care do not receive this type of care, which is necessary for their success.

He recounted experiences where youth who were unwilling to respond in ways the agency desired them to respond, were dropped off and left at the local youth shelter. In this way, the province was rejecting their child, and refusing to parent. Richard found this reactive approach deeply unsettling, and not representative of what real parents do, when they try to raise

young people with a sense of self, belonging, and aspirations. He said that this firmly implants, in an already traumatized young person's mind, the question "How am I going to succeed when you are telling me I won't succeed? And now you are setting me up for a situation where you are just going to leave me completely on my own." For Richard, to access PSE, youth in exiting care need wide-scale support (emotional, financial, educational, life skill, parental). If they have those, they have an opportunity not only to access PSE, but also to succeed. Richard believed instead of focusing on the development of consistent, efficacious, and ongoing support for its youth, the child welfare system places a focus on building autonomy. Yet, the one supports the other; if support is lacking how does one build autonomy? Richard was adamant that "...all children in care deserve the opportunity to receive continual support so that they can break the cycle of needing care or having their children placed in care". Unfortunately, outside of the young man who accessed a CICE program at college, when he worked in child welfare, Richard did not see the required supports offered to the young people, for access to PSE specifically, nor for life more generally.

To enhance and support access to PSE, Jane Kovarikova, founder of the Child Welfare Political Action Committee, and child welfare expert interviewed in this study, discussed a project that was completed at a high school in Texas. Jane indicated that the school administration implemented a rule that to graduate with a high school diploma, each student was required to complete and submit an application for post-secondary education. Support (with document completion, finances for the application fee) was offered to the youth, but they had to apply even if they had not previously considered or were not considering attending any PSE. Jane described what happened as a result of this initiative:

....a lot of students who may never have applied before, because they just thought psychologically that it was beyond their experience and never considered it as an option,

all of a sudden were getting acceptances to either college or university or trade school or whatever. So, it increased by a substantial percentage the number of disadvantaged youth who accessed post-secondary.

Jane believed a similar initiative could be applied, with an incentive, to those in the care of Ontario's child welfare system, potentially yielding positive results in the long-term. She noted that the practice with applying, even if the young person chooses not to go post-acceptance, is positive as the process is demystified and less intimidating later on should they decide to re-apply. Having youth complete an application is communicating optimism and an expectation that they should attend. It is an encouraging and supportive act under the guise of a mandatory action.

**Child Welfare Advocate Interview.** Ace identified that the focus on physical shelter for foster youth (having a roof over their heads) by the child welfare system, with a deficit in adequate and supportive parenting, is the biggest barrier to healthy and successful life outcomes for children and youth in care. She pointed to the reality that FY, though they may have adequate physical shelter, may be “in homes that are negative, or where meaningful bonding may not occur.” As a forensic pathologist Ace provided a focus on how the actions of the child welfare system may link to overall life outcomes for youth in and from care. Ace believed empirical study that will inform system reform was the answer to improving outcomes, educational and otherwise, for all children and youth in/exiting from care. About the child welfare system, and foster care specifically, she stated,

...it was designed to take kids out of homes for survival. But many children spend more than 10 years in care. The system is not prepared for beyond crisis. It does not work for kids, and it does not track its outcomes-short, mid, or long. They don't evaluate the things they do, their interventions. They do consult foster youth, but there is an intrinsic power imbalance...kids go from home to home with garbage bags, designed for trash. The message is that they are disposable.

Ace's own experience is one example of why the system needs to self-assess and evaluate its actions to make improvements. Ace was adopted at four years of age, and believes she was adopted because "I passed as white". Ace is Indigenous and was removed from her biological mother for neglect. However, that neglect was masking poverty, and not abuse. She then experienced worse poverty in her adoptive home, with Caucasian parents. Her question to child welfare was this: "Why would you be involved in my Indigenous family and not my white adoptive family?" Indigenous children and youth are highly over-represented in care in Canada; Ace was one of these children. Though Ace did successfully access and persist in her university studies and end up in an influential career, Ace's resilience and her experience is probably not the norm. Ace believed that child welfare perpetuates the idea that foster youth are disposable individuals, and as she pointed out, as a clear barrier to access, "they [FY] move around a lot...to different educational systems. It is not considered a big deal to move". So, in Ace's perspective, both as a former youth in care, current advocate, and expert in the field of forensic pathology, to enhance life outcomes for youth in/from care, including improving access to PSE, the system needs to take a critical look, gather data, and respond to its inadequacies. Ace did not want to see the fostering of "crossover kids" continue in child welfare. She shared,

...when they age or are ejected out they go from being a ward of the state-in the child welfare system-to another governmental system-continue to be institutionalized. For example, a lot of young women become pregnant and join the welfare system, and a lot of young men engage in criminal behaviour and become a part of the justice system. They don't learn the skills needed to survive out of systems.

Ace preferred the term "ejected" over aging out, as that is what she believed the system does as youth approach adulthood.

**Research Question 5.** The final Research Question the study sought to understand was how educational institutions can best support FY as they begin and continue their studies. It

asked: **“What factors and/or supports could facilitate foster youth persistence in post-secondary education in Ontario as perceived by the participants?”**

Each of the participant groups had a lot to say about factors involved in their own success within PSE, along with ideas for how educational institutions could improve persistence and graduation rates for crown wards/former youth in care. Common themes included building relationships with educational staff and mentors who can support the youth for the duration of their studies, creating programming to benefit all students so that foster youth do not feel different, and recognizing and trying to minimize the impact of trauma, and the additional life responsibilities and challenges (that former foster youth may have) on educational trajectories and experiences.

**Foster Youth Interviews.** Kaitlyn took advantage of a peer mentoring program during her time at university, and utilized counselling services during her undergraduate studies, though not regularly. In addition to the emotional support and encouragement she received from teachers and friends, and the financial support of the Children’s Aid Foundation, in the pursuit of her goal, she identified personal factors that helped her to persist. She described herself as a persistent, determined person. She shared that “...when challenges came up in university I kind of had that belief in myself, and that if I persevered, I would achieve success, and get to my goal”. She was also a self-advocate and did not hesitate to stand up for herself and share her thoughts and opinions. Her championing policy change around the requirement of parental financial information during her post-graduate studies is an example of her determination and self-advocacy.

However, Kaitlyn recognized that not all youth are as resilient and may not be able to speak up for themselves after years in care, and traumatizing life experiences. She recommended

that PSE institutions take the following actions to better support their foster youth learners as they complete their education:

There should be some recognition, perhaps training for staff around the circumstances for foster youth. And there should be a protocol put in place for how to deal with students who are facing these kinds of circumstances, rather than relying on them to advocate for themselves (when they) come up against a lot of obstacles.

Elaina identified self-care, protecting her emotional well-being, as vital to her own persistence in PSE. She reported that the course content in her program often triggered her trauma and she was aware of the need to reach out and ask for help. She regularly accessed the same counsellor and reported having a positive connection with her program coordinator and teacher, whom she felt she could go to when she experienced stress. She stated, “She is kind of like a second mother. I go to her about stuff, and she refers me...She knows everything about where to go and whom to call so she’s a good person to talk to.”

Elaina shared that personal motivation, willpower, and self-awareness were crucial to her success as a PSE student. She stated, “...it is good to have a grip on your life - being self-aware and knowing what your weaknesses and strengths are, what triggers you.” Elaina was a person who was self-aware and had not hesitated to reach out for help; in addition to seeking in-school supports, she had also attended support meetings in the external community; Narcotics Anonymous, and had enrolled in programs at a local addictions treatment centre. She identified these supports as helping her to continue her education. To facilitate her own persistence and ensure she was successful in the program, Elaina also transferred to a reduced course load and became a part-time student. Although it would take her longer to complete her program, this allowed her to minimize potential stressors, and she could focus on fewer courses while taking care of her own emotional health.



Elaina recommended peer mentors to support FY during their education; someone who is available throughout the school-day to listen to concerns and challenges, assist youth around the college, and who is aware of the specific services and funding sources available to FY. However, she really felt that the support for PSE persistence begins much earlier in a youth's life. Social workers who care and support youth, listen to their concerns over their foster home living environments, and encourage them in attaining educational goals are all important. Preparation for academic success was something Elaina felt was not so simple for FY. She shared, "If a youth is not used to sitting down and doing homework, and they are too busy wondering where their next home is, school is not going to be a priority." For Elaina greater stability and support for FY is required to help them achieve success.

Like Elaina, Louise was on a reduced course load at the time of the interview. However, with her learning disability, she was considered full-time with three or four courses per semester (through the accommodation process). In her first year, she had the full seven or eight courses per semester but ended up failing one in each. To facilitate her success, Louise regularly accessed both a guidance counsellor and a personal counsellor at the College. Louise and her guidance counsellor met in person each week to support her with time management, helping her to chart her assignments across all of her courses, and to review of her assignments before submission. Louise was also able to email her questions about her work. She and her counsellor also met weekly to help Louise with goal-setting for school and with processing emotions and issues in her personal life. When asked what personal factors contributed to her success in PSE (Question 2 e. vi, Appendix I) thus far, Louise shared,

...my mom, my dad, they never went to college or anything. I think my mom graduated from high school, I don't think my dad even did. And I just want this. I want to succeed, and I don't want to become a statistic. I want to show people that I CAN do this, like with my learning disability, or how my lifestyle was, I can still do this.

Like the other youth interviewed, Louise demonstrated her determination and persistence to achieve her PSE goals, despite the potential obstacles to completion she had already faced. She accepted that it would take her five years to complete a three-year program and did not let that detract her from success. Louise was confident that, like her peers who have not grown up in care, she could complete her education. She closed her interview by sharing “You know, people that grow up in care, they aren’t different. We are human.”

Mike indicated that his PSE journey so far had been free of disruptions, and that he had not experienced any life events significant enough to threaten his ability to succeed. He shared that he used the student success department at his College for a quiet place to complete his Social Service Worker program homework, but that he did not require support with his academics. He shared,

I’m pretty smart; I can do things on the fly....I can just really understand all of the concepts they teach in class really easily...A lot of it is things I know to be true, they are just putting a title to it. I find that happens a lot.

So, regarding the course content, Mike’s life experiences as a youth from care may actually have assisted him with greater understanding which contributed to his academic success.

Mike also attributed his success thus far as due in part to a lack of financial stress; he found the monetary support for crown wards generous, lived with his sister, paid cheap rent, and did not have to rely on public transportation as he owned a car. He also pursued kickboxing which helped to minimize emotional stress; he made time to spar and used the punching bag following his clinical counselling classes.

**Child Welfare Worker Interviews.** The child welfare worker participants all highlighted the importance of FY self-identifying to access and receive ongoing supports throughout their PSE journeys. The expectation was that educational institutions would be

responsive and provide additional services and supports (e.g., learning, emotional, transitional, financial), ideally consistent, to these youth, if they self-identify.

Ruthven identified that a number of the youth he had supported sought out programs related to their own lives (e.g., social service worker, child and youth care), because they felt they could offer support to others who experienced disrupted lives as they had. Three of the four foster youth interviewed in this study were enrolled in these programs, and two (Louise and Elaina) described the content of these programs as triggering of their trauma, or negative life experiences. Ruthven believed that connecting foster youth to people at the very beginning of their PSE journey - whether it be senior students or staff - to help them create partnerships that can encourage and support their success when things get difficult was crucial. Joanne stated, “Put in the energy, put in the time, put in the people that they can build relationships with because I think once they have a relationship in the educational system, I think that keeps them going back.” Within the post-secondary environment, ideally Ruthven would like to see “...a high school/hybrid setting where there is more student-staff contact, more check-ins, more of that structure built into post-secondary.”

Both Faye and Ruthven also identified that child welfare caseworkers have a responsibility to youth in PSE. They need to maintain open communication with their youth, and check-in regularly. Faye indicated that workers must tailor the frequency of the contact to the needs of the youth. The challenge is human resources; as Ruthven identified, at his agency “We have a lot of programs, not a lot of people.”

**Child Welfare Expert Interviews.** Jane Kovarikova’s work with the Child Welfare Political Action Committee emphasized the need for data-driven, evidence-based, decision-making. She and her team would like to see outcomes of youth in and from care tracked so that

there is a better understanding of their needs, and efficacious policies and programs can be developed, and tested/measured for their utility, in response. Jane reflected on her own PSE journey and the supports that helped her to persist. Now a doctoral candidate, she began her educational career at her local college, studying General Arts and Science for two semesters and then transferred to university. She indicated that she struggled all through high school (she attended five schools due to disruptions from life in care) and thought she was stupid, so she had significant anxiety about her ability to be successful. However, she was a good self-advocate and actively sought out support. A college learning-strategist became her mentor and guide. He showed her how to organize her workload, cope with exam anxiety, and demonstrated strategies and tools (e.g., how to take notes) that helped her to succeed. She learned how to learn at college, and experienced success that prepared her for her continuing university studies.

Des, a former youth in care with insight into the college system's supports from her work as a CWECT champion, reinforced the importance of this same support in her interview, adding her perspective as a mental health program manager. Concerning the prevalence of diagnosed mental health issues for FY, she shared,

Understanding that because of childhood trauma, as well as the high rates of FASD [Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder] and other mental health concerns-ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder], things like that, (there are) higher rates of learning disabilities ... understanding the individuals that fall into the system (is critical). So, those resources - learning strategist resources are imperative to getting help, as well as de-stigmatizing.

Jane also believed that orientation programs provide an opportunity to reach all students and share concrete strategies and supports for success, without segregating or pointing out foster youth. Des also believed that any integrity-filled support or service that does not act to distinguish FY from their peers is beneficial; that efforts must be more discrete, and inclusive, because "...as a foster kid you want to be normal, you do not want to be identified as a foster kid or a kid in care."

Richard had a unique vantage point as an Ontario college faculty member, and a former child welfare worker. He noted that the average college student, one who has not lived life in care, struggles to succeed. Like every other participant, Richard believed that connections to a support person is vital for FY post-secondary persistence and success. He indicated, like Ruthven, that child welfare workers do not have sufficient time to check in with the youth they have supported/do support, and that educational institutions must be responsive. He suggested that universally designing programs, services, and supports so that they assist all students, and do not label or further stigmatize foster youth, was the answer. Teaching all students how to keep safe - on their own and with others - emotional regulation, mindfulness, and coping are some of the keys he believed to be important. He also wondered if a sign or symbol, like the rainbow for youth who are LGBTQ2S, could be designed and adopted by PSE communities to communicate,

This is a safe place for you. For you to access. For you to talk about these things. A safe place for you to come to and work through things that are in addition to your learning needs, so that you have a chance for success.

