A Microsystem of Support for Students Who Experienced Foster Care

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Abstract

Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model was used to learn about students’ challenges and supports while in college. Themes of tending to my personal/family issues, navigating my academic life, and managing my time emerged for challenges. Depending on self and depending on others resulted for supports. Based upon this study’s results, the microsystem’s elements of activity, role, and interpersonal relation were used to discuss mentoring, enhancing educational behaviors, and focusing on basic needs as recommendations to support these students during their college journey.

Keywords: foster care, higher education, student success

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College life may be a challenging transition for many students. This can be a reality for students who experienced foster care as evidenced by high drop-out rates in college (Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011; Unrau, Font, & Rawls, 2012) and low college graduation rates (Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2003; Pecora et al., 2005). Various challenges may occur during their college journey that may lead to issues with retention and graduation. One factor may be inadequate preparation for college-level work (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Challenges with academics have been evidenced during elementary and secondary schooling (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). They may have to take remedial-level college courses (Courtney et al., 2011) and may lack strong time management and study skills (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Inability to fund college expenses has been reported as a common reason for dropping out of post-secondary programs and as a common barrier to continuing education (Courtney et al., 2011; Hernandez &
Naccarato, 2010). Housing can be a critical component in particular for students who attend community colleges as many of these colleges may not have on-campus housing (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Rassen, Cooper, & Mery, 2010). Securing reasonably priced housing within the vicinity of the campus can be an issue (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). If students select affordable housing that is a distance from the campus, then they may encounter transportation difficulties. Another piece of the housing puzzle is year-round housing as some students may not have places to reside during school intermissions (Casey Family Programs, 2010). Mental health issues may be negatively linked to educational outcomes (Dworsky & Perez; Salazar, 2012). Having a history of a mental health diagnoses was related to a higher likelihood of college disengagement (“taking time off from an associate’s or bachelor’s degree program or starting a program but not completing it;” Salazar, 2012; p. 147). Students’ family circumstances may also help to explain college challenges. Students may experience guilt because they have funds (e.g., scholarships) to go to college while their families may be financially struggling (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). This familial financial pressure may lead students to give some of their funds to their families or decide to drop out of college so they can work to financially care for their families. Some students may also be parents. Parenting responsibilities was a reason for no longer being enrolled in school (“became a parent/caring for children”) and a barrier to continuing education (“need to care for child[ren]”) (Courtney et al., 2011).

Bioecological Model

We engaged in this research by using Urie Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model to guide our understanding of these students and of a college environment that could be conducive
to their development. The bioecological model contains nested systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem in which the developing person is at the center (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For this study, we focused on the developing persons (students who experienced foster care), microsystem (college), and ecological transitions (two academic semesters). The developing person is a dynamic being with characteristics and experiences that influence one’s environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem which is the closest environment has three basic elements: activity (purposeful continuing behavior), role (expected behavior), and interpersonal relation (interaction between individuals in which one individual focuses on another individual or partakes in an activity with another individual) that are experienced by the developing person. An ecological transition is a change in role and/or setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Research Goals

A goal of this study was to learn about these developing persons’ challenges and supports in their microsystem during their ecological transitions. We developed two research questions:

1. What challenges have you experienced in being successful this semester?

2. What supports have helped you to be successful during this semester?

Via the lens of the microsystem’s elements of activity, role, and interpersonal relation, we used the results to suggest recommendations of how a college could be a supportive microsystem.
Method

During two consecutive semesters (semester 1 [S1], semester 2 [S2]), we recruited students who were participating in a campus support program at a university in the northern part of Texas. We integrated our study’s five open-ended questions into a program evaluation questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to students towards the end of these two semesters during their in-person program meetings. For the program evaluation, no demographic information was collected. These students were part of a specific campus program composed of a small number of potential participants and not collecting demographic data could help to protect their anonymity and to help increase their participation and honest responses (Babbie, 2010). In essence, we were promoting a safer space for student expression. Therefore, we do not have demographic data about our participants. During S1, nine of the 16 students participated, and 10 of the 12 students participated in S2. The same students may have participated during both data collection times. We collected data at two time points so we could learn about similarities and differences in their reported experiences.

