

# ***Who will teach me to learn?***

Creating Positive  
School Experiences  
for Youth in Care

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*“A lot of us don’t know the way and there is no one there to show us.”*

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# The National Youth in Care Network

The National Youth In Care Network (NYICN) is a charitable organization comprised of young people, aged 14 to 24, who are either in or from state care across Canada. In any year, there are over 60,000 young people in the care of child welfare authorities and 25,000 young people in custody in Canada. Most of these youth have been traumatized by abuse (sexual, physical, neglect) and go into care stigmatized, isolated and distrustful of adults. Too often, their futures are compromised by a lack of support services, a high level of early school drop out and chronic unemployment.

The NYICN exists to nourish the development of youth in care networks across Canada, while helping our members find their voices and regain control over their lives through support, skill building, and healing opportunities.

Our objectives are to:

- support the development of local and provincial Youth In Care Networks;
- voice the opinions and concerns of youth in and from care;
- promote the improvement of services for this group; and
- facilitate healing, support and skill building opportunities among youth in and from care.

We do this by providing programming that addresses the needs of youth in and from care including networking and member support, advocacy and education.

# Introduction

Children and youth in foster care generally do not perform as well in the educational system as other children and youth. Over the past 15 years, the NYICN has been increasingly concerned with the alarmingly high number of youth in care who do not complete their high school education. There are few studies, however, which directly address the educational needs of youth in the care system, particularly in Canada. It is clear that there are specific needs and concerns, but the nature of those needs as perceived by youth and possible solutions are much less apparent. This study is a first step toward understanding and addressing the educational needs of youth in care. Through qualitative participatory research, the NYICN aimed to provide adult stakeholders with knowledge of how to better support youth in care throughout their high school education.

Our aim was also to provide youth in care with an active voice in education. A recent study on student engagement in learning and school life shows that youth often do not have an active voice in their education, although they are key to understanding how these processes work.<sup>1</sup> This may be particularly true of youth in care, for whom many aspects of

life are institutionally controlled. As one focus group participant said: “To understand youth, you have to put yourself in our shoes.”

In order to complete this participatory research project, the National Youth In Care Network (NYICN) entered into a partnership with the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD). The aim of this partnership was to utilize the expertise of CCSD staff in order to train and assist the youth staff of the NYICN in conducting qualitative participatory research. The youth staff then carried out the project with the continued assistance of the CCSD. In keeping with the mandate of the NYICN, youth staff played lead roles at all stages of the project.

The youth-to-youth approach used in this research project adds a layer of uniqueness and increases the validity of the responses for youth in care. The youth who participated in this project were among their peers, and were free to discuss their concerns openly with others who were in similar situations. They believed their voices would be heard and would eventually help improve the educational experiences of other youth in care like themselves.

# Background

There are over 60,000 children and youth living under the guardianship of the child welfare system. While child welfare and child protection are issues of national concern, the policies and procedures related to child welfare and protection are under the jurisdiction of each province or territory. Consequently, the terminology and policies defining a province's portrayal of child welfare vary across regions. This causes a great deal of difficulty in tracking youth in care from province to territory and even knowing exactly how many children and youth are in care in Canada. Recommendations, while similar among youth in all provinces, will be difficult to implement. The implications for policy change will be different in each province or territory unless basic national standards are developed for child welfare care.

Foster care is just one of many experiences for youth in care. "Youth in care" is the label applied to any youth who has been placed in the legal care and guardianship of the state, such as through child protection agencies, youth justice facilities, or mental health institutions. While many of the needs, issues and services are similar among youth in all forms of state care, there are also many differences. And while this participatory research study includes other forms of state care (including young offenders), it only examines the areas of overlap, and additional research is needed to examine the unique needs and recommendations for those youth. The same applies to sub-populations within youth in care, including Aboriginal youth and minority youth.

