Effectiveness of the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Program

Fosters Group

Tarleton State University
Effectiveness of the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) Program

Every year, approximately 23,000 young adults age out of foster care and face negative outcomes due to the lack of resources for their transition to adulthood. Aging out of foster care is a process in which young adults 17 or older, who are not enrolled in high school, no longer receive assistance from the state due to reaching the age of majority, thus making them ineligible to remain in the foster care system (Center for Public Justice, 2017; National Foster Youth Institute, 2017). The term young adult refers to individuals between 17 and 24 years of age. Although resources are available, the young adults endure many conflicts when they age out of the foster care system, such as finding employment, obtaining a college education, and managing finances (Ahmann, 2017). Approximately 1 in 5 young adults from foster care will become homeless, and at the age of 24, only half of young adults from foster care are employed; also, more than 95% will not have earned a college degree by 26 years of age (Center for Public Justice, 2018). Young adults who age out often lack access to resources to obtain basic life skills (how to cook, vehicle maintenance, the importance of insurance, etc.) for adulthood (Rosenwald, Mcghee, & Noftall, 2013). Additionally, research has exhibited themes within the foster care system that contribute to learning helplessness, such as lack of interaction outside of the home and lack of preparation for adulthood (Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, and Gala´n-Cisneros, 2015).

Services are available for young adults aging out of foster care. These services are observed in programs offered by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and ACH Child and Family Services. Although other services are provided, this research focuses on the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program, which is offered by the DFPS agency. The PAL program aids in housing and implements the skills needed to function as an adult (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2017). Research revealed young
adults who accessed available programs frequently experienced positive outcomes. These results aid the research in understanding the problem by proving the idea that young adults who employ the current available resources undergo a smoother transition to adulthood (Scannapieco, Smith, & Blakeney-Strong, 2016).

This research is an exploratory study to investigate the effectiveness of the PAL program in addressing the needs of the young adults aging out of foster care and transitioning into adulthood. This research has relevance to social work because it implements the core value of social justice by ensuring the population has their basic needs met and access to opportunities to improve their quality of life. Additionally, this research has implications on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work practice. At the micro level, social workers obtain additional knowledge in connecting young adults with available services. At the mezzo level, social workers are able to educate families, agencies, and communities concerning resources for this population. Lastly, on the macro level, social workers can advocate for policy changes to improve and expand existing programs.

**Problem Statement and Objectives**

This research focuses on the effectiveness of the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program as perceived by the professionals working in the PAL program, non-PAL professionals working with the young adults, and the young adults obtaining these services. The objectives of this research are as follows:

Objective 1 (O1): Identify the needs of the young adults aging out of foster care.

O2: Identify the perspectives of PAL and non-PAL professionals regarding the young adults and their needs.
O3: Identify potential improvements for the PAL program to make the services offered more effective and assessible.

The student researchers have developed the following research question to address the identified problem:

Research Question 1 (RQ₁): How effective is the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program in addressing the needs of young adults aging out of foster care?

Hypotheses

The student researchers have identified the following hypotheses for the research question they developed:

Hypotheses (H₁): The majority of PAL program professionals report the PAL program is effective.

H₂: Fewer young adult participants report the effectiveness of the PAL program.

H₃: Fewer non-PAL professionals report the effectiveness of the PAL program.

Research Aims

This study aims to determine the effectiveness of the PAL program in addressing the needs of the young adults aging out of foster care. This research is important because it provides additional insight into the differing perspectives regarding the needs of the young adults.

Literature Review

The student researchers reviewed 12 articles relating to the effectiveness of the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program. Five of the articles were qualitative, two were quantitative, two were mixed methodology, and lastly, three were secondary data. The sample size of the studies ranged from 6 participants to 4,235 participants being the largest study conducted amongst the articles. The researchers divided the articles into three themes. The first
theme consisted of four articles which discussed lack of resources for youth transitioning out of foster care (Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Gala´n-Cisneros, 2015; Olson, Scherer, & Cohen, 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Sakai et al., 2014). The next five articles discussed the theme of perspectives of youth aging out of the foster care system (Chambers et al., 2018; Reynolds, Hasson, & Crea, 2018; Rosenwald, Mcghee, & Noftall, 2013; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Trejos-Castillo, Davis, & Hipps, 2015). The last theme which included three articles discussed the current available services for youth aging out of the foster care system (Barnow et al., 2015; Kim, Ju, Rosenberg, & Farmer, 2019; Scannapieco, Smith, & Blakeney-Strong, 2016).