To address Research Question 1, we had two open-ended questions (e.g., During this semester, what have been your weaknesses in performing well in your current courses). For Research Question 2, three open-ended questions were presented (e.g., During this semester, who and/or what has motivated you to continue your coursework during this semester? How did this motivation occur?). We, the first two authors, participated in multiple steps to examine the data via qualitative content analysis which is an approach to examining text; specifically for describing and explaining the meanings of persons’ written words (Marshall & Rossman, 2011),
such as written responses to open-ended questions of a questionnaire (Buntine & Read, 2007; Stonelake-French et al., 2018). Part of our organization process was to group participants’ responses according to their respective open-ended questions and then eventually to each of the two research questions. Individually, we investigated the students’ responses to comprehensively learn of their unique meanings. We summarized meanings of their responses by applying descriptive words (Saldana, 2013). This coding led us to seeking commonalities among the students’ responses. We grouped similar responses and examined these data sets. This structuring led to another level of synthesizing the data and developing and refining our five themes. We dialogued multiple times about our individual examinations and respective results (Creswell, 2013). Our combined approaches of individually and collaboratively examining the students’ responses assisted in enhancing our interpretation of their challenges and supports. Two of our co-authors worked with individuals who experienced foster care and pursued a college education. To enhance trustworthiness of our results, these two co-authors reviewed the results section and confirmed that the results were consistent with their professional experiences.

Results

What I Am Experiencing As a Developing Person: My Challenges

For both S1 and S2, themes of tending to my personal/family issues, navigating my academic life, and managing my time were revealed.

*Tending to my personal/family issues.* One recurrent dimension was finances. One student expressed experiencing financial instability (S1); whereas, another student reported having stress about financial situations (S1). Divorce was indicated, and basic necessities of food and housing were evidenced in responses. A facet of mental health was identified, “My major obstacle is/
being depressed” (S1). During S2, a student reported being pregnant as a challenge in successfully finishing the semester, and another student shared “I had a health scare spring semester which has made it difficult to work.”

*Navigating my academic life.* A focus was on the process of completing academic work and the struggles experienced. During S1, one student conceptualized schoolwork as being stressful, and another student expressed that studying was a weakness. Comprehending academic practice was also revealed. In both semesters, specific courses (e.g., English) were identified as areas of weaknesses in performing well.

*Managing my time.* During both semesters, students admitted personal responsibility in navigating their time. During S1, one student informed that a weakness was “Not staying on top of my school work.” Along with scheduling issues, procrastination was a difficulty. Another thought was that lack of time was a major obstacle in completing the semester. During S2, a couple of students shared that a weakness in their performing well was not being focused; for example, “Focusing on school while attending to personal problems.”

*What I Am Experiencing As a Developing Person: My Supports*

For S1 and S2 data, depending on self and depending on others were the two themes revealed. Students reported their contributions to their academic success. Also, they identified social supports who were instrumental to them.

*Depending on self.* During S1 and S2, a common sub-theme was self-motivation. A difference in sub-theme was noted between the two semesters in that during S1, academics management was yielded; whereas, perseverance was shown in S2. Students expressed their
desires to be successful; for example to rise above negative circumstances by “not be[ing] a statistic” (S1). One student envisioned a positive future and shared “The fact that I know that I am on the path to greatness” (S1). Along with expressing challenges with their academics in S1, they did highlight their accomplishments that are housed within the sub-theme of academics management. Their comments had an essence of diligence. Students expressed that they made changes in accomplishing their school work. One student shared “I have grown into a mature and independent lady. I have been studying more than I did in high school. In History, Math, and psychology I have a B average, which is an achievement to me.” (S1). One student looked towards the future of attending graduate school, “wanting to get into grad school, so I have to preform well, or my chances are lower.” (S1). During S2, perseverance was evident via responses such as “I stayed in class no matter what. I always attempt to study. I never gave up.”

Depending on others. Multiple students realized that their journey was not a solo effort. During S1 and S2, social support was shown. During S1, financial resources were emphasized in contrast to S2 in which academic resources were revealed. Socially, students identified the Program, family, friends/peers, and counseling. The Program graduate assistant was mentioned multiple times; for example: “[Program graduate assistant] inspired me when I was seriously considering quitting school.” (S1); “[Program graduate assistant] has been very encouraging & very easy to talk to. She is always willing to lend an ear” (S1); “[Program graduate assistant] has really motivated me in a since everytime I felt like giving up she pushed me to do better for myself and continue doing it until I finished” (S2). For counseling as a resource, a student shared “Counseling because it helps me with problems I face and it has gotten me on the right track.” (S2). During S1, a couple of students focused on an essential college expense—books. Basic
needs were also indicated such as support with food. For S2, academic support was shown; specifically, assistance with mathematics; “I used the mathlab, it was beneficial during the fall semester b/c everyone knew what/how to help.”