Richard shared that the most successful FY PSE experience he had witnessed involved a student with a cognitive disability in the Ontario college system's Community Integration through the Co-operative Education program. He shared that this student received a seamless transition of support from high school to college, and that the academic and social-emotional support throughout the program helped to ensure the student's success.

**Child Welfare Advocate Interview.** Ace also pointed to the lack of data collected regarding the life outcomes of youth in care. In terms of accessing and persisting in PSE, she believed the system must adequately prepare children and youth for life success through support such as, parenting-providing skills development, emotional support, instead of simply providing (often inconsistent) physical shelter. For Ace, to see improved outcomes, in education and in life,

there needed to be a recognition that change was needed, and tangible reforms to how Ontario's child welfare system parents, which need to be informed by and aligned with research findings. Ace noted that she utilized OSAP for her post-secondary education, as many youths in and from care are encouraged to do. Not specific to FY only, she asked "Why should poor people pay more for their schooling? (e.g., you pay back what you borrowed, plus interest)". She indicated that mounting debt, which she experienced, may be a deterrent to PSE success.

### **Summary of Findings**

In sum, Ontario college information regarding PSE supports, programs, and services available to FY highlights that offerings are inconsistent. Some institutions have developed specific programming, others offer none, and several institutions link FY to other supports, programs, and services designed to capture all first-generation students, or students who are at risk based on financial disadvantage. The province's Crown Ward Education Championship Team (CWECT) initiative, and how it operates within Ontario's PSE institutions, also seems unstandardized and varying. FY attending some institutions have access to a CWECT contact, and services, available on-site, while others may not have a CWECT presence at all.

I identified some consistent themes in the responses of participants-foster youth, child welfare workers, experts, and advocates-across questions two through four. When FY did not have sufficient and consistent social supports (e.g. family members, foster carers, child welfare workers, educational staff, friends) encouraging them throughout their educational journey, from primary, to secondary, and into PSE, there were reports of poorer outcomes, or a greater number of challenges in both access to and persistence in PSE.

The findings of this qualitative research study are discussed at length in the following chapter, utilizing the post-secondary pathway proposed following the review of literature in

Chapter Two. Theoretical perspectives outlined in Chapter One are woven into discussions of participant responses as they relate to preparation for, awareness of, engagement in, transition to, and persistence within post-secondary education. I also discuss recommendations for future research in the intersecting fields of social work and higher education, which can serve Ontario's foster youth population.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications**

Based on the findings described in Chapter Four, in this chapter I provide a holistic, and in-depth, answer to the study's overarching question that asked, "What are the perceived barriers, challenges, and supports for foster youth in accessing and persisting in PSE within Ontario?"

My discussion explores the study findings, by research question, integrating the interpretation of the findings in relation to the themes I identified in the literature and theoretical perspectives related to the PSE pathway.

As anticipated, the FY, their caseworkers, child welfare experts, and advocates pointed to factors, elements, and experiences affecting PSE access and persistence that the theoretical constructs identified in Chapter One address or conceptualize. Additionally, as described in my review of the literature in Chapter Two, the pathway to and through post-secondary education (PSE) can be conceptualized as containing five stages: preparation, awareness, engagement, transition, and persistence, which overlap and interact to inform an individual's PSE access and persistence. Barriers and supports to access and persistence can occur within and across any of these stages. The perspectives of participants regarding barriers and supports in their own access and persistence, and/or that of those they have supported, and advocated for, align closely with what I found in the literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

### **Research Question One**

My investigation into the **first research question** revealed that what Ontario's colleges offer foster youth (FY) learners differed widely. There were supports offered to all students across the sector's institutions, such as student success services counselors, accessibility advisors, and orientation programs. However, these supports were not standardized, and



programming and services were institution-specific. The data collected in the phase one document (website) analysis suggest that FY would experience differential supports depending on which Ontario college they elected, or were able to attend. For example, at Sault College, there is a targeted support program that facilitates success in PSE from access through persistence for FY/crown wards. However, in other colleges (Centennial, Algonquin, Cambrian, Georgian, Niagara), the resources offered were targeted at more generalized groups to which foster youth may belong, for example with at risk students (Centennial), or first-generation students (Algonquin, Cambrian, Georgian).

This raises an interesting discussion of FY opportunity and equity across the province's colleges from a capabilities perspective. Within the capabilities framework, persons' interactions with societal institutions define whether they will have the opportunity to grow and expand on their internal capabilities as individuals (Garrett, 2008). A person's potential is determined by the interaction between the capabilities they have, and what the institution provides to support and maximize their individual capabilities. So, from this perspective, an institution's supports may determine if, and how, a student's capabilities are realized. If FY experience additional outreach and/or tailored supports through some institutions and not others, it raises the question of equitable opportunity to access and succeed in PSE being affected by, or even contingent on, the institution they attend. Using the capabilities framework to interpret PSE access and persistence, a FY learner's capabilities to prepare for, become aware of, engage with, access, transition, and persist in Ontario post-secondary education may be determined by what the institution offers to FY learners at all stages of their PSE journey.

Preparation for, awareness of, and access to an educational institution's programs could be impaired if an institution is not reaching into the community to share information on post-

secondary opportunities, and offering guided support through the PSE application process. For example, FY participant Mike delayed access to PSE because he felt he had received inadequate information, and did not have a clear understanding of the opportunities, and the process of application, because of his status as a youth in care. The literature supports the idea that foster youth/crown ward learners benefit from additional supports in accessing and succeeding in post-secondary education (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Foster youth targeted programs in the United States like Kansas Kids @ GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) and the Michigan Educational Opportunities for Youth in Care (MEOYIC) have demonstrated that perceptions and attitudes about post-secondary education can be positively altered. Educational aspirations can be increased, and readiness for post-secondary study improved with sufficient tailored supports (Kirk & Day, 2011). An Ontario example of such programming, which predated this study, was Humber College's "Gear Up for Success" conference for foster youth, a collaboration with the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) YouthCAN division, which offered two days of inspiration (first person narratives of former youth in care who had experienced PSE success), and information specific to Humber College programs and opportunities (OACAS, 2015).

A FY's combined capabilities (Garrett, 2008) represent the interaction between their internal capabilities-those they have been able to build in life-and what the environment facilitates to support their realization, into action (or functionings). As a group, because of their involvement in the child welfare system, FY experience adversity in their childhood and/or youth, and these adversities can lead to emotional, mental, academic, behaviour and physical challenges (Barker, Kerr, Alfred, Fortin, Nguyen, Wood & DeBeck, 2014). Adverse experiences during childhood and youth may affect the internal capabilities they develop. As the FY in this

study indicated, barriers to success may include: a lack of social supports, financial stressors, the demands of having to be independent, educational gaps due to earlier life school instability, mental health challenges, and disabilities. Each of the FY participants in this study did access PSE demonstrating resilience in the face of life adversity. However, they identified challenges for themselves, or their FY peers in the PSE experience. For example, two of the FY participants frequently accessed supportive services on campus, and decided to complete their programs on extended tracking after struggling with course loads.

From the capabilities lens, to support the success of learners, so that they can overcome barriers, an educational institution must be responsive. Colleges that recognize the intersecting inequalities experienced by non-traditional students like FY, develop an appreciation for and awareness of the unique needs and challenges, and respond accordingly to offer support (Philibert, Allen & Elleven, 2008). This idea is supported by research on the program Know How 2 Go (KH2GO), which was initially developed as a first generation support, and then studied for its efficacy with foster youth learners specifically. In the research 27 foster youth enrolled in, or who had completed, college or university self-reported on their needs above and beyond what was provided by the program. The findings identified concerns over how to afford basic living, the challenges of navigating financial aid, inadequate family support, and the stigma of being a foster youth (Batsche, Hart, Ort, Armstrong, Strozier & Hummer, 2014). The same concerns exist among the participants in this study, and are described in this discussion.

In my research, FY, child welfare workers and expert participants commented on the importance of the institution offering resources to promote, support, and facilitate student success. Child welfare expert, Jane Kovarikova, herself a former FY and an Ontario college student in the past, spoke of her own experience in the early stages of her PSE. During her one

year General Arts and Science certificate she relied heavily on the support of a learning strategist in Student Services who acted as a mentor, and showed Jane how to learn, study, and be academically successful. This individual and the counsellors at the College supported her when she felt like quitting, and she would visit the centre to receive emotional support when she knew she was at risk of withdrawing. Jane indicated she felt like a failure and that she was incapable of success in school from her earlier school experiences. Bourdieu (1990) discussed the importance of early foundational education on all school experiences, sharing that a person's success in all school education "...depends fundamentally on the education previously completed in the earliest years of life" (p. 43). When FY experience educational disruption due to child welfare involvement in their formative years, this can have lasting impacts. Educational systems and institutions need to be aware that additional supports may be required to offset inequities and disadvantages experienced by FY as a result. Des, also a child welfare expert who supported youth in mental health programs, and who previously acted as a Crown Ward Education Championship Team (CWECT) member in an Ontario college, identified that the learning strategist supports the college offered were vital for student success.

Unfortunately, as colleges restructure support services because of fiscal pressures, these positions disappear at times. Two years ago Georgian College eliminated its learning strategist positions and the duties and responsibilities of this role were absorbed by department-wide student advisors (Learning Specialists Association of Canada, May 2016). As a faculty member and program coordinator at Georgian I am familiar with the advisor role. In addition to providing learning strategies support, the student advisors assist all students in the programs under their portfolio with academic advising, program tracking, referrals to college services, and other processes. The Learning Specialists Association of Canada released a statement responding to

the cuts at Georgian, and asked the College to reconsider its decision. In their statement they discussed the specialized practice of Learning Strategists and its benefits to students, detailed their concern about the diminished quality of student academic support, and stated,

By limiting and reducing access to these support systems we are concerned that Georgian students will face barriers to achieving their full academic potential. Furthermore, we are concerned that this decision will disenfranchise students with disabilities and other non-traditional students by limiting their opportunities to receive comprehensive learning strategies support. (Learning Specialists Association of Canada, May 2016)

Richard, the child welfare expert who also taught in an Ontario College, added further commentary on supports, services, and programming that can assist, and in contrast create barriers for, foster youth. In particular, Richard highlighted the positive support offered by the Community Integration through Co-operative Education (CICE) program at his College. He knew of one foster youth in particular who entered CICE and experienced great success in the certificate program which offered additional academic support, and accommodation and modification tailored to his learning needs. About the youth's experience, he stated,

...there was follow-through and there was no support timeline in terms of age; age was not really even a consideration in terms of when you are in and out of care, it was just transition of support. And I thought that language, in and of itself, was useful. As well, everyone looked at the individual needs of that person; what he would require to be successful, and people worked on behalf of that youth.

In this case, both the child welfare agency and the institution worked together to help this student with a disability to enter and transition to college. Ongoing support throughout his college experience then fostered his persistence, and ultimate success through to graduation. From the capability perspective, his combined capabilities were realized, and his functionings-the actions he needed to take to effectively navigate his role as a college student and persist, were successful (Nussbaum, 2000). Richard contrasted this experience with those of other FY in mainstream college programming, with or without disabilities, where he felt that the FY were left to fend for

themselves, seek out services and supports on their own, and expected to successfully navigate adult life earlier chronologically than their non-FY peers.

Elaina, one of the FY participants in this study, suggested that the colleges create a private mentoring program so that FY students like herself who need extra support due to mental health challenges can confidentially get that support from a knowledgeable and sensitive peer, one who understands and appreciates the individual's needs. This private mentor would be available to the student throughout their college education, and help to foster a healthy transition and continued persistence. Elaina shared,

...I don't think they take emotional disorders as seriously as physical or learning disabilities, but it can affect your school just as much or more. And being in the CAS would probably mean you have some things you need to talk about, or get off your chest. So, I think there should be someone there at all times, like a counsellor but someone that can assist you around the college. Especially if you are 18 years old and still in care.

What Elaina suggested sounds similar to what is included in Sault College's targeted FY/crown ward programming, where FY students are each assigned a mentor who guides them throughout their school journey, is available to support them, listen to their unique needs, and connect them to college resources (Colleges and Institutes Canada, Changing Lives through Championship, 2016). This person could be conceptualized as a social intermediary - a supportive connection, who guides and assists the students in their interactions with the institution, demystifying and personalizing their connection to the school, and nurturing and advancing their combined capabilities - their ability to use their internal capabilities to achieve success within the post-secondary environment (Nussbaum, 2000).

Two of the child welfare workers, Faye and Joanne, indicated that their agencies had contacts (for crown wards and first generation students) at the local Ontario College with whom they could connect their FY who were interested in a college education. Joanne recommended

that, to facilitate access and persistence in Ontario PSE for the province's FY, that as a society we "...put the energy and the time in, put the people in that they can build that relationship with because I think once they have a relationship in the educational system, I think that keeps them going back". Joanne and Faye underlined the importance of a support person's presence in helping foster youth to establish a sense of belonging and community. In resilience theory, a person is more likely to be resilient, and bounce back from adversities, such as growing up in care-if there are protective factors in their lives; without these factors a person's ability to function may be impaired (Kirk & Day, 2011). A factor that has been identified as important in the educational lives of foster youth and former foster youth is the presence of caring and supportive adults (Hines, Merdinger & Wyatt, 2005).

The Crown Ward Education Championship Teams, an initiative developed and funded by the Ontario government as a collaborative effort between the Ministries of Children and Youth Services (MCYS), Education (MED), and Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU), and discussed earlier in this paper, was designed to assist Ontario's foster youth/crown ward students with accessing and experiencing success in PSE. However, based on the data in my study, it is clear that there is not CWECT representation in all of the English language Ontario colleges, or if there is, it was not clear in my search of the 22 college websites. Even in those institutions that did list a contact, the role that individual played appeared to be institution-specific, and inconsistent system wide. In a recently published formative evaluation of two specific CWECTs in Ontario from the University of Ottawa's Centre for Research on Educational and Community Services, the authors state,

Clearly, interventions in Ontario such as the CWECT program that aim to improve educational outcomes, and specifically PSE access and retention, need to be accompanied by a vigorous, ongoing, cycle of research, demonstration, evaluation, and program improvement. (Weegar, Hickey, Shewchuk, Fall & Flynn, 2016, p. 6)

The authors then highlight recommendations for improvement of the province's CWECTs. Many of the suggestions made in the report (e.g., peer mentoring, one-on-one support with PSE decisions and transition, connecting directly with youth, and tutoring and academic help) are reflected in the voices of this study's participants.