The experience of being in the foster care system is unique and youth in the child welfare system face several challenges that others do not. Youth in foster care are separated from their families for a variety of reasons such as

abuse, neglect, the death of caregivers, or the inability of the caregivers to care for the child. Youth frequently have difficulty adjusting to coming into the care of the child welfare system<sup>2</sup> which can be disruptive to the youth's education.<sup>3</sup>

Once placed in the care of the social agency, youth frequently relocate to new placements.<sup>4</sup> This relocation can be especially disruptive and difficult to cope with when it also involves a move to a new school.<sup>5</sup> Youth who have difficulty adjusting to the foster care setting often have school-related difficulty.<sup>6</sup> Within the school setting, teachers have lower expectations for youth from foster care<sup>7</sup> and the young people are more likely to be expelled or suspended.<sup>8</sup>

Evidence has shown that children in foster care consistently perform below the national average for their age group, even when they are in long-term placements,<sup>9</sup> and they are at greater risk of dropping out.<sup>10</sup> As high school and post-secondary education is becoming an economic necessity, these undereducated children and youth are falling behind.

Youth from foster care also lack the luxury enjoyed by the "boomerang generation" of being able to return to the parental home later in life. Most high school students report stress related to their financial situation.<sup>11</sup> Although provincial standards vary, by their early twenties at the latest, these youth will be required to be fully financially independent. This will be a difficult feat without the education required to compete in the job market.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the many challenges that youth in the foster care system face, some do succeed. Those who succeed are believed to possess or benefit from certain protective or resiliency factors.

These are personal attributes or characteristics of their social situation which help them to overcome adverse life circumstances.

For youth at risk, stability and consistency within the home can act as protective factors when the youth are exposed to multiple life stresses.<sup>13</sup> In the absence of such conditions, schools with well-defined schedules and discipline can be a resiliency factor.<sup>14</sup>

A supportive social group can also contribute to the resiliency of a youth who has experienced a high degree of life stress.<sup>15</sup> Effective support networks outside of the home can involve a wide array of individuals such as teachers and social workers.<sup>16</sup> Perceived support in this domain was a surprising predictor of a youth's attachment to academic learning. That is, youth were more likely to succeed in school and to enjoy learning when they felt that someone cared about their schooling, regardless of who that person was.<sup>17</sup>

Other research shows that if one's life situation, such as home life, includes many risk factors, another situation, such as school, can provide resiliency factors<sup>18</sup> to offset the risks. School counselors have been shown to be effective in helping youth to deal with the transition into the foster care system.<sup>19</sup> Participation in extracurricular activities can also improve self-esteem and resiliency.<sup>20</sup> Non-mainstream school environments such as alternative schools have also been shown to help youth to stay in school.<sup>21</sup>

Youth who are in less restrictive placements such as foster homes fare best academically, while those in more restrictive placements such as group homes are less likely to succeed.<sup>22</sup> Fewer moves to new placements is related to more positive outcomes.<sup>23</sup> Participation in independent living programs that teach life skills has also been related to increased chances of obtaining a high school diploma.<sup>24</sup>

Despite evidence indicating ways to help youth in care succeed, resources are still inadequate.<sup>25</sup> In an analysis of high school dropouts, many of the youth who dropped out were described as "invisible."<sup>26</sup> These youth were not identified beforehand as being especially 'at risk' of leaving

school. In particular, there appears to be a lack of integration and communication between child welfare agencies and educational institutions.<sup>27</sup> Yet this co-operation is necessary in order for the personal and educational needs of the youth to be fully understood and met. In order to understand the factors that affect youth, we must understand that all things in their lives are related and affect one another.<sup>28</sup> The educational needs of youth cannot be effectively separated from their personal and social needs.

Further, youth often do not have input with regard to their own educational needs.<sup>29</sup> They are often uninvolved in the plans that are made for them within the social agencies and, even when they are present, their input is not considered.<sup>30</sup>

Through increased involvement in life and educational planning, these youth will learn how to plan for their own future, rather than relying on someone else to make decisions for them. They will acquire the personal management skills that are necessary in order to become fully independent and successful.

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*The role of the professional should be to respect the decisions of their clients – in this case, youth in care – in order to empower them.<sup>31</sup> Youth who are empowered will be capable of making the educational and life decisions that are right for them.*

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*Through this project, 100 youth from the child welfare system have spoken out and asked to be empowered. They have shared their thoughts and ideas about the problems at hand and possible solutions. They have also shared their life experiences, some happy and some painful, in the hopes that they will be heard.*

# Project Youth Participants

We recruited youth in care to participate in this qualitative research project who were representative of the youth in care population of Canada. The trends we see in this sample are reflective of the national and geographical diversity of the youth in care population of Canada.