Discussion and Implications

As developing persons, students experienced challenges of personal/family issues, academic life, and/or time management. For support, depending on self included self-motivation, academics management, and perseverance. Social, financial, and academic resources were revealed for depending on others. Common themes were revealed across their ecological transitions. Differences were within supports for both themes of depending on self and depending on others.

A limitation of our study was not collecting student demographic data. Demographics such as age, employment status, and family household structure may provide another level of understanding these students’ experiences. Demographic data can be useful in developing culturally-enhanced policies and programs. Students responded to a questionnaire via writing. Even though the students revealed much in their responses, select responses were general. A limitation was that this type of data collection did not allow opportunity for follow-up questions to obtain additional information from students regarding their experiences.

Based upon our study’s results, we used the microsystem’s elements of activity, role, and interpersonal relation to discuss mentoring, enhancing their educational behaviors, and focusing on basic needs as strategies to support students. Mentoring is a relational activity that operates as a joint activity dyad. Characteristics of this dyad are reciprocity, balance of power, and affective relation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Mentoring can give students an opportunity to develop a stable,
consistent support system. Enhancing their educational behaviors is about empowering students to fulfill their roles as students. Focusing on basic needs involves activities that help students to manage their human needs so they can tend to their academic lives. Activity, role, and interpersonal relation can intersect (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as evidenced by mentoring. Designated leadership in the college environment is essential (Casey Family Programs, 2010) for these strategies to be established and sustained. This leader is responsible for identifying these students, guiding them during their college journey, and collaborating with others who can provide services to the students (Casey Family Programs, 2010).

*Mentoring*

Students identified how the program graduate assistant helped them; for example, inspired, encouraged, and listened. These are characteristics of a mentor. A reality of persons who experienced foster care is that their support system may not be sufficiently knowledgeable about college life and/or champions them to earn a college degree (Rios & Rocco, 2014). Therefore, mentoring within the college environment can be an integral part of their journey. Mentors can regularly meet with them to discuss how college life is progressing, guide mentees to develop academic goals, and inform them of campus resources to help navigate their circumstances. Mentors can be faculty, staff, or fellow students who would serve as consistent figures who are invested in supporting students’ educational success (Crisp & Cruz, 2009).

*Enhancing their educational behaviors*

Dimensions of navigating academic life and managing time were revealed as students’ challenges. Specifically, students reported issues about studying, coursework completion, and time use. For students who have difficulties in accomplishing their schoolwork, a variety of
activities can be put into place to assist them in enhancing their educational behaviors. Students can be guided to participate in campus academic activities such as tutoring, academic coaching, time management, and study skills (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Sessions with academic advisors and/or mentors could be another opportunity to encourage students’ positive behaviors (Eller, Lev, & Feurer, 2014). Simple yet an important action is having dialogues about their accomplishments such as completing assignments in a timely manner and earning passing grades. In essence, these activities are to guide students to embrace ownership in fulfilling their roles in being successful within their college microsystem.

Focusing on basic needs

Students’ comments reflected basic needs of finances, housing, and health. Because attending college can be conceptualized as a luxury in that a college degree is not needed to get a job; some students may drop out if these types of basic needs are not being met (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Students may examine the immediate cost-benefit of college and deem that the costs outweigh the benefits; therefore, their roles as students may be dropped so they can tend to their basic needs. To guide students financially, designated staff members can be educated about grants, scholarships, and waivers relevant to students who experienced foster care (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Rassen, Cooper, & Mery, 2010). Students may even benefit from money management skills sessions. Another goal can be to help students to secure affordable and safe housing whether on or off campus (Casey Family Programs, 2010). Students reported specific health situations such as stress, pregnancy, and depression. Students can be encouraged to participate in regular wellness visits and in counseling
sessions. Counseling may have to be normalized as some students may have negative perceptions of engaging in therapeutic help (Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

Conclusion

This study took a step in contributing knowledge about students as developing persons by learning about their challenges and supports while enrolled in college and by using the microsystem’s elements of activity, role, and interpersonal relation to suggest ways to develop a supportive college environment. A next step can be to analyze the microsystem’s elements in relation to the students’ educational outcomes (e.g., grade point average, retention, graduation). Also, data can be obtained from mentors and/or individuals who work closely with these students to provide additional perspectives of factors relevant to these students’ educational outcomes.
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http://www.cwla.org/child-welfare-journal/