It appears, from my review of services, programs, and supports offered in Ontario's colleges, that there were general supports provided to all students to assist with access (e.g., marketing recruiters, high school visits, college tours, website information, open houses) and persistence (e.g., counsellors, accessibility advisors, tutoring services). However, the supports above and beyond those offered to the general student population varied by institution as identified in Chapter Four. From my study, it appears that the experience an individual FY may have in one institution could vary widely from their experience in another. Regardless of the internal capabilities a FY brought to their PSE experience, the institutional supports interact with the individual to determine what was possible for them, and whether or not they could achieve equitable access and persistence rates when compared with their non-FY peers. As Richard identified in his interview many students struggle to succeed in PSE, even with the supports available. Given the additional demands of independent adulthood placed on many foster youth and former foster youth, and the inherent challenges many have experienced due to a life/portion of life in care, institutions can unwittingly create barriers to access and persistence for FY if they do not offer adequate supports, or consider the unique needs of FY as a group.

## **Research Question Two**

The second research question in this study investigated barriers to PSE access for FY. Several concepts related to Bourdieu's Theory of Social Reproduction are relevant to the discussion of FY access to the field of PSE in Ontario. Habitus, capital (social, economic,



cultural), symbolic violence, educational aspirations, and educational expectations, all relate, and can be linked to participant responses in this study. Each of these is discussed within the context of access to PSE.

Habitus, a culturally socialized predisposition toward thinking about, and being ourselves, is formed over the course of childhood and youth, and it becomes an unconscious guide to our life's direction; communicating our place, our capabilities, and where we best fit (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Habitus can therefore be limiting of (or narrow) our potential, and set us down normalized paths based on where and how we grew up, and the messaging we received regarding where we belong (Bourdieu, 1996). It can hold us back from thinking about and engaging in actions that lead to divergent and alternative destinations (Wagner & McLaughlin, 2015).

Even though all of the FY in this study accessed PSE, with adverse early life experiences other FY may have formed habituses that communicate an inability to access and succeed in PSE. Study participants (foster youth, child welfare workers, child welfare experts, and the child welfare advocate) pointed to numerous potential barriers to PSE that result from the experience of being a child and youth in the care of the child welfare system. There was a recognition among the foster youth participants that, even though they had accessed PSE, this was not always the case for other youth in care. Mike, when asked to share his thoughts about his educational experiences and opportunities, compared his situation to that of his sister's saying: "I think I have had an overall good experience myself. My sister on the other hand... she has a very opposing view, she is much more aggressive with it." Mike and his sister both grew up in care, but when it came to PSE, he indicated they had very different experiences. Though I did not have

the opportunity to interview Mike's sister, it was clear through his comments that he felt he had a more positive experience than she.

What might Bourdieu say about Mike's educational experiences, and his views of himself? Mike dropped out of high school at 18 because he was working to afford his new-found independence from foster care. He was in Grade 11 at the time, a grade behind his peers as he was held back in kindergarten. When he decided he did not want to do roofing for the rest of his life he accessed PSE as a mature student. He credits a high school teacher with pushing him to take academic instead of essential level courses, and making him believe he had the academic skills to succeed. But he also indicated no one approached him with PSE options. In the interview he indicated feeling badly about his choice to leave highschool, and disappointment with himself. However, due to Mike's early childhood experiences, which among family and home instability included a lot of school disruption (he estimated he attended eight elementary schools), how much of Mike's experience was actually a choice? Perhaps Mike was simply acting out the unconscious role that societal messaging and his socialization developed in him. Did Mike form a habitus based on his experiences (and society's reaction to those experiences) which communicated that he was not a fit for higher education, which then internalized this direction? This is possible. If we extend Bourdesian analysis, Mike's potentially educationally-limiting habitus may have predicated a developmental shortage of cultural, social, and economic capital (Wacquant, 2005) for the field of post-secondary education. His lack of family privilege and shortage of capital then left Mike feeling even less like a fit for PSE studies, and lost in PSE information sessions among his non-FY peers. As he described it, he simply did not have the knowledge and understanding of PSE or what to expect, nor the supports, that his friends had with navigating the process. As Bourdieu (1996) stated, family "...is one of the key sites of the

accumulation of capital in its different forms and its transmission between the generations” (p. 23).

Elaina, another FY participant, shared what she had noticed among her peers in the child welfare system. She stated,

...they are not even going to school, or a lot of them are having kids of their own, or they are into substances and stuff, and they...end up on the streets...Sometimes the CAS will take kids off of their monthly cheque if they are not following whatever standards. Like, I’ve seen a 17 year old homeless because CAS took him off, but they didn’t give him any legitimate resources to make sure he was ok.

Child welfare advocate, Ace’s, discussion of the stigma of being a foster youth, and the communication that one is disposable by having all of your possessions placed in a garbage bag as you move from home to home, is certainly relevant to the habitus a child or youth forms regarding who they are, and their place in the world. At one or more points, FY who are in the care of the state have been removed from their native homes and placed in alternative living environments. Often this affects/disrupts their educational experiences as they are required to move schools. They may also miss significant periods of schooling due to adverse life experiences that precede placement in care. Three of the foster youth participants in this study identified multiple school placements across elementary and secondary education, and two of the foster youth pointed to missing school and struggling with attendance due to life circumstances. For example, Elaina, one of this study’s FY participants, reported six to seven school placements, three of which were high schools. Then, there is the question regarding the quality of the homes in which FY live. According to the youth in this study, their traumatic experiences were not limited to their homes of origin. Three of the FY participants identified trauma in care - including emotionally abusive foster parents, witnessing marital discord in a foster care placement, and having to live in a group home where there was violence and theft between the

other youth residents. Inconsistent and unstable home environments, disrupted educations, and moving (often more than once), potentially with your life's material possessions in a garbage bag, may communicate very detrimental and damaging messages to FY about who they are, where they belong, and their own capabilities. Violet Rose Pharaoh, a former youth in care in Ontario, and child welfare advocate spoke on Ontario's annual Youth in Care Day at the 2016 Five14 Talks and addressed the concern over this messaging. She founded "The Garbage Bag Challenge" to bring awareness to the issue, with a goal of providing suitcases to all children and youth in care as they transition from home to home. She indicated that by having a small thing like a suitcase FY feel like they can "take a piece of you with you" when they move, feel some sense of stability, and preserve their dignity (Children's Aid Foundation, Five14 Talks, 2016).

In Bourdieusian terms, capital refers to an individual's unique tool kit of resources-financial, social, and cultural-that assist them in accessing particular fields within society (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Kaitlyn, a FY participant, discussed a lack of financial capital in accessing and pursuing her post-graduate studies in law. She had to fight the institution to make change to policies which demanded that parental income be considered in her financial aid allotment, even though she was a youth in care, and her parents' financial assets were of no relevance to her financial need. Mike discussed a lack of awareness around his post-secondary options, and indicated feeling as though his peers knew their options, and had support with accessing PSE, but he did not know where to start and did not want to be the only one asking for help. What Mike shared is indicative of deficits in both social and cultural capital for the field of PSE. He did not have the same social support resources in high school to ensure he understood his options, nor someone he could specifically rely on or turn to for ongoing help and guidance. He also did not know what to expect of PSE; he was largely unfamiliar with the the programs

and options available, and did not know what to expect given his lack of connection and interaction with PSE through his family's or social network's experiences. He was not equipped with the knowledge, skill, and experience to navigate PSE. Instead he experienced reduced cultural capital for the field.

Louise indicated that neither of her parents attended college, and her dad did not graduate from high school. Though we do not have information on Louise's birth family's life story, their lack of educational attainment could be an outcome of social inequality; the result of a lack of societally-imposed privilege, limiting their own access to higher education. Louise and her brother were the first in her family of origin to access college, making them truly first generation students. As first generation learners, they had less knowledge and understanding of PSE as those in their biological family were not able to pass down relevant information. This reduced both their social and cultural capital as well, because they had less connective history to PSE, and less understanding of the PSE landscape than students whose family members had attended PSE. Louise credited growing up in care as the factor that facilitated her access to PSE because it stabilized her school attendance as a child and youth, and allowed her to graduate.

Using a Bourdieusian lens, the experiences shared by the FY participants in this study, which influenced or created barriers to post-secondary access and persistence, are reflective of what I found in the literature. Foster youth, as a group, are likely to experience less economic, cultural, and social capital in interaction with the field of post-secondary education for many potential reasons-lack of family privilege, educational and life disruption, poverty, and more limited awareness of, and exposure to, post-secondary education among them (Finnie, 2012, Okpych & Courtney, 2014, Unrau, Font & Rawls, 2012). However, each of the FY interviewed in my study made it to PSE; the journey was not always easy, but each was enrolled, or had

graduated from a PSE program. Bourdieu may have conceptualized these individuals as “miraculous exceptions” (In Garrett, 2013, p. 124) for accessing and succeeding in PSE despite realistic barriers (i.e. reduced capital) to that achievement. Or he may have interpreted the sample’s PSE success as indicative of the non-deterministic nature of habitus, where individuals have more control over their own outcomes than their habitus-or their structuring structure-might seem to predict. Bourdieu did believe that habitus could change in response to experience and outside influences, and that an individual did have agency; they were not entirely at the mercy of their habitus controlling their life, and educational, outcomes (Garrett, 2013).

However, regardless of PSE access and persistence, all of the following factors were mentioned as potential barriers to accessing PSE by study participants (across all groups FY, CWW, CWE, CWA): missing school time, poor school performance, lack of preparation for future studies, grief and trauma, a negative living environment (both in the birth family and in-care contexts), financial struggles, low self-esteem, developmental gaps, lack of personal support, addictions, mental health challenges, and negative messaging from others about FY’s abilities. These are reflective of self-reported and observed barriers I found in the literature as well (Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky & Damashek, 2012, Dworsky & Perez, 2010, Tweddle, 2005).

Ontario’s Youth Leaving Care Hearings in 2011, which culminated in the “My Real Life Book” publication discussed in Chapter Two, highlights that Ontario’s youth in care experienced concerns over personal safety, emotional and mental well-being, trauma, full integration and acceptance in foster families and society, educational losses, stigma and “otherness”. These identifications are reflective of concerns expressed by participants in this study. Together, the four foster youth interviewed in this study touched on each of these concerns-indicating concerns

over safety (for example, Kaitlyn, living in a group home), challenges with emotional and mental health that extend into adulthood and post-secondary studies (Elaina and Louise), trauma from early life losses (all foster youth participants), challenges compared to their non-foster youth peers with regard to full integration and equitable opportunity in society (all foster youth participants), educational losses and challenges in secondary school (all foster youth participants), and feeling labelled and stigmatized for being youth in care (all foster youth participants). These self-reported experiences may act as possible barriers to PSE access, either for themselves, their FY peers, or in the case of child welfare workers, experts, and advocates, those they represent.

Previous studies have pointed to concerns over few aspirations, and lower expectations, among foster youth related to post-secondary educational attainment (Kirk et al, 2011, Miller & Flynn, 2014). What a FY desires to pursue in terms of higher education reflects their educational aspirations, and their expectations what they believe they can achieve in terms of higher education attainment. My review of the literature and the data provided by my study's participants suggest that FY receive messages from adults in their lives about their ability to access and succeed within PSE, and which affect their expectations for themselves, and ultimately inform or reform their aspirations.

Negative messaging around educational expectations and aspirations is relevant to the Bourdesian concepts of symbolic violence. When one party with more power communicates, through words or actions, that another has less worth, is undeserving of opportunity, or incapable, this is representative of symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2000). Thankfully, for the FY participants in this study, none of them were stymied permanently by negative messaging about themselves from adults in their lives. In fact, each of the FY pointed to people

in their lives-including both birth and foster family members, and teachers who had pushed or encouraged them to continue their educations. Each of the FY accessed PSE. If everyone in their lives had been discouraging their attendance and causing them to question their ability to access and persist, arguably they may not have made it through the doors of their respective PSE institutions. Negative messaging from those with more power can create internalized beliefs in the one with less power about their capabilities, and influence how they view educational opportunity; what they expect they can achieve and what they aspire to (Kirk et al, 2011).

Several participant responses highlighted the importance of messages (both verbal, and through actions) they received from supports in their lives regarding their potential to achieve. For example, Mike (FY) indicated that if it were not for a Grade 8 teacher pushing him to sign up for more challenging secondary school courses, he would have opted for a less challenging route, one which would have ultimately, through inadequate academic preparation, limited his PSE potential. Elaina (FY) likewise shared that if it were not for her teacher, who offered not only educational encouragement, but a place to live while she attended PSE, that her access would likely have been affected due to an increased number of life stressors. Both Kaitlyn (FY) and Joanne (CWW) spoke about the messaging foster youth receive. Kaitlyn admitted to having significant support and positive messaging about her own ability from many people in her personal life, and through this she built a solid and long-lasting believe in her own educational potential that contributed to clear aspirations. However, she did hear that she was not expected to attend PSE from those supporting her in the child welfare system; that her status as a foster youth meant she had already achieved more than expected by completing high school. Kaitlyn explained that this communication, if shared with less self-assured and confident FY, could completely eliminate PSE access as an option.



Regardless of whether FY have previous educational aspirations, if they lack confidence, or self-efficacy, and are influenced by the opinions of those in positions of authority (i.e. foster parents, child welfare workers, guidance counsellors, teachers etc.), negative messaging could completely derail educational aspirations, and set expectations that they are not capable. The messaging communicated to FY regarding their place, and expectations for their future may inform how they are prepared for PSE. Though Kaitlyn was ultimately very successful in PSE, graduating with a Juris Doctor, being told that she had already achieved more than was expected for her given her position as a FY, was a clear communication from people in positions of greater power (e.g. her child welfare workers) of Kaitlyn's assumed habitus, or place, within society. Had it been internalized, it could have created clear disadvantage in terms of her PSE access and career goal attainment. In Bourdieusian terms, Kaitlyn was not expected to access the field of PSE, and it was assumed, despite her eventual success, that she did not have the required capital to access and persist.

Joanne (CWW) echoed this sentiment identifying culpability for negative messaging about FY educational opportunity and potential lies with the education system itself, family, and child welfare workers. Des (CWE) also had concern that FY receive differential messaging. She indicated, that in her role she had witnessed some child welfare workers providing more support, and encouragement, to FY who she described as having "easier traits to get along with", and not making the same efforts with FY who were not as agreeable. According to the resilience literature, fostering pro-social beneficial relationships "...requires individuals to develop a set of social skills to elicit helpful and supportive responses from others, and for others to develop understanding of these individuals and the challenges they are facing and a willingness to engage with them." (van Breda, 2018, para 29). Some FY may struggle with developing positive social

relationships with their welfare workers, due to attachment issues, trauma, and experiences in the system, among other factors. Child welfare workers, and anyone working with foster youth who may struggle in relationship, must recognize these factors. In her role as a mental health program lead, Des offered commitment therapy, helping the FY in her program to identify their values, and long-term goals, and work toward their achievement. PSE was both a value and a goal for many of the youth she supported, though they did experience many barriers to access such as addictions, mental health, and unstable living environments.