A total of 100 youth participated in the focus groups.<sup>32</sup> There was a relatively even gender split, with 40 per cent male participants, 56 per cent female participants and four per cent who did not indicate their gender. Participants ranged from 12 to 23 years in age, with the average age being 17.

Some participants indicated more than one ethnicity and 30 per cent of the respondents did not indicate their ethnic background. Of those who did, 25 per cent identified themselves as Canadian, 30 per cent as White or European, 10 per cent as Native, 10 per cent as South American, four per cent as Black and three per cent as Latino. Sixty per cent of the respondents spoke English as their first language.

Sixty-three per cent of the sample were currently enrolled in school, 13 per cent were not, and 24 per cent did not indicate an answer to this question. The average grade completed was Grade 10. For those who were in school, Grade 11 was the average level, although education levels ranged between Grade 6 and university.

The average age for entry into the child welfare system was 12 years. At the time that the focus groups took place, 17 per cent of the respondents lived in foster homes, 10 per cent with relatives, 27 per cent lived independently, and 22 per cent lived in other situations such as group homes or semi-independent homes. The average number of moves since entering the child welfare system was five.

Ten per cent of respondents indicated that they had or were expecting a child of their own. Thirty-four per cent indicated that they participated in extracurricular activities, 40 per cent indicated that they did not, and 26 per cent failed to answer the question. Jobs were held by 21 per cent of the youth. One-quarter of the youth had been involved in the correctional system as young offenders.

In general, there were no significant differences between the responses of the various sub-populations of youth in care sampled. However, we recognize that the questions asked were specific to the educational experiences of youth in the care of child welfare authorities. There are many overlapping issues between sub-populations of youth in care, but these sub-populations (such as young offenders, Aboriginal youth, etc.) are very unique and further study would be needed to explore the differences in more depth.



# Stability and Safety

Many of the youth in this sample expressed concerns about stability and safety, both at home and at school. Stability refers to the consistency of one's environment, while safety refers to the youth's feelings of personal security in any given situation. These two issues often coincided with one another in the youth's responses. Although they represent two separate issues, there is a relationship between the two. In order to feel safe, youth must be able to assess their environment. This becomes difficult, however, when the environment is not stable. The youth are then either unable to assess the environment before change takes place or are unable to feel safe in the current environment because they are anticipating changes to come. Movement to an environment that may be safer also involves a disruption in stability as the youth are removed from their current environment.

## Transiency

One major obstacle to stability is that youth in foster care often move from placement to placement. This can cause a disruption in school life, particularly when changes of schools are involved. The average number of times a youth had moved since entering the child welfare system was five for this sample.

Each time the youth moves, he or she must readjust to a new foster family or group home setting. The move may also mean a readjustment to a new school or even a new school board. This can take away from the time and attention that they are able to focus on school, both academically and interpersonally.

Some of the youth indicated that school provided the consistency that was missing in their home lives. Many of these youth felt that school was an escape from the turbulence that they experienced in other areas of their lives.

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*"I changed schools three times, so friends were hard to keep. I had a lot of conflict at school. I felt isolated and alienated."*

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*"You need a stable environment both at home and at school to graduate. You get emotionally affected when you are always moving around."*

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*"School was the most consistent thing in my life. I moved around a lot and I went to nine different elementary schools. But I always knew that my teacher was going to be there when I got there every morning and I didn't have that at home."*

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## Teacher Support

Many youth in care also experienced problems at school. Many felt that teachers were not empathetic towards them. A frequent complaint

was discrimination against students based on their status as wards of the child welfare system.

Minority youth often spoke of the double stigma of being a minority and being a youth in care. Several participants suggested that teachers and other staff working with youth should undergo empathy training or become more educated about youth in care.

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*“I have two kids and constantly feel like I have to prove myself. As long as I am pushing and proving myself, I have all of the teacher’s support, but if I slip up and miss a week of school because my kid is sick or I am, I lose it all.”*

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## Violence

Some youth also feared violence within the school system. Several youth described being in fights at school or being threatened with violence. The youth felt that because of their involvement in the child welfare system, they were immediately stigmatized as “trouble makers” and blamed for the altercations in which they became involved. When the youth were given opportunities to explain themselves, many found that they were not believed by the authorities.