**Lack of Resources**

Various studies examined the lack of resources for young adults transitioning into adulthood (Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Gala´n-Cisneros, 2015; Olson, Scherer, & Cohen, 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Sakai et al., 2014). These studies explain the number of resources needing improvement. According to National Youth in Transition Database (2017), youth who age out of the system experience adverse adult outcomes (Gomez et al., 2015; Olson et al., 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Sakai et al., 2014). Furthermore, these studies examine the perspectives of youth on factors that influence mental health service use after aging out of foster care (Gomez et al., 2015; Olson et al., 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Sakai et al., 2014). The limitations for these studies consist of small sample size, large national sample for some studies, secondary data, and consideration of factors involving mental health services (Gomez et al., 2015; Olson et al., 2017; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Sakai et al., 2014). These articles inform the study by providing information on how youth lack resources transitioning into adulthood and by seeking to improve these resources available for youth to be more prepared for adulthood. By
understanding the lack of resources for youth, improvements can be modified to improve youth outcomes when transitioning into adulthood.

**Young Adult Perspectives**

Other articles examined the perspectives of young adults who aged out of foster care on topics such as the transition to adulthood, independent living services, placement moves, and informal supports (Chambers et al., 2018; Reynolds, Hasson, & Crea, 2018; Rosenwald, Mcghee, & Noftall, 2013; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Trejos-Castillo, Davis, & Hipps, 2015). Overall, the findings of these studies imply that current services available to young adults who are emancipated from the foster care system could be improved by addressing the young adults’ need for support and relationships and by emphasizing the development of tangible skills such as financial literacy and economic and overall well-being (Rosenwald et al., 2013; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Trejos-Castillo et al., 2015). Additionally, experiences of young adults both while in care and after emancipation impact their overall outcomes (Chambers et al., 2018; Reynolds et al., 2018). These studies indicate limitations within their samples due to small size, usage of secondary data, and/or lack of representation (Chambers et al., 2018; Reynolds et al., 2018; Rosenwald et al., 2013; Rutmean & Hubberstey, 2016; Trejos-Castillo et al., 2015). These articles inform the study by providing insight on how young adults utilizing programs perceive the services. These studies also increase awareness of additional conflicts young adults encounter and how they currently resolve these issues (Chambers et al., 2018; Reynolds et al., 2018; Rosenwald et al., 2013; Rutmean & Hubberstey, 2016; Trejos-Castillo et al., 2015). These findings provide implications for the additional needs of young adults aging out of foster care. This study intends to examine the effectiveness of the PAL program through the perspectives of
the young adults utilizing the program, the professionals administering the program, and other child welfare professionals interacting with the program.

**Current Available Services for Youth Aging Out**

Diversified studies examined the current available services for youth aging out of foster care and alumni of foster care service (Barnow et al., 2015; Kim, Ju, Rosenberg, & Farmer, 2019; Scannapieco, Smith, & Blakeney-Strong, 2016). These studies revealed as more services were utilized, the youth had more positive outcomes as adults; however, according to the youth aging out of foster care, more services are needed (Barnow et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2019; Scannapieco et al., 2016). Next, the youth stated the programs in place to assist in the aging out process revealed a need for more specific training regarding job preparation skills and education opportunities (Barnow et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2019). Limitations for these studies include: usage of secondary data, validity and reliability, lack of comparison group, and limited data for some studies (Barnow et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2019; Scannapieco et al., 2016). These articles inform the study by providing the views of youth aging out of foster care regarding the current available services for their transition. This study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of the current available services through a questionnaire survey. By understanding how effective the current available services are at addressing the needs for foster youth aging out of the system, improvements can be identified and compared to the PAL program.

All 12 studies aim to investigate the understanding of social phenomenon of young adults aging out of foster care. Each study provided insight on this issue by examining the lack of resources, young adult perspectives, and current available services for young adults aging out foster care. They inform the study by providing knowledge for previous studies in similar topics.
and increasing awareness of the challenges young adults aging out of foster care encounter as they transition to adulthood.

**Theoretical Framework**

Two theories, the Transactional Model of Development and the General Systems Theory, inform this study. General Systems Theory views individuals, groups, organizations, and other social structures as smaller systems within a whole (Miley, O’Melia, & DuBois, 2017). Each of these systems interact with each other and influence each other’s context. The Transactional Model of Development depicts a reciprocal relationship where people continually shape and are shaped by their environments (Miley, O’Melia, & DuBois, 2017). This theory explains the relationship between biological factors, environmental factors, and a child’s development, and concludes that each of these factors are influenced by each other (Goemans, van Greer, & Vedder, 2009). The following paragraphs provide a detailed overview of the identified theories. The overview includes information regarding who developed the theory, when the theory was developed, a detailed definition of the theory, and how the theory informs the overall study.