Despite interviewing youth who have accessed PSE in Ontario, we know that the rate of attendance for FY is significantly lower than that of their non-FY peers (Conference Board of Canada, 2014). There are barriers, and those identified by this study's participants are highly congruent with those I found in the literature. Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction and its components offer a lens that clarifies how power and position interact to create inequity for FY. From the participants in this research, it seemed that a FY's habitus, capital holdings, experience of symbolic violence, and discouraging messaging concerning educational expectations may impact FY PSE enrolment.

### **Research Question Three**

The study's third research question investigated barriers to persistence in PSE. The two most consistent responses to this question by study participants, across all groups (FY, CWW, CWE, and CWA) were a lack of social-emotional and resource support(s) for FY, and additional external life pressures that result from earlier-than-average entry into adulthood independence. The FY interviewed in this study exhibited resilience; not only had each of them had accessed, but they had persisted, or were persisting, at the time of interview. As such, resilience theory frames this discussion. And, although none of the FY in this study were engaged in a process of

“cooling-out” by their post-secondary institution, Clark’s concept is relevant and will be discussed in relation to identified barriers to persistence.

Each individual interviewed pointed to inadequate or limited support in FY’s lives, which can then impact PSE persistence when a FY enrolls. The necessity of additional support for FY as they move through PSE is discussed in the literature. The literature provides evidence that FY life considerations which precede PSE entry can act as barriers to PSE access and persistence, and discusses efficacious components of responsive on-campus support programs-such as understanding and consideration of each individual’s unique life experiences and providing tailored supports (Dworsky & Perez, 2010, Merdinger, Hines, Osterling & Wyatt, 2005, Rasan, Darla & Mery, 2010, Salazar, 2012). Weegar, Hickey, Shewchuk, Fall and Flynn (2016), in their discussion of policy and practice implications in response to the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies’ estimate that 46% of FY have graduated high school by age 19-20 (OACAS, 2014), and the Ontario Looking After Children (OnLAC) research (Miller & Flynn, 2014) regarding educational outcomes of youth in care within this province, state, “We need to encourage high educational aspirations by young people themselves and their caregivers as well as stable caregiving, preferably in family based placements” (p. 17). This statement emphasizes the importance of surrounding youth in care with encouraging and stable supports to enhance access and persistence through the development of educational goals or aspirations, which have been demonstrated to be lower among Ontario’s FY (Miller & Flynn, 2014).

As Richard (CWE) pointed out, PSE is often stressful for all learners, and there are many demands placed on students in order for them to persist and experience success. Mike (FY) and Jane (CWE) both shared that FY lack adequate knowledge and preparation for PSE success once they are in, as they had not had consistent supports teaching or guiding them in the ways of

success. As both Richard and Kaitlyn (FY) pointed out in their discussions of PSE persistence, FY may be more vulnerable to stressors during their studies. Richard shared,

I'm 47 years old and my dad is still offering advice on how to manage a house, fix things, find the best deal, etc. As a parent, I am consistently offering my daughter psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual counsel, and I do not see this ending because I want to send the message that she is valued and that her needs matter. My professional experience is that this tendency is lacking for children in care.

Richard highlighted that the holistic network of support he was offered by, and offered to, his family is missing for many FY. And, he had not seen evidence through his work, that it was replaced, or adequately compensated for, by the child welfare system. As Kaitlyn described it, experiencing a “blip” in progress at college or university could become disastrous for a FY whereas a non-FY peer may be able to navigate the same blip more easily as they have more established support resources, or a living environment more conducive to success to support them as they bounce back. Richard believed that it was the systemic issues faced by children and youth in care which shaped not only their educational performance, but also their opportunities. The lack of support, in their families, in the child welfare system, and in their educational environments negatively impacted their success. He shared that he believed they need to develop resiliency as

...a lot of times they [the FY] are under all of this extra pressure where all of a sudden all of these other things that regular families would be supporting...a lot of times you are learning to fend for yourself.

Ruthven (CWW) certainly agreed. He had supported many youth in accessing PSE, but at the time of interview, he had not yet attended a single convocation for any of those youth. He believed the reason these FY struggled to persist was because they were dealing with the stressors of independent adult life with less support, and this often lead them to turn to employment in an effort to minimize one of the major hurdles of adult life-financial stressors.

As van Breda (2018) states, “While many people have negative outcomes in response to vulnerability, not all do” (para 8). Resilience theory is pertinent to the discussion of additional external supports that may assist FY, and to the personal internal resources some FY may draw on to persist in PSE. The research by Hass, Allen, and Amoah (2014), in which they interviewed 19 former foster youth and PSE graduates, uncovered three themes present in the narrative of participants. At self-identified turning points, the participants in their study noted the presence of personal resilience, made up of three components: a belief that they could overcome challenge and the strength to do so, positive external supports, and an environment which was safe. These three factors combined to provide them with opportunity and contributed to their PSE success. The FY participants in my study also clearly demonstrated that believing in themselves (despite negative messaging and stigma), pushing through adversity, utilizing external supports-in the school, external community, and in their personal lives, and feeling a sense of belonging and safety in their school communities was important for their ongoing persistence and success.

Louise (FY) expressed irritation at the stigma around FY, and the resultant expectation from her classmates that she should therefore be different. She shared that peers in her college program, upon finding out she grew up in care, said things like “What? I would never have guessed because you look so happy, and I don’t know, you just don’t look like someone who grew up like that”. Louise did not allow this sentiment to deflate her sense of self-efficacy nor prevent her from continuing in her studies, yet Louise, like Mike (FY), and Des (CWE), just wanted to fit in and be treated like everyone else. This stigma confirms that there are expectations regarding what it means to be a youth from care. This feeling of being different, somehow separate or distinct from one’s peers, could not only affect social interaction or connection in PSE, but impact access to required supports and resources within the institution.

Des, child welfare expert participant, reflecting on her time as the Child Welfare Education Championship Team (CWECT) lead at an Ontario college, shared how stigma could be contributing to the problem of FY persistence,

Another understandable issue was that they didn't want to identify or be seen as youth who were involved with the CAS because they don't want to be associated...So, it became problematic in getting resources for them because they didn't want to identify, and that is the problem-you have to identify to get those grants, funding, resources, extra supports, things like that.

The discussion of FY persistence in Ontario PSE also relates to Burton Clark's (1970) concept of cooling-out. In cooling-out students who are academically at risk, or not performing optimally (for example, in the Ontario College system **not** being "in good standing"), are, through PSE processes, programs, and policies often encouraged or mandated to reframe goals or change direction. For example, advisors, faculty, and/or administrators may encourage students who are struggling to develop academic and career goals deemed more achievable, switch programs, enter a terminal program (and not carry on to higher levels of study), or withdraw. If a student's performance does not improve over a set period of time PSE institutions have policies and processes in place that force academic suspension.

Integrating this study's conceptual frameworks, and speaking from a capabilities perspective, when a FY struggles to persist though they have the capability to succeed with adequate institutional supports, and the institutional supports are found lacking, non-responsive, or unavailable, this could result in a FY being cooled-out (not persisting, or transferring to a different program) for reasons outside of their control. Cooling-out may also relate to Bourdieu's concepts of capital within a field. If the FY lacks social, cultural, and economic capital during their post-secondary experience, this may contribute to their faltering and not persisting. Honing in on, and gathering concrete data on FY persistence rates in Ontario PSE,

and operationalizing and measuring Bourdieu's concepts of capital in Ontario's FY post-secondary learners as they enter and journey through PSE may be efficacious in exploring this further.

#### **Research Question Four**

Returning to the subject of PSE access, the fourth question in my research investigated what factors and/or supports could facilitate foster youth access in PSE. This discussion is most pertinent to the concepts of educational expectations and aspirations, and related to Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction. As Ace (CWA) and Jane (CWE) identified, there is a lack of understanding regarding where foster youth go when they age out, or are "ejected" as Ace conceptualized the aging-out process. As members of the Child Welfare Political Action Committee, and former youth in care, both of these participants have experienced and studied child welfare policy and legislation, and are aware of the gaps in empirical data to chart outcomes and make progress. They both felt that tracking FY outcomes was vital to understanding how the child welfare system can best support youth from care, not only in accessing PSE, but in achieving more positive life outcomes. In Ace's words, "Instead of throwing money at the problem, there needs to be an empirical AND an ethical framework by which to evaluate what the system is providing to kids in care."

Outside of the foundational research, and self-assessment in which the system needs to engage, Ace, Jane, and all other study participants identified specific factors that they believe may support FY access to PSE. If messaging that FY hear about their educational potential can limit access, it makes sense that, not only does the negative messaging need to change, but there also needs to be greater encouragement and support in helping FY in articulating their educational aspirations and goals. As I identified in the literature, this can be facilitated by child

welfare workers, educators, and foster carers who may take the place of parents in mentoring youth to develop PSE aspirations and expectations (Batsche, Hart, Ort, Armstrong, Strozier & Hummer, 2014, Jackson & Ajayi, 2007). Des (CWE) engaged in this work with FY directly through her role as a mental health program manager, and as a Crown Ward Education Championship Team representative at her local college. She assisted youth in/from care with understanding their goals and what they needed to do to achieve them, and connected the youth to essential services and resources that could assist them in attaining their goals. As Joanne (CWW), Richard (CWE), and Ace (CWA) all indicated, the work in promoting access to PSE for FY needs to start from the beginning; community needs to be built around the child in their educational system, support people and resources need to be available, and the child welfare system must act like a positive and encouraging parent, not just one seeking to place a roof over the child's head. If consistent supports, and a community surround the child, they may have a better, or more equitable, opportunity to learn about their PSE options, gain the tools and capital they require to succeed in the field of PSE, and make plans for their futures.

Mike (FY) felt like he was the only one among his high school peers who did not understand how to go about applying for college, and he was too afraid to ask out of a fear of identifying himself as different. If Mike had had consistent supports and a community of people encouraging and surrounding him, how might his experience have changed? Likewise, it appears, that for Kaitlyn (FY), there was an attempt to cool her out (Clark, 1970) before she even reached the doors of her university. However, because this educational expectation did not align with Kaitlyn's own views of her self, and her educational aspirations that had been instilled in her by significant people in her life since she was seven or eight years of age, she was able to access, and persist in PSE. She had always expected she would attend PSE and was encouraged



to do so by her birth family, and later by consistent and supportive secondary school staff. She had her community. Numerous longitudinal studies on resilience have provided evidence that a positive relationship with a caregiver from early childhood onward is vital in fostering positive developmental outcomes (van Breda, 2018). The importance of consistent supportive people in a FY's life, those who can provide emotional support, foster resilience, teach skills and tools for school and life success, and be present, was highlighted by all study participants as not only a support to PSE access, but also to PSE persistence. As Richard shared,

It's a big jump to go from high school to post-secondary and now being placed in the position as being completely seen as an adult who is now responsible for all the decision making regarding their life and future. My concern was, and still is: What worker comes in and sets aside their day so that they'll come to a school meeting just to make sure the foster youth knows what questions to ask and answer, and ask how they feel after meeting with different programs? Do they even know where to go, and do they feel safe enough to admit they are feeling scared, and how they are scared, and what they need so they can move forward?

For Richard, it was about ensuring there are people available to support FY with accessing PSE- people who can devote time, clarify, check in, and guide FY as they make the incredible transition from high school to PSE, while often simultaneously transitioning out of care. In Bourdieusian terms, these supportive people advance foster youths' capital holdings, stocking their PSE-specific tool box with the knowledge and skills they require to successfully access higher education and persist in their programs of study. They may also help to reframe a FY's habitus, countering a socialized and internalized belief that they are not a fit for PSE. Why is this important? For Bourdieu each generation passes on to its youth, through both implicit and explicit messaging, valuing, and actions, where they "fit" (Wacquant, 2005). Ultimately, as Canadian society is socio-economically and class stratified, with a clear pecking order that informs differential power, children and youth are socialized, by agents (e.g., family, welfare workers, teachers) and institutions that surround them, and in fields within which they participate

(e.g., education) into a particular social position. This position then determines the capital (social, cultural, and often economic) available to a person. Capital ultimately influences/shapes an individual's specific power, and differential capital and power can contribute to greater inequity. In a recently published American article on the supports community colleges could provide to foster youth, Whitman (2018) discusses depleted academic capital in foster youth, which he sees as largely created by a lack of family. Through a review of pertinent literature, and as a young man emancipated from foster care himself, he provides suggestions for ways that higher educational institutions can improve the academic capital holdings of youth in, and exiting from, care. These suggestions include easing financial concerns, forming a supportive network, providing trustworthy information, and assisting the youth with navigating bureaucratic systems and processes, all of which help foster youth advance their academic capital or "...college knowledge, the ability to use human and information resources to discern and pursue appropriate pathways through educational systems" (Whitman, 2018, p. 85). As Bourdieu (1996) astutely points out, the nations of our world constitute family identity as "...one of the most powerful principles of perception of the social world and one of the most real social units" (p. 25). Our belonging within and to others in family informs how we navigate the world and what we are afforded in terms of power through the socialization of habitus and the accumulation of capital. FY, by virtue of being wards of/in the care of the state and not that of their families, are uniquely positioned outside of the social norm; they often do not engage or identify with their families in traditional ways, and this can affect both habitus and capital holdings.

### **Research Question Five**

Finally, in the fifth research question, this study explored self-reported factors and/or supports that could facilitate foster youth persistence in post-secondary education in Ontario.

Due to the reality that many FY may lack adequate capital for post-secondary success, their resilience, including self-awareness and the ability to self-advocate, alongside supportive networks in the institution are critical to this discussion. When FY participants were asked what they believed had helped them succeed, or what could support FY PSE persistence and success (all participants), they had varying answers. However these answers aligned with the core theme. Foster youth may require additional tailored supports-emotional, social, financial, and with learning-in various ways, across a variety of contexts, both inside and external to the post-secondary institution.

The responses of participants in my research support the idea that foster youth, who experience loss and adversity, in and beyond their native homes, may be at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to the places and spaces they occupy in various societal fields, such as higher education. Foster youth may possess more limited capital than youth who are not wards of the state. A FY's habitus may not only have limited their consideration and awareness of PSE options, but also made it more difficult for them to enter post-secondary education (access) and persist and find success in PSE. Their tool kits for academic success and their self-efficacy may not be as robust. As a group, they are marginalized and underprivileged. Foster youth may experience or be afforded more limited capital and may receive subtly and explicitly communicated messages regarding their educational potential. These messages can then feed their own educational expectations. They may also feel different (e.g., Mike, who felt less aware of his opportunities), or they may feel viewed as different by others (e.g., Louise, who felt judged by her college peers by her status as a foster youth).