**Transactional Model of Development**

The first theory the student researchers selected to inform the study is the Transactional Model of Development. This theory was first proposed in 1975 by Arnold Sameroff and Michael Chandler (Arnold, 2009). The Transactional Model of Development examines the interactions of nature versus nurture in child development. This theory explains the development of a child is influenced not only by the child’s biology, but also by the child’s social environment (Arnold, 2009). The Transactional Model of Development explores the reciprocal exchanges between children and their environment to explain certain developmental themes (Goemans, van Geel, & Vedder, 2018). This model utilizes both single factors and the way in which the factors interact
with each other to emphasize the “interdependent effects” of both biology and the environment on the child (Goemans, van Geel, & Vedder, 2018, p. 991).

This theory applies to the study by recognizing how both biology and the environment impact the outcomes of the young adults. The PAL program must reflect the unique needs of the young adults utilizing the program, as they have likely endured environments and experiences that negatively impacted their development. The natural abilities and resiliency of young adults must also be accounted for through the services provided by the PAL program. For example, the young adults’ environmental impacts coupled with biological considerations can hinder their development of life skills. The PAL program must recognize factors such as these when providing services to the young adults. Therefore, the Transactional Model of Development informs the study by recognizing that the young adults who utilize the PAL program are impacted by both their biology and their environments.

**General Systems Theory**

The student researchers identified General Systems Theory as the second theory relating to the research. While Ludwig von Bertalanffy was the first person to discuss the idea of General Systems Theory in 1937 (Miller, 1969). The theory was founded by scholars identified as Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Anatol Rapoport, Kenneth E. Boulding, William Ross Ashby, Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson and others in the 1950's (Mitchell, 2019). General Systems Theory is used to “understand the relationships among various components of [the] society” (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012, p. 291). Additionally, General Systems Theory “view[s] an individual or group as its own ecosystem with many moving parts that affect each other” (Good Therapy, 2019, para 4).
Pincus-Minahan (1973) states there are four basic systems: a change agent system, a client system, a target system, and an action system (as cited in Zastrow, 1999, p. 73). In the research regarding the PAL program, the change agent system are the professionals working with the young adults aging out of foster care who want to ensure the young adults have the essential skills for living independently. The client system are the young adults aging out of foster care. The target system are the creators and facilitators of the PAL program. Lastly, the action system are both the professionals who work with the young adults aging out of foster care (non-PAL professionals) and the PAL professionals. General Systems Theory informs the overall study by revealing how the PAL program is impacted by many different systems in society, and how each part contributes to the effectiveness of the PAL program. Figure one depicts a visual of the aforementioned model.

Figure 1. Pincus-Minahan model for PAL program.

The theories focus on relationships shaped by the environment, Transactional Model of Development; and focus on smaller systems viewed as a whole, General Systems Theory. Additionally, the student researchers are administrating an exploratory study and developed a
survey. These theories aid in the understanding of the study by identifying how biology and the environment impacts the youth and how the PAL program is impacted by other systems. These theories focus on how the PAL program is taught and how to improve the PAL program for future young adults.

Research Design

The student researchers are conducting an exploratory study using a sample of 75, with 25 being young adults who have utilized the PAL program, 25 being PAL professionals, and 25 being non-PAL professionals. Additionally, the student researchers are using a non-probability, purposive sampling method. The reason for this method is because each of the participants are selected regarding their involvement and knowledge of the PAL program. The study design is a mixed-methodology. Researchers use quantitative analysis for analyzing the demographics, scale questions, and qualitative analysis for analyzing the open-ended questions to identify codes, categories, and collapse into sizeable themes. There are no identifying markers on the online survey. All completed surveys are coded. Data is retrieved anonymously and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences or a similar analysis tool (i.e. JASP). Data is stored in a secure location. The results of the data inform researchers on the effectiveness of the PAL program in meeting the needs of young adults.

Survey Description

The survey includes 5 demographic questions, 2 Likert scales regarding effectiveness and perceptions of the PAL program, 4 multiple-response questions concerning the needs of young adults and services provided by the PAL program, 1 yes or no question regarding if the PAL program should be improved, and 2 open-ended questions with respect to experiences and suggestions with reference to the PAL program. The survey is to be administered to the
participants online. Participants access the survey through an online forum and complete the survey.
References


Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. (2017). “Preparation for adult living (PAL) program.” Retrieved from https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Protection/Youth_and_Young_Adults/Preparation_For_Adult_Living/