Richard, one of the child welfare experts interviewed in this study, pointed most clearly to the family privilege afforded to children and youth with consistent and continuing home

support. As a college educator, he noted that all students struggle, and it was unclear to him how anyone could be successful without family support, and a stable home environment. Child welfare advocate, and forensic pathologist, Ace, noted, “You can’t measure a home only by its ability to provide shelter”. She believed that an inadequate focus on the whole person, instead prioritizing the physical shelter needs of youth in care, set them up for long term disadvantage, failure, disease, and even death. She wondered how most youth in and from care can be successful in PSE with their trauma, limited focus placed on the holistic person, lack of support, and a deficiency in diligent and active parenting by the system. Kaitlyn (FY) emphasized that safe and supportive housing is not something that all youth in care experience; that group home environments like the ones in her past are instead disruptive, pose danger, and can undermine the opportunity for academic success. Elaina credited her ability to complete high school, and transition and persist in post-secondary, to the loving and supportive home environment offered to her by a high school teacher. Without his support, and welcoming her into his home, she did not feel she would be able to pursue PSE successfully.

Faye also noted the importance of a consistent support system in the institution the FY attend, someone there to provide guidance, and information to those working within child welfare to facilitate the best possible support not only with accessing PSE but also with persistence. Faye indicated that she and those in her agency who support youth entering post-secondary, and aging out, do try to check in. However, those check-ins range from once every couple of weeks to once per month. Faye and her team expect that the PSE institution will be taking intentional time to check in with those identified as crown wards/former crown wards (FY). Ruthven also stated,

I think if there is a way to connect them with people, whether it be other students, senior students, and to do so at the onset, create partnerships that way, so they have that person who

can keep pulling them along, when they have those times when they are struggling with papers they have that go-to person [snaps fingers] that they can always rely on.

Through the testimonies of each of this study's participants, it was clear that the presence of supportive individuals in FYs lives matters greatly; as positive, encouraging, present, and informed individuals they act as agents for PSE access and persistence.

As a college educator and program coordinator, with 15 years of experience in the sector, including a secondment as a Learning Strategist, at Georgian College, I state with confidence that a student's overall persistence and success in higher education is about far more than academics. The student's personal approach, the value they place on education, their self-awareness, ability to self-advocate, the integration of positive academic and social experiences, receiving sufficient support across learning, the post-secondary journey (e.g., with shared housing, having difficult conversations, dealing with relationships, etc.), and connections to the institution are all important. Each of the FY interviewed in this study confirm these essential components of success through their responses. They all valued PSE, saw it as important for their futures, and were dedicated to succeeding in their programs of study. Kaitlyn and Mike identified that they were largely independent and self-advocated to ensure their needs were met. Louise and Elaina both demonstrated self-awareness and elected to complete their programs on extended tracking, pursuing their education part-time to ensure the best chance of success. All the FY who participated in this study reported utilizing support services in some way, from counselling (e.g., Kaitlyn, Louise, Elaina) to simply taking advantage of quiet and supportive study space (e.g., Mike).

Child welfare experts, workers, and the advocate participants shared their perspectives on what they would communicate to Ontario College administrators about the post-secondary support needs of foster youth. Their collective responses underlined the importance of

efficacious on campus supports, and responsiveness to the needs of FY. Together this study's participants who work, lead, and advocate across the child welfare sector identified many needs. They emphasized the importance of training campus staff, across college departments and services, on the needs and special considerations of foster youth learners, and then connecting FY to people on campus for consistent support. As Whitman (2018) has identified,

Foster youth experience challenges (for example trauma, lack of stable housing, and little to no familial support) that may not be experienced by other students or may be heightened for the foster youth. As a result, it is important for student affairs educators to understand the unique experiences of foster youth and ways to support the whole student in order to see successful degree attainment. (p. 84)

The participants in this study also suggested that it was important to ensure support efforts are as discrete as possible to limit FY stigma, while ideally reaching out to FY learners so they do not have to self-identify to receive supports. They emphasized the importance of facilitating early and open conversations between campus supports and child welfare workers so that FY receive full support, encouragement, and are aware, prepared, and engaged to successful transition to and persist in PSE. They also identified the need for campus safe spaces for decompression, the importance of faculty using teaching and learning methodologies and strategies that support diverse learner needs and strengths, and explicit instruction in life skills, mindfulness, and emotional regulation.

FY, as under-represented learners who have experienced numerous barriers as a group, and generally have fewer external supports, may require additional in situ supports to welcome them, build a community, and assist them in achieving PSE success through to graduation. Each of the institutional supports accessed by the foster youth assist them in building social and cultural capital, resilience, and strengthen their capabilities for success. When an institution can

offer efficacious and responsive supports, this enhances equitable opportunity for success in FY students.

Richard, a post-secondary educator and former child welfare worker, ended his interview on a hopeful note for youth in and from care. He stated,

We all have a journey, a path to walk, a life to live. And what we go through builds perseverance and character. I want FY to know that what they have gone through builds them, their character and perseverance, and that their resilience can produce success.

There is great opportunity for FY to make tremendous personal and professional gains in post-secondary education in this province. As Ace (CWA) and Jane (CWE) noted, PSE can be a great equalizer and open opportunities for life and career success and stability that FY may not otherwise experience. They both believed that FY persistence in post-secondary relies on collecting evidence, tracking youth outcomes, and responding to that evidence to ensure quality, efficacious actions are taken to support FY as a demographic. As Jane Kovarikova, President of Ontario's Child Welfare Political Action Committee, and child welfare expert interviewed in this study, stated:

...the evidence says post-secondary achievement opens life for significant, and multiple, positive life trajectories. So, if you are looking to the evidence for how to improve the life of somebody, anybody, never mind foster kids, at the point of adulting, then you will find that post-secondary education is a pathway that gives you access to a lot of opportunity. So, if you have committed to evidence-based policies, then you are improving access to post-secondary education, by default.

## **Conclusion**

This study's findings align well with previous conclusions in the literature pertaining to foster youth barriers and supports in accessing and persisting within higher education. However, this study appears to have been the first to formally investigate, through an exploratory research design, the experiences of foster youth and former foster youth in Ontario, and in Canada. The

most prominent message from all participant groups in this research is that foster youth do have additional barriers to accessing and persisting in post-secondary education, and that tailored and specific supports along the educational pathway may assist in negating or helping foster youth to overcome these barriers. The study's findings are aligned with Bourdieu's Theory of Social Reproduction, Clark's Cooling-out hypothesis, and Sens' and Nussbaum's work on Capability Theory. All of these theories underline the importance of the social environment, in this case both the child welfare system and academic institutions, and the role they can play in perpetuating inequality or, conversely, affording opportunity. Resilience theory is also highly relevant to the findings in this study, as each of the foster youth participants demonstrated the ability to overcome great personal challenge in their lives to access and persist in post-secondary education. The child welfare workers, experts, and advocate also underlined the importance of resilience in the province's foster youth, in order to age out successfully, learn to navigate adult life, and achieve educational success.

As both Jane Kovarikova (CWE), and Ace (CWA) pointed out consistently in their responses to the study's questions, there is a need for empirical evidence of quality programming provided by the child welfare system, and the educational and life outcomes of children and youth in, and from care, must be tracked. The same applies to Ontario post-secondary education. The Ontario College system, which was qualitatively investigated in my study, does not appear to formally track foster youth/former foster youth access and persistence either. Its support offerings are also unique to each institution, and the Crown Ward Education Championship Team (CWECT), which is to run province-wide to carve smoother paths into and through Ontario PSE for foster youth, is inconsistent. Gathering data, developing and testing the efficacy



of outreach and support programs, and ensuring consistent child welfare partnerships across the province, may help to advance FY access and persistence in Ontario PSE.

Additionally, based on this research and previous studies, there is a strong indication that consistent and effective supports are needed to facilitate the educational success of FY throughout their post-secondary journey. Government policy development, and intervention (Ministry of Education at primary and secondary levels, and Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities at post-secondary levels) is required to ensure that educational institutions; primary through tertiary, are aware of the needs of FY learners and to assist in the funding and development of efficacious supports. Research and data collection is required to get a better sense of the numbers of FY aging-out and accessing post-secondary each year. Programs already in place, at all levels of the educational pathway must also be better understood so that their efficacy can be tested and improved. New program development must facilitate improved communication and collaboration between child welfare and all levels of the educational system to ensure that the most consistent social, emotional, and learning supports are developed, maintained, and fostered, both in home and school environments. Connective programming and knowledge-sharing between secondary and post-secondary levels must also be enhanced, so that each child, youth, and young adult is provided with the best opportunity to access, persist, and succeed in the latter years of their educational journey, in post-secondary. The latter may begin with a formal, widespread review of the CWECT initiatives that have been instituted.

I now discuss the implications for policy and practice, further research and theory related to the findings as interpreted through the lenses of the theoretical constructs that grounded this study, and the literature reviewed.

### **Implications for Policy/Practice**

This study's findings are reflective of those in the literature. Foster youth need more support in accessing and persisting in post-secondary education, and do not experience equal opportunity. Reflective and responsive policy and practice, both in child welfare agencies and in Ontario's colleges could make changes to outcomes for these vulnerable and marginalized children and youth.

The participants in this study have identified that FY need person-centred, trauma-informed, and reliable supports. FY need mentors and carers across their lives-in living environments, agencies, schools and post-secondary institutions. They need professional and personal connections who see them as individuals, take the time to learn about their educational and life experiences, their successes, the barriers they may face, and who then respond compassionately and effectively to support them, connect them with community resources, and help them overcome challenges.

Within home environments, consideration needs to be given to ensure the cultural backgrounds of foster youth are validated and supported, and their emotional and mental health and wellbeing is protected through safe, caring, and stable foster parenting. Nurturing self-efficacy and the development of educational aspirations should not be limited to educational environments, but fostered in the home through connection with agency and educational institution collaborations, projects, and supports.

In the community, developing, piloting, and researching the efficacy of collaborative school and agency integrated educational advising and mentorship, along with programs that connect FY to the post-secondary environment to increase their familiarity and build their cultural and social capital are important. Child welfare policies must be developed with a child-first mentality that expects children and youth in care to attend and succeed in post-secondary

education. If this intention is adopted then the question of how we can make post-secondary more accessible and increase the likelihood of FY success in education will become central, and inform the development of efficacious practices and programs to support FY as learners. FY should not hear messages that post-secondary is untenable for them due to their status as youth in care, but be encouraged to develop and pursue educational and occupational goals in line with their strengths, just like many of their peers who live with their families of origin.

Within post-secondary institutions, attention needs to be paid to the individual's barriers to entry and success, and to systemic barriers that may be inadvertently created or strengthened by the institution. For example, financial aid policies which make it difficult for foster youth to access funding due to family information or status, or residence life policies that force students to leave and go home on holiday periods, when FY may have no home to go to. Institutions must instead investigate ways to maximize FY capability and grow their capital for post-secondary educational success. When academic and institutional policies are developed, the needs of underrepresented learners like FY should be considered in the development process to ensure that the institution is not creating additional barriers for its learners (Sherer & Anson, 2014). When the needs of more marginalized learners, like FY, are considered in policy development, and the ways in which policy is operationalized into practice within the educational environment, it supports FY student success and may even assist other students facing different challenges. It allows institutions to be responsive to the students they have, not simply to those students who fit the stereotype of a traditional student (Dietsche, 2012).

## **Implications for Further Research**

A major implication for further research is the need to study foster youth and former foster youth who have NOT continued to PSE. Although that was my goal for this study, I previously identified the difficulty in finding and including such foster youth and former foster youth. However, if we are to fully understand the barriers explored in this study, it is imperative to study the perspectives of those who have not continued to or persisted in PSE. A major challenge in reaching former foster youth is their lack of connection to their child welfare agencies after they age-out. We need to examine how to reach this population so that we are able to engage in research that tracks their life outcomes, promotes reflection and data-driven revision to child welfare policy and practice, and which helps to build societal programming that targets their holistic needs; among them the educational supports they may require to access and persist in post-secondary education.

An implication for further research includes the need to develop both small and large-scale studies to empirically investigate what higher educational institutions in this province are doing, and to measure the efficacy of these actions to improve offerings and fill gaps. A case study on a few targeted, or more generalized, support programs offered by colleges and universities, which gather data on participant numbers, and pre- and post-tests relevant FY educational success variables, would be a good start. Informed support planning is required, and formalized research within and across institutions would enable greater understanding of what works, why it works, and how it works to support FY learners.

There also needs to be a clearer understanding of who foster youth/former foster youth are; numbers in, and exiting from, care, their racial-ethnic backgrounds, their family access, the number of foster placements, school experiences and achievements, and many more variables

could be measured and tracked. Efficacious planning for their future PSE access and persistence can only occur when we understand the group we are planning for. It would be very interesting and informative to expand theoretical discussions and empirical investigations around FY resilience and the interplay of this resilience (or various levels of it) with the PSE institution on the FY PSE journey. Each of the FY participants in this study demonstrated resilience to access PSE and achieve what they have. It is important that further studies focus on concrete strategies on how an institution could help FY, and other underrepresented or at-risk, learners develop and/or strengthen resilience over the course of their studies to decrease the incidences of cooling-out as conceptualized by Clark (1970).

This study investigated Ontario College supports, services, initiatives, and programs that can assist FY in accessing and persisting in post-secondary education. Though one of the FY participants did attend university, most of the participant reflections-across the groups interviewed-related to the Ontario College system. Further research should more formally investigate the province's universities and what they are doing in order to facilitate FY educational success. It would be beneficial to have information on both systems to identify and compare best practices in order to advance supports and eliminate barriers.

### **Implications for Theory Development**

There are implications for theory expansion and development from the findings of this study.

**For the Theoretical Frameworks Grounding this Study.** The theoretical perspectives utilized in this study: Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, Sen and Nussbaum's capabilities framework, Clark's cooling-out, resilience theory, and discussions of educational expectations

and aspirations, were all relevant to the exploration and interpretation of FY access and persistence in Ontario PSE.

I believe, and this study's participants support, that Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital and symbolic violence have great utility in understanding the inequity faced by many FY, not simply in accessing and persisting, but well before a student arrives at a PSE institution, when they are forming thoughts and ideas about PSE, and their personal educational expectations and aspirations.

The capabilities framework offered a solid conceptualization of the importance of the interaction between the individual and their external environments, particularly that of the higher educational institution; how it needs to understand the learner and be reflective and responsive to learner needs to ensure full combined capabilities/maximum potentials are realized into functionings, and so that cooling-out does not occur. As Otto and Ziegler identify, the framework, applied to the study of education elaborates how "...observable outcomes but also unobservable opportunities are related with respect to specific individuals in specific circumstances" (p. 272).

Foster youth resilience, demonstrated by the FY participants in this study, could be explored more in-depth and the protective, or promotive, factors involved at each stage of the PSE journey investigated and conceptualized to create a clearer picture of FY post-secondary educational resilience in particular; helping to advance understanding of why and how some learners are able to bounce back from adversity in PSE while others are not, and end up cooling-out. As Zimmerman (2013) identified,

research that applies a resilience framework will have common characteristics that can be replicated across populations and contexts and contribute more broadly to our understanding of the processes by which youth overcome adversity and develop into healthy adults despite risk exposure. (p. 383)

**New Theoretical Framework Proposed.** Based on my review of the literature, and my professional reflection on the experiences of college students from my experience as a long-term faculty member (15 years) and access program coordinator (eight years), I have conceptualized the post-secondary educational journey into five stages for the purpose of this research; preparation, awareness, engagement, transition, and persistence. Though all of these terms are found in the literature, they have not been previously combined, or conceptualized into a post-secondary pathway, as I did for this study. While the stages were conceptualized, defined, utilized, and applied to provide clarity on the foster youth PSE experience, they could be used as a theoretical framework for exploring and understanding the post-secondary journey of any student. Barriers and supports throughout each stage, an exploration of student access and retention/persistence, student development, and institutional processes, procedures, policies, supports, and services, could all be investigated through the application of this framework. Research could include individual student case studies, larger scale studies focused on specific student demographics, or investigations into institutional offerings at each stage.

Each of these stages is experiential, and identifies actions and experiences that precede, continue, and inform the process of becoming and remaining post-secondary learners. The five stages are reviewed briefly below.

**Preparation.** I propose that long before a youth considers PSE, they must be prepared for entry and success in PSE. Both the literature, and participants in this study, reflect this back in their findings or comments regarding lived experience in the child welfare system. Frequently noted barriers include educational gaps and disruptions due to housing/school moves, social and emotional support deficits (in both the native family and foster homes, schools, and child

welfare), and both inadequate academic preparation, and encouragement, for further study.

Trauma as a result of negative life experiences can also interfere in their ability to prepare for an educational future and instead contribute to outcomes that may interfere with or inhibit future PSE potential. For example, a FY who is abused may require long-term counselling and support for mental health issues like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and not be able to manage the demands of school, at any level. This can lead to educational disruption and FY can fall behind, and struggle to catch up without the right supports and understanding.

**Awareness.** In the second stage, the youth becomes aware of their PSE options. Some of the participants in this study became aware of their opportunities while still children, while others struggled to learn as young adults about what was available to them. Mike, for example, felt less equipped to understand PSE than his non-FY peers. He noted that he did not have the same familial supports around him to explain. When, how, and to degree to which a person learns of the higher educational opportunities available to them is the characteristic of this stage. As this study has explored, the PSE institutions can play a large role in connecting with FY, and those who support them, to assist them in understanding their options and encourage further exploration and eventual application.

**Engagement.** The process of engaging with the PSE system, to go from interested potential student to applicant, includes paperwork, online applications, and requires that an applicant have the knowledge to navigate the process. Both the literature and participants in this study have noted that the processes of applying, both for programs, and for required financial aid and additional supports (i.e., accessibility services) may be more challenging for FY. Programming (targeted or general-research needs to determine the efficacy of each) that provides FY applicants with additional supports, and a connection to the institution is vital at this stage, as



many of the study's participants outlined. Child welfare workers Faye and Ruthven indicated that their agencies provided direct support with PSE application processes to their youth. Des, child welfare expert, indicated that she also provided support with entry to identified crown wards/foster youth during her time as a CWECT representative at an Ontario college.

**Transition.** When the FY learner accepts an offer of admission, officially becoming a PSE student, there are several transition considerations - both specific to being a student, and a foster youth/former foster youth. Being a PSE student is qualitatively different from being a student in elementary and secondary school, and there must be supports in place to assist all students in the adjustment. FY may also be aging out simultaneously, and/or carrying additional life burdens and challenges which necessitate additional supports and understanding. As the participants in this study clearly outline, helping students to make and maintain connections within the institution, and fostering a sense of belonging among FY learners, helps in the ongoing transition to PSE student. Peer mentorship, consistent connections to a college counsellor or supportive staff member, social-emotional and learning supports, and safe spaces are a few of the possible transition supports mentioned as potentially efficacious by the participants in this research. Participants indicated the need for both greater transition and persistence supports as FY are likely to have support deficits in their lives outside of school.

**Persistence.** The final stage in the PSE journey is the one that determines whether the student successfully graduates from their program (or transfers and completes another). The participants in this study have confirmed that the continuation of supports-academic, social-emotional, and with student life-throughout the entire PSE experience is important. For example, during school holiday periods FY may not have somewhere to go due to fewer family connections and having aged-out of child welfare support. An institution can be responsive to

this situation by considering what on- and off-campus activities may nurture a continued sense of belonging in the FY student.

## **Conclusion**

Foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education matters. FY are currently under-represented in the province's post-secondary educational institutions due to barriers which see them accessing and persisting at lower rates than their non-FY peers (Conference Board of Canada, 2014, Miller & Flynn, 2014).

Through participant self-reports, the foster youth, child welfare experts, workers, and advocates demonstrated that there are potential barriers along the post-secondary pathway, from preparation through persistence. Participants identified that foster youth and former foster youth, through their involvement in the child welfare system, may have life considerations that their non-FY peers do not. Participants drew attention to the barriers of trauma and its repercussions (i.e. emotional wounds, a variety of mental health challenges such as addictions and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), educational disruption/gaps due to housing and family instability, support deficits-financial, social, learning, and emotional, earlier than average age of independence (due to the aging out process), and societal stigma.

As a province, in a nation where we encourage the attainment of higher education to advance life and career opportunities and success, it is crucial that we do not neglect the many youth in and from care who experience extra hurdles in getting through the door and remaining inside. Ontario's foster youth are in the care of our province; Ontario is their parent. As the findings of this study demonstrate, the experiences of youth in care are wide-ranging, but there are consistent concerns regarding how the system parents. Study participants identified

inadequate support, insufficient programming to prepare FY for post-secondary education and adult life, and negative messaging that foster youth receive about their educational goals as barriers to success affecting FY in this province.

As the parent for these youth, our province has a duty to learn about its offspring, reflect on its parenting, and make changes to advance FY equity of opportunity in post-secondary education. Both the province, as parent, and Ontario's educational institutions need to become aware of, and respond to improve and/or negate, FY challenges and circumstances that can affect their higher educational preparation, awareness, engagement, access, and persistence. As such, we must engage in a discussion of the supports required to enhance access and persistence. The voices of the participants in this study were clear: supports need improvement because FY feel underprepared and do not have the same resources available to assist them with accessing and persisting in PSE. Every participant in this study underlined the importance of FY having positive and supportive connections with those who can assist them in preparing for their studies, helping them to understand and navigate the application process, transitioning to life as a PSE student, and encouraging and assisting them with accessing support resources once enrolled. These supports form a community around the FY, and may include child welfare workers, elementary and secondary school teachers, foster carers, birth family members, college and university staff, mentors, and educators.

Child welfare and educational systems must collaborate to develop, support and advance cultural, social, and economic capital for Ontario's foster children to ensure they have the ultimate capability to attend and experience success alongside their non-FY peers. This work can begin with strengthening the existing CWECT initiatives across Ontario to ensure they are consistent and responsive to the youth in their region, and through informed planning and an

understanding of the FY demographic in our institutions, developing and/or advancing services, supports, and programs in our post-secondary institutions. Education is a right, not a privilege afforded to a few. Equity of opportunity for Ontario's foster youth is vital; they have experienced challenging life circumstances and experiences that disadvantage them already; we must ensure our educational institutions are not another barrier standing in the way of their success and full integration into adult life.

For these are all our children, we will all profit by or pay for what they become.

—James Baldwin

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## Appendices

## Appendix A OISE

ONTARIO INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

### Phone & Email Request for Dissemination of Foster Youth Call for Participation

**Title of Study:** Hidden among the Under-represented: Foster Youth Access and Persistence in Ontario Post-Secondary Education

**Researcher:** Renée J. Ferguson

#### Phone Request

Hello, my name is Renée Ferguson and I am a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. For my doctoral degree in Higher Education, I am conducting research into foster youth and former foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education.

I am calling you today to inquire whether the [*Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies or advocacy organization name here*] is willing and able to assist me in reaching out to Ontario's foster youth and former foster youth to invite their participation in an interview developed for my study. My goal is to interview 20 foster youth or former foster youth, 18-28 years of age, who have resided in foster care for at least 6 months before their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. These interviews will take place between May-August 2017.

The interview will take 45-60 minutes to complete. Participation is completely voluntary and participants can choose to exit the interview, or the study (and have their responses destroyed) at any point before data is aggregated. No participant will be identifiable in any report or in appropriate publications and presentations; only pseudonyms will be used. Dr. Katharine Janzen, at OISE, U of T, supervises my research and it has been approved by the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board.

If you can assist with the promotion of this research study, I will ask that you distribute the call for participation and my contact information to all of your stakeholders, agencies (*in the case of OACAS*), and relevant foster youth/former foster youth contacts. Additionally, I would greatly appreciate your posting and promoting the study on your organization's social media pages. Your co-operation to help spread the word about this research would be greatly appreciated and invaluable to this study.



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to this study.

I can be reached at 705-719-9037 or [reneejustine.ferguson@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:reneejustine.ferguson@mail.utoronto.ca). I would appreciate you letting me know whether your organization can assist within 5-10 business days. Should you agree, I will follow up with an e-mail which outlines additional study details and contains the foster youth call for participation.

Thank-you kindly for taking the time to listen to my request today. I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

### **Follow-up Email**

Hello [name of organization],

Thank-you very much for agreeing to assist in the promotion of this important research into foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education; I greatly appreciate your willingness to spread the word about the study and help recruit foster youth and former foster youth across the province.

As I shared during our phone conversation, my goal is to obtain responses from 20 foster youth or former foster youth, 18-28 years of age, who have resided in foster care for at least 6 months before their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. The interview is conducted one-on-one and begins with an overview of the study and the informed consent process. Participation is entirely voluntary. In approximately one hour, participants are asked to respond to semi-structured and open-ended questions related to themselves, their life experiences in childhood and youth, their educational expectations and aspirations, and their PSE experiences. With specific consent, participant responses will be digitally recorded for transcription purposes and the qualitative data will be protected in line with strict Research Ethics Board guidelines. Only my thesis supervisor and I will have access to the recordings, which will be destroyed after the information is transcribed. Although I will meet with interview participants in person, their identities will be held strictly confidential. Participants do not fully identify themselves and they can exit the interview, or study, at any point before data aggregation. No participant will be identifiable in any report or in appropriate publications and presentations; only pseudonyms will be used.

Interviews will be held between May through early August 2017. Since you have agreed to assist, please distribute the attached call for participation to all of your stakeholders, agencies, and relevant foster youth/former foster youth contacts. Additionally, I would greatly appreciate your posting and promoting the study on your organization's social media pages.

Dr. Katharine Janzen, at OISE, U of T, supervises my research and the study has been fully approved by the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions about the study, or would like clarification, you can contact either of us. Our contact information is provided below.



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Thank-you again!

Sincerely,

Renée J. Ferguson  
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## Appendix B

# OISE

ONTARIO INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

### Invitation to Participate (Foster Youth Interview)

**Title of Study:** Hidden among the Under-represented: Foster Youth Access and Persistence in Ontario Post-Secondary Education

**Researcher:** Renée J. Ferguson

Hello,

My name is Renée Ferguson and I am a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. For my doctoral degree in Higher Education, I am conducting research into foster youth and former foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education. Although there has been a focus on under-represented learners in Canadian higher education in recent years, I have not found academic studies specific to foster youth and former foster youth.

This is where you come in. I would like to invite you to participate in my study. I believe it is important that any research on foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary include the actual voices of foster youth who have lived experience in this province's child welfare system. This study is your opportunity to have your voice heard and contribute to practical research.

If you agree to participate, you and I will meet one on one for a one-hour interview scheduled on a mutually agreeable date and time between May and August 2017. Your participation is entirely voluntary. Should you agree to participate, you can withdraw consent, simply by contacting me by phone or email.

The interview begins with an overview of the study and the informed consent process. In approximately one hour you will be asked to respond to semi-structured and open-ended questions related to yourself, your life experiences, your educational expectations and goals, and your post-secondary experiences.

With your specific consent, your responses will be digitally recorded for transcription purposes. Your responses will be protected in line with strict Research Ethics Board guidelines. Only my thesis supervisor and I will have access to the recordings, which will be



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transcribed. You will also have the opportunity to review and revise the transcript. Although I will meet with interview participants in person, no interview participant will be identifiable in any report or in appropriate publications and presentations. Only pseudonyms will be used. Your identity will be held strictly confidential. Dr. Katharine Janzen, at OISE, U of T, supervises my research, the study is approved by the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board, and there is no anticipated risk to interview participants. You will receive a copy of the final research report.

Along with this invitation to participate you will find a copy of the informed consent letter for your review. If you decide to participate as an interviewee we will review informed consent and you can sign the form at the interview. If you have any questions, please get in touch with either Katharine or me. Our contact information is provided below. Additionally, you may also contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics at [ethics.review@utoronto.ca](mailto:ethics.review@utoronto.ca) or 416-946-3273.

Thank-you kindly for your time. I look forward to hearing from you,

Renée J. Ferguson  
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## Appendix C

## OISE

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

### Phone & Email Request for Call for Participation by Child Welfare Workers

**Title of Study:** Hidden among the Under-represented: Foster Youth Access and Persistence in Ontario Post-Secondary Education

**Researcher:** Renée J. Ferguson

#### Phone Request

Hello, my name is Renée Ferguson and I am a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. For my doctoral degree in Higher Education, I am conducting research into foster youth and former foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education. Although there has been a focus on under-represented learners in Canadian higher education in recent years, I have not found academic studies specific to foster youth and former foster youth.

I am calling you today to inquire whether the *Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies* is willing and able to assist me in reaching out to Ontario Children's Aid Societies, and their child welfare workers, to invite them to participate in one-on-one interviews. These interviews are a supplement to the interviews I will also be conducting with foster youth and former foster youth.

My goal is to disseminate the child welfare worker interview invitation to the OACAS head agencies in the five regions of Ontario-Central, East, West, North, and Toronto and interview a minimum of five full-time child welfare workers who work directly with children and youth in foster care (at minimum one interview per region).

Participation in the interview is voluntary and consent can be withdrawn any time before data aggregation. The interview is conducted one-on-one and begins with an overview of the study and the informed consent process. In approximately one hour, participants are asked to respond to 12 semi-structured and open-ended questions related to their work experiences and perceptions of foster youth/former foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education. With specific consent, participant responses will be digitally recorded for transcription purposes and the qualitative data will be protected in line with strict Research Ethics Board guidelines. Only my thesis supervisor and I will have access to the recordings, which will be destroyed after the information is transcribed. Although I will meet with interview participants in person, or through Skype, no interview



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and I will have access to the recordings, which will be destroyed after the information is transcribed. Although I will meet with interview participants in person, or through Skype, no interview participant will be identifiable in any report or in appropriate publications and presentations. Their identities will be held strictly confidential. Only pseudonyms will be used. Dr. Katharine Janzen, at OISE, U of T, supervises my research, the study has been fully approved by the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board, and there is no anticipated risk to participants.

If you can assist with distributing the call for child welfare worker participation, I would ask that you contact your head agencies in the five regions of Ontario. Your co-operation to help spread the word about this research would be greatly appreciated and invaluable to this study.

I fully respect if you need, or would like to take some time, to consider this request. I can be reached at 705-719-9037 or [reneejustine.ferguson@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:reneejustine.ferguson@mail.utoronto.ca). I would appreciate you letting me know whether your organization can assist within 5-10 business days. Should you agree, I will follow up with an e-mail which outlines additional study details and includes a document to share with your agencies.

Thank-you kindly for taking the time to listen to my request today. I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

### **Follow-up Email**

Hello [name of contact at OACAS],

Thank-you very much for agreeing to assist in the promotion of this important research into foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education; I greatly appreciate your willingness to help recruit child welfare workers for the study interviews.

As I shared during our phone conversation, my goal is to disseminate the child welfare worker interview invitations to the OACAS head agencies in the five regions of Ontario-Central, East, West, North, and Toronto and interview a minimum of five full-time child welfare workers who work directly with children and youth in foster care (at minimum one interview per region). These interviews will be scheduled at a mutually agreeable time, between each participant and I, during May through August 2017.

Participation in the interview is voluntary and consent can be withdrawn at any time before data aggregation. The one-on-one interview begins with an overview of the study and the informed consent process. In approximately one hour, participants are asked to respond to 12 semi-structured and open-ended questions related to their work experiences and perceptions of foster youth/former foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education. With specific consent, participant responses will be digitally recorded for transcription purposes and the qualitative data will be protected in line with strict Research Ethics Board guidelines. Only my thesis supervisor and I will have access to the recordings, which will be destroyed after the information is transcribed. Although I



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will meet with interview participants in person, no interview participant will be identifiable in any report or in appropriate publications and presentations. Their identities will be held strictly confidential; only pseudonyms will be used.

My research is supervised by Dr. Katharine Janzen, at OISE, U of T, the study has been fully approved by the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board, and there is no anticipated risk to participants. If you have any questions about the study, or would like clarification, you can contact either of us. Our contact information is provided below.

I have attached a copy of the call for participation, and the informed consent form for participants, which can be distributed to your head agencies.

Thank-you again.

Sincerely,

Renée J. Ferguson  
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Appendix D

# OISE

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

## Invitation to Participate (Child welfare worker interviews)

**Title of Study:** Hidden among the Under-represented: Foster Youth Access and Persistence in Ontario Post-Secondary Education

**Researcher:** Renée J. Ferguson

Dear Child Welfare Workers of Ontario,

Hello, my name is Renée Ferguson and I am a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. For my doctoral degree in Higher Education, I am conducting research into foster youth and former foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education. Although there has been a focus on under-represented learners in Canadian higher education in recent years, I have not found academic studies specific to foster youth and former foster youth.

I write this letter as, in addition to interviewing foster youth, I am inviting the province's child welfare workers to participate in the study. Participation involves a one-hour interview scheduled on a mutually agreeable date and time between May and August 2017.

Should you agree to participate, you can withdraw consent, simply by contacting me by phone or email, any time before data aggregation. The interview is conducted one-on-one and begins with an overview of the study and the informed consent process. In approximately one hour you will be asked to respond to 12 semi-structured and open-ended questions related to your work experiences, and perceptions of foster youth/former foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education.

With your specific consent, your responses will be digitally recorded for transcription purposes. Your responses will be protected in line with strict Research Ethics Board guidelines. Only my thesis supervisor and I will have access to the recordings, which will be destroyed after the information is transcribed. You will also have the opportunity to review and revise the transcript. Although I will meet with interview participants in person, no interview participant will be identifiable in any report or in appropriate publications and presentations. Only pseudonyms will be used. Your identity will be held strictly confidential. Dr. Katharine Janzen, at OISE, U of T, supervises my research, the study is



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or in appropriate publications and presentations. Only pseudonyms will be used. Your identity will be held strictly confidential. Dr. Katharine Janzen, at OISE, U of T, supervises my research, the study is approved by the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board, and there is no anticipated risk to interview participants. You will receive a copy of the final research report.

Along with this invitation to participate you will find a copy of the informed consent letter for your review. If you decide to participate as an interviewee we will review informed consent and you can sign the form at the interview. If you have any questions, please get in touch with either Katharine or me. Our contact information is provided below. Additionally, you may also contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics at [ethics.review@utoronto.ca](mailto:ethics.review@utoronto.ca) or 416-946-3273.

Thank-you kindly for your time. I look forward to hearing from you,

Renée J. Ferguson  
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## Appendix E

## OISE

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

**Invitation to Participate (Child welfare expert interviews)**

**Title of Study:** Hidden among the Under-represented: Foster Youth Access and Persistence in Ontario Post-Secondary Education

**Researcher:** Renée J. Ferguson

Dear [insert Child Welfare Expert name],

Hello, my name is Renée Ferguson and I am a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. For my doctoral degree in Higher Education, I am conducting research into foster youth and former foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education. Although there has been a focus on under-represented learners in Canadian higher education in recent years, I have not found academic studies specific to foster youth and former foster youth.

I write this letter as, in addition to interviewing foster youth and child welfare workers, I want to hear from experts in the field of child welfare in Ontario. Individuals who have insight into the big picture are required to enhance understanding of those with lived experience in the system. Participation involves a one-hour interview scheduled on a mutually agreeable date and time between May and August 2017.

Should you agree to participate, you can withdraw consent, simply by contacting me by phone or email, any time before data aggregation. The interview is conducted one-on-one and begins with an overview of the study and the informed consent process. In approximately one hour you will be asked to respond to 12 semi-structured and open-ended questions related to your work experiences, and perceptions of foster youth/former foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education.

With your specific consent, your responses will be digitally recorded for transcription purposes. Your responses will be protected in line with strict Research Ethics Board guidelines. Only my thesis supervisor and I will have access to the recordings, which will be destroyed after the information is transcribed. You will also have the opportunity to review and revise the transcript. Although I will meet with you in person, your identity will not be disclosed unless you provide specific consent. Dr. Katharine Janzen, at OISE, U of T, supervises my research, the study is approved by the University



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meet with you in person, your identity will not be disclosed unless you provide specific consent. Dr. Katharine Janzen, at OISE, U of T, supervises my research, the study is approved by the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board, and there is no anticipated risk to interview participants. You will receive a copy of the final research report.

Along with this invitation to participate you will find a copy of the informed consent letter for your review. If you decide to participate as an interviewee we will review informed consent and you can sign the form at the interview. If you have any questions, please get in touch with either Katharine or me. Our contact information is provided below. Additionally, you may also contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics at [ethics.review@utoronto.ca](mailto:ethics.review@utoronto.ca) or 416-946-3273.

Thank-you kindly for your time. I look forward to hearing from you,

Renée J. Ferguson  
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## Appendix F

## OISE

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

**Invitation to Resource Share (For Ontario English-speaking colleges)**

**Title of Study:** Hidden among the Under-represented: Foster Youth Access and Persistence in Ontario Post-Secondary Education

**Researcher:** Renée J. Ferguson

Dear [specific CWECT, first generation, or student services contact name if possible],

In addition to my career at Georgian College, I am a second-year doctoral student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). I am completing my studies in Leadership and Higher Education with the Community College Leaders' Cohort. My doctoral research involves an investigation into foster youth and former foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education. Although there has been a focus on under-represented learners in Canadian higher education in recent years, I have not found academic studies specific to foster youth and former foster youth.

My qualitative research involves interviews with foster youth, child welfare workers, and child welfare experts across Ontario with the intent to explore and problematize the issue of foster youth educational inequity. However, I also plan to engage in document analysis and my research seeks the input of Ontario's colleges regarding programs, services, policies, and initiatives currently in existence that may (directly or indirectly) benefit this population of learners.

Although relevant information may be publicly available, I am contacting the Ontario Colleges with the request that you directly forward, or link me to, details on your college's specific programs, services, policies, and initiatives. This information, gathered between April and May 2017, will be utilized to provide a realistic, and current, overview of what the CAAT system offers under-represented learners such as foster youth and former foster youth.

Dr. Katharine Janzen, at OISE, U of T, supervises my research, the study has approval from the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board, and there is no anticipated risk to institutional participants. You will receive a copy of the final research report.



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If you have any questions, please get in touch with either Katharine or me. Our contact information is below. Additionally, you may also contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics at [ethics.review@utoronto.ca](mailto:ethics.review@utoronto.ca) or 416-946-3273.

Thank-you kindly for your time. I look forward to hearing from you and incorporating your institution's relevant offerings in my research findings and eventual publications.

Renée J. Ferguson

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## Appendix G

# OISE

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### **Informed Consent Letter (For foster youth/former foster youth)**

**Title of Study:** Hidden among the Under-represented: Foster Youth Access and Persistence in Ontario Post-Secondary Education

**Researcher:** Renée J. Ferguson

Dear participant,

Thank-you for your willingness to participate in this research study. The following describes what is involved in your participation in this study on foster youth access and persistence in post-secondary education and describes your rights as a research participant. At the end of the document, you will be asked to provide informed consent to participate in the research. I will review the conditions of consent as described below and ask you to sign this consent form at the beginning of our interview before we discuss any of the questions.

### **What does my participation in this study involve?**

Your participation involves an interview anticipated to last approximately 60 minutes, conducted by me in a private location. With your consent the interview will be audio-recorded. You will receive a copy of your transcribed interview for review and revision as you wish.

### **What are the benefits of my participating in this research?**

This study aims to explore and describe the opportunities and challenges in access and persistence within post-secondary education for Ontario's foster youth and former foster youth. In shaping the future of post-secondary for our youth, your perspective matters. By participating in this study, you will help us to understand more fully those who have had similar life experiences to your own.

### **What are the risks of participating?**

Some of the questions ask you to recall past experiences which may make you feel uncomfortable. If that happens, please let me know and we will pause or re-direct the interview until you feel ready to



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Some of the questions ask you to recall past experiences which may make you feel uncomfortable. If that happens, please let me know and we will pause or re-direct the interview until you feel ready to continue. I have also prepared a list of local and community supports for you should you need or want to talk to someone. Other than that, there are no risks anticipated beyond those inherent in daily living.

### **Do I have to participate?**

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You are free to decline to answer any question(s) during the interview without explanation or consequence of any kind, and you may indicate if you do not want a particular response included in the report. You may withdraw from the study any time before data aggregation is begun by letting me know by any means and all data previously submitted will be deleted; after data aggregation is begun it will not be possible to delete your individual responses. You will also receive a summary of the study findings upon its completion.

### **Who will know about my participation?**

I will only use a non-identifiable pseudonym (not your name). You will not be identifiable in any reporting of the findings. All of your information will be kept confidential and secure, accessible only to my Thesis Supervisor and me. However, this research study may be reviewed for quality assurance to make sure that the required laws and guidelines are followed. If chosen, (a) representative(s) of the Human Research Ethics Program (HREP) may access study-related data and/or consent materials as part of the review. All information accessed by the HREP will be upheld to the same level of confidentiality that has been stated by the research team.

### **Whom should I contact if I have any questions or concerns?**

If you have any questions about the study itself, please feel free to contact my Thesis Supervisor or me. Our contact information is below. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may also contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics for questions about your role, and your rights, as a research participant at [ethics.review@utoronto.ca](mailto:ethics.review@utoronto.ca) or 416-946-3273.

Thank-you in advance for your participation in this research. We value your contribution and look forward to learning from your insights.



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Sincerely,

Renée J. Ferguson  
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By checking the “I agree.” statement and signing below, you are indicating that you are voluntarily willing to participate in the study and are fully aware of the research conditions identified above.

☐ I agree to participate in this research study.

☐ I do not agree to participate in this research study.

I agree to have the interview audio-recorded ☐ Yes ☐ No [if no then verbal permission will be asked to take field notes]

Signature\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

Please provide an email address in order to receive a copy of your transcribed statements for review, and a summary of the final thesis, which includes research study results. This personal information will be kept confidential, secure and not shared with anyone for any reason.

Email address:\_\_\_\_\_



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## Appendix H

## OISE

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

**Informed Consent Letter (For child welfare worker, child welfare expert, and child welfare advocate interviews)**

**Title of Study:** Hidden among the Under-represented: Foster Youth Access and Persistence in Ontario Post-Secondary Education

**Researcher:** Renée J. Ferguson

Dear participant,

The following document outlines what is involved in your participation in this study on foster youth access and persistence in post-secondary education and describes your rights as a participant. At the end of the document, you will be asked to provide informed consent to participate in the research. If you choose to participate in this research study, you may withdraw from the study any time before data are aggregated.

**What does my participation in this study involve?**

Your participation, should you consent to be involved, involves an interview anticipated to last between 30-60 minutes, conducted in person or through connecting technology such as telephone, Skype, or Facetime. With your consent the interview will be digitally recorded. You will receive a copy of your transcribed interview for review before any of your statements are included in data aggregation and formal research findings. You can elect to rephrase or remove any statements before the interview data are aggregated.

**What are the benefits of my participating in this research?**

This study aims to explore and describe the opportunities and challenges in access and persistence within post-secondary education for Ontario's foster youth and former foster youth. In shaping the future of post-secondary for our youth, your perspective matters. You have the opportunity to contribute to a project that could produce positive change for those who have had similar life experiences to your own or those you work with, advocate for, and represent across this province.

**What are the risks of participating?**



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### **What are the risks of participating?**

No risks beyond those inherent in daily living are anticipated.

### **Do I have to participate?**

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You are free to decline to answer any question(s) during the interview without explanation or consequence of any kind, and you may indicate that you do not want a particular response included in the report. If you do decide to participate you may withdraw from the study anytime before data aggregation is begun by letting me know by any means and all data previously submitted will be deleted. A transcript of your interview will be provided to you for your review and revision. You will also receive a summary of the study findings upon its completion.

### **How will the data be used?**

Only my thesis supervisor and I will have access to the data. Additional research publications and/or public presentations may refer to your data but without identifying information. In all cases, you will be non-identifiable in all reporting of the findings as will your agency. Pseudonyms will be used in the report results and discussions.

### **Whom should I contact if I have any questions or concerns?**

If you have any questions about the study itself, please feel free to contact my thesis advisor or myself. Our contact information is below. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may also contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics for questions about your role, and your rights, as a research participant at [ethics.review@utoronto.ca](mailto:ethics.review@utoronto.ca) or 416-946-3273.

The research study you are participating in may be reviewed for quality assurance to make sure that the required laws and guidelines are followed. If chosen, (a) representative(s) of the Human Research Ethics Program (HREP) may access study-related data and/or consent materials as part of the review. All information accessed by the HREP will be upheld to the same level of confidentiality that has been stated by the research team.

Thank-you in advance for your participation in this research. We value your contribution and look forward to learning from your insights.



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Sincerely,

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By checking the “I agree.” statement and signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study and are fully aware of the research conditions identified above.

☐ I agree to participate in this research study.

☐ I do not agree to participate in this research study.

I agree to have the interview digitally recorded, understanding it will only be utilized by the researcher and thesis supervisor for interview transcription ☐ Yes ☐ No

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Please provide an email address in order to receive a copy of your transcribed statements for review, and a summary of the final thesis, which includes research study results. This personal information will not be shared with anyone for any reason.

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

---

**Only if you are a child welfare expert and DO consent to your name and position being identified in the final research study, please indicate here:**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, am comfortable with disclosing my identity and role in child welfare in the final thesis document and any subsequent publications. I understand that I will have the opportunity to review all of my transcribed statements in advance of their publication. If I am uncomfortable with a statement, and wish to rephrase or remove it, I will be able to do so.



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Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please keep a copy of this signed consent form for your records.**



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## Appendix I

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### Foster Youth Interview

**IN PERSON: At the beginning of the interview we will review the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix G) and they will be asked to sign, if they do consent, before starting the interview.**

1. The first set of questions asks you to share some basic information on yourself. Remember, if you are uncomfortable answering any of these questions, you can choose not to answer. At the end of the interview if you would like to revisit any questions, please let me know.
  - a. How old are you?
  - b. Where were you born?
  - c. What gender do you identify with-male, female, both, neither, or other?
  - d. How would you describe your cultural, racial, or ethnic identity?
  - e. How would you describe your current physical and mental health and wellbeing?
  - f. If you have anything else you would like to share about yourself, please do so.
  
2. This next set of questions asks you to share information about your time and experiences in foster care.
  - a. At what age did you first enter foster care?
  - b. Are you still in foster care?  
*If response is "No":*
    - i. At what age did you leave foster care?
    - ii. Why did you leave foster care?
    - iii. Please describe your current living situation.
  - c. In total how long were you/or have you been, in foster care? Please estimate if you are unsure.
  - d. How many different foster care placements have you experienced? Please estimate if you are unsure.
  - e. How would you describe your experience(s) in foster care?
  
3. We now turn to questions related to your school experiences and your educational goals.



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- a. How many different elementary and secondary schools have you attended? Please estimate if you are unsure.
  - b. Have you graduated from high school?
    - If response is "Yes":*
      - i. What did you graduate with-a certificate, diploma, GED, or something else (please explain)?
      - If response is "No" or "Not yet":*
        - ii. Why haven't you graduated from high school?
  - c. While in high school did you/do you use any learning supports or services, such as an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), resource centre, Educational Assistant, Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT), adaptive technology, testing supports, sensory room, etc.?
    - If response is "Yes":*
      - i. Please describe the extra support you received and used.
      - ii. Please share if you have a diagnosis(es) that relates to your learning.
  - d. How would you describe your academic performance in high school?
  - e. Did/do you enjoy high school? Why or why not?
  - f. Did/do you have people in your life who encourage/d you throughout your elementary and high school education. Please explain your answer.
  - g. Do you have any educational goals?
    - If response is "Yes":*
      - i. What are your educational goals?
      - ii. Why are these your goals?
      - iii. How do you think you developed these goals?
      - iv. Do you feel like you will be able to reach your goals? Why or why not?
      - If response is "No":*
        - v. Why not?
4. Post-secondary education refers to education beyond high school. For example, in Ontario, students can take further education in public, private, and career colleges, polytechnics, universities, and through trade schools and apprenticeships. The next set of questions asks you about your interest in, exposure to, and experiences with, post-secondary education in Ontario.
- a. Have you learned about post-secondary options available to you?
    - If response is "No":*



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- i. Why do you think you have not learned about post-secondary options available to you?
  - ii. Are you interested in learning about post-secondary options available to you? Why or why not? **(Then, skip to Question 4f)**  
*If response is "Yes":*
  - iii. How old were you when you first learned about post-secondary education possibilities for yourself? Please estimate if you are unsure.
  - iv. How did you first learn about your post-secondary education options?
- b. Have you ever applied to post-secondary education?  
*If response is "No":*
  - i. Why not? **(Then, skip to Question 4f)**  
*If response is "Yes":*
  - ii. Please describe.
- c. Have you been accepted to post-secondary education?  
*If response is "No":*
  - i. Do you plan on applying for post-secondary education again? Why or why not? **(Then, skip to Question 4f)***If response is "Yes":*
  - ii. Please describe what post-secondary program you were accepted to, whether or not you accepted your offer of admission, and why.  
**(If participant hasn't accepted an offer of admission skip to Question 4f)**
- d. Have you ever attended/Are you attending post-secondary education, either full- or part-time? **(If response is "No" skip to Question 4f).**  
*If response is "Yes":*
  - i. Please describe the post-secondary education you have attended/are attending.
  - ii. How old were you when you first attended post-secondary education?
  - iii. Please describe any supports or services that you have used (both in the post-secondary institution and in the community), or that have helped you to prepare for, entering post-secondary education and transitioning to your role as a student in post-secondary education.



- e. Have you ever graduated from a post-secondary education program?  
*If response is "No":*
- i. Why did you not complete your studies and graduate?
  - ii. What supports, both in and out of school, do you feel would have helped you to complete your studies? **(Then, skip to Question 4f)**
- If response is "Yes":*
- iii. Please describe the program you graduated from and what credential you earned.
  - iv. Did you have any life experiences that challenged you while you were completing your studies? If so, please describe.
  - v. If you used any institutional supports or services to help you throughout post-secondary please describe them, and how often you used them.
  - vi. What personal factors do you believe contributed to your success in post-secondary education?
  - vii. Are there any other factors-outside of yourself and the school-that contributed to your success in post-secondary education? If so, what were they?
- f. Do you believe post-secondary education is important? Why or why not?
- g. Do you believe that Ontario's foster youth and former foster youth have equality of opportunity when it comes to attending and experiencing success in post-secondary education in Ontario? Why or why not?
- h. Please share any final thoughts you have on being a foster youth or former foster youth and how you feel it relates to educational experiences and opportunity.



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## Appendix J

## OISE

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## Child Welfare Worker Interview

**IN PERSON:** At the beginning of the interview, we will review the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix H) and they will be asked to sign, if they do consent, before starting the interview.

1. Please share some information about your CAS agency:
  - a. What is your association's geographic service area?
  - b. How many children and youth are currently in care through your association?
  - c. What percentage of your foster youth population identifies as Indigenous?
  - d. Describe any factors that make your child welfare association and/or population unique.
2. How long have each of you worked with children and youth in foster care?
3. How many youth in high school and approaching adulthood would you estimate you support in a given year?
4. Please describe your experience working with youth who are "aging-out" of the system.
5. In your opinion, what are the most serious challenges faced by youth aging out of the system?
6. What supports are offered to youth aging out of the system and what do you think of them?
7. Describe the level of interest in pursuing post-secondary education among the high school youth and young adults you support.
8. What would you describe as the biggest barriers, or roadblocks, to post-secondary education in the young people you support? Why?



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## Appendix K

## OISE

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## Child Welfare Expert Interview

**IN PERSON:** At the beginning of the interview, we will review the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix H) and they will be asked to sign, if they do consent, before starting the interview.

1. Please describe how your work role specifically relates to Ontario's child welfare system.
2. Do you work with or represent youth who are "aging-out" of the system? If so, please describe.
3. In your opinion, what are the most serious challenges faced by youth in Ontario's child welfare system?
4. In your opinion, what are the most serious challenges faced by youth aging out of Ontario's child welfare system?
5. What would you describe as the biggest barriers, or roadblocks, to post-secondary education in the young people you support or represent? Why?
6. Please describe any programs and services your organization offers to assist foster youth in accessing post-secondary education.
7. Among foster youth and former foster youth who do access post-secondary, what do you believe they need for post-secondary success?
8. If you were asked to speak to Ontario College administrators about the post-secondary support needs of foster youth, what would you share with them?

Please state any other issues/concern or factors that you believe need to be considered for foster youth access and persistence within post-secondary education in Ontario.



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## Appendix L

# OISE

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

### Invitation to Participate (Child welfare advocate interview)

**Title of Study:** Hidden among the Under-represented: Foster Youth Access and Persistence in Ontario Post-Secondary Education

**Researcher:** Renée J. Ferguson

Dear Child Welfare Advocates of Ontario,

My name is Renée Ferguson and I am a PhD candidate in the Leadership, Higher and Adult Education Department at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I am conducting research on foster youth and former foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education. This research study is in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the PhD degree. My Thesis Supervisor is Dr. Katharine Janzen in the Higher Education Program.

I am inviting the province's child welfare advocates to participate in this study. Participation involves a one-hour interview with me scheduled on a mutually agreeable date and time, in person, or by phone. Alternatively, you can choose to answer the questions in written form. If there is local travel, any costs (e.g. public transportation, parking) will be reimbursed.

The interview is conducted one-on-one and begins with an overview of the study and the informed consent process. You will be asked to respond to questions related to your advocacy experiences, and perceptions of foster youth/former foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education. Should you agree to participate, you are free to decline to answer any question(s) you do not wish to answer or withdraw from the study at any time, simply by contacting me by phone or email, any time before data aggregation.

With your specific consent, the interview will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes. The audio-recording will be erased immediately after the transcription of the interview and you will have an opportunity to review and revise the transcript as you see fit. No participant will be identifiable in any reporting of the findings or in appropriate publications and presentation. Only pseudonyms will be used; your identity will be held strictly confidential and secure. Only my Thesis Supervisor and I will have access to any of your information. You will also have the opportunity to review and revise



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will have access to any of your information. You will also have the opportunity to review and revise the transcript. However, this research study may be reviewed for quality assurance to make sure that the required laws and guidelines are followed. If chosen, (a) representative(s) of the Human Research Ethics Program (HREP) may access study-related data and/or consent materials as part of the review. All information accessed by the HREP will be upheld to the same level of confidentiality that has been stated by the research team.

The study is approved by the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board, and there is no anticipated risk to interview participants. You will receive a copy of the final research report. Before we begin, we will review the required Informed Consent (attached) and I will ask you to sign it. If you have any questions, please contact me or Dr. Janzen. Our contact information is provided below. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics at [ethics.review@utoronto.ca](mailto:ethics.review@utoronto.ca) or 416-946-3273.

Thank-you kindly for your time. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Renée J. Ferguson  
Doctor of Philosophy Candidate,  
Leadership, Adult, and Higher Education,  
OISE/University of Toronto  
[reneejustine.ferguson@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:reneejustine.ferguson@mail.utoronto.ca)  
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## Appendix M

# OISE

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### Child Welfare Advocate Interview Guide

**IN PERSON:** At the beginning of the interview, we will review the Informed Consent Form and the participant will be required to sign, if they do consent, before participating.

**Non-leading probing questions, such as “Please tell me more?” and “How did that happen?” will be used as needed to gain a deeper understanding of participant comments.**

1. Briefly describe your lived experience as children or youth within Ontario’s child welfare system, including aging-out if applicable.
2. In your opinion, what are the most serious challenges faced by children and youth under 18 years of age in Ontario’s child welfare system today? Why?
3. In your opinion, what are the most serious challenges faced by youth 18 years of age and older who are aging out of Ontario’s child welfare system? Why?
4. What would you describe as the biggest barriers, or roadblocks, to obtaining post-secondary education among Ontario’s foster youth and former foster youth? Why?
5. Please describe any programs and services the Child Welfare PAC offers to assist foster youth in accessing post-secondary education.
6. Among foster youth and former foster youth who do access post-secondary, what do you believe they need for post-secondary success? Why?
7. If you were asked to speak to Ontario college and university administrators about the post-secondary support needs of foster youth, what would you share with them?

Please state any other issues/concern or factors that you believe need to be considered for foster youth access and persistence within post-secondary education in Ontario.



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## Appendix N

### **E-mail Call for Participation sent by Dr. Parm Bhattal on June 23, 2017**

**E-mail Subject Line:** Research Participation Request

**To:** Directors of Service, Resource Managers, YouthCAN Network

**From:** Dr. Parm Bhatthal, Director, OACAS Learning

Renée Ferguson a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto is doing a research study titled: Hidden among the Under-represented: Foster Youth Access and Persistence in Ontario Post-Secondary Education. Renée is conducting research on foster youth and former foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education. Child welfare workers, those who have worked with foster youth in a full-time capacity for at least one year, are being invited to participate in this study. Renée is also seeking to interview 20 foster youth or former foster youth, 18-28 years of age, who resided in foster care for at least six months before their 16th birthday. These interviews will take place between May-September 2017. Participation involves a one-hour interview scheduled on a mutually agreeable date and time between May and September 2017, in a private space in a local child services agency, or another location of the participants choosing. Local travel costs (e.g. public transportation, parking) will be reimbursed.

The interview is conducted one-on-one and begins with an overview of the study and the informed consent process. In approximately one hour you will be asked to respond to questions related to your work experiences, and perceptions of foster youth/former foster youth access and persistence in Ontario post-secondary education. Should you agree to participate, you are free to decline to answer any question(s) you do not wish to answer or withdraw from the study at any time, simply by contacting Renée by phone or email, any time before data aggregation.

The study is approved by the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board, as well as being reviewed by OACAS and there is no anticipated risk to interview participants. Workers will also receive a copy of the final research report.

Please forward this email to your staff, or youth stakeholders that might be interested in taking part in this study. If you are interested in taking part in this study or need more information, please connect directly with Renée Ferguson either via email at [reneejustine.ferguson@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:reneejustine.ferguson@mail.utoronto.ca) or telephone: (705) 719-9037.

Thanks,

Parm Bhatthal, Ph.D  
Director, OACAS Learning  
Phone: 416-987-8055