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*“In Grade 5 and 6 I was always getting in fights because I was always getting picked on. Once after gym class, some boys took all of my clothes while I was in the shower. I was crying and naked. I tried to run home but the school authorities thought that I was streaking so they kicked me out of school.”*

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*“You can’t worry about your grades and worry about your life or who is going to challenge you to a fight next. It’s unrealistic.”*

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Clearly, the youth feel that a stable and safe environment both at home and at school would be more conducive to learning. Stable living situations and safe schools with supportive teachers are an unrealized ideal for these youth.

The nature of the foster care experience inherently involves transitions. However, while planning that minimizes the number of transitions is useful, in some cases transitions will be necessary. In such cases, it is important to understand the nature of the transitions and the effects that they have on youth. Further study on the nature of moves – such as reasons for moving, the number of moves, youth’s input into the moves, and the effects of these transitions on youth – is necessary in order to effectively meet the needs of youth in transitory situations.

Teachers play a valuable role in mentoring and supporting students. Teachers should be informed of the issues and living situations of youth in care so that they can understand how to support and advocate in favor of youth.

Greater youth involvement in life planning may be one strategy for increasing stability and safety. In such a strategy, the youth would have more input into decisions affecting their living arrangements and schooling, with an emphasis on choosing placements that maximize the potential for safety and stability. It is important to note that what a social worker or teacher may see as a safe learning environment may be viewed very differently by the youth, and it is important that the youth’s perception of the environment be respected. To that end, sensitivity training for school and social work staff may be useful.

# Resources and Choice

## Awareness of, Access to and Availability of Resources

The youth in our focus groups said they were often not aware of their options or resources they could access when faced with a decision regarding their education. Many of the youth were aware that they needed help in certain areas but they did not know about the resources that may have been available to them. Some of the youth did not have the confidence to ask for help, while others believed that if their problem was truly a serious one, help would have been offered to them. Others were unaware of the resources that were available to them. Many youth said that they had always dealt with things on their own, and they did not like to be dependent on others for assistance. They were able to access resources only after someone had taken note of their difficulty and helped them to get what they needed.

Other youth who did ask for assistance were surprised to find that many people were unwilling to help them or unable to help them due to their own lack of knowledge. The need for increased funding for education was mentioned repeatedly. Scholarships, bursaries, loans and other financial resources were not well understood by the youth. Resources for locating such information were described as difficult to understand.

Often, the youth felt that when they sought the help of a guidance counselor, social worker, or teacher, they were expected to know much more about their options than

they did. They were expected to plan for their education with far less assistance than they felt was required. Training for teachers and guidance counselors was identified as a need within the educational system.

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*“I had a lot of trouble with my math. I never asked the teacher for help. I thought that he would have come to me.”*

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*“Counselors don’t know much about kids and what they want. I wanted to be a massage therapist and no one could tell me what I needed. I finally went on the Internet, where I found out about the program and what I needed.”*

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*“A lot of us don’t know the way and there is no one there to show us.”*

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## Engagement and Involvement

The youth felt that they were not given the opportunity to be active participants in decisions regarding their schooling. Several participants explained that choice of schools, courses and

extracurricular activities was often taken out of their hands. These participants expressed the need to be treated as competent individuals who are able to play an active role in making important decisions about their own lives.

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*“I played volleyball until I went into the group home. I don’t play anymore. They always say that they will look into it and never do.”*

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*“I switched schools this semester because I wanted a fresh new start. I went into Grade 10 and the principal chose all of my courses for me. I am doing co-op and I had a placement lined up at CIBC. Instead, they asked me how working with kids sounded and pushed me towards that.”*

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*“If you have certain things on your mind that you want to do, they should help you achieve that instead of offering other suggestions.”*

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There is a marked difference between what the youth believe they need in order to be able to make decisions and what they are being provided with. The youth interviewed demonstrated a strong desire to succeed and to be active participants in decisions about their own lives. Many of these youth feel victimized by a system that does not allow them to do this. One participant summed up the discussion of decision-making by saying: “Just because we are youth does not mean that we are incompetent! Adults need to recognize kids and what they are capable of.”

It is also important that youth be supported in maximizing this potential. Training guidance counselors and social workers to help youth locate resources that they need and to explain the resources where necessary would be a useful step in helping youth to plan for their future. Further, the amount of resources available to youth in care, such as funding for tuition, books, housing, and the like should be increased in order to make post-secondary education a more feasible option for youth in care.

# Personal and Educational Support

Throughout the focus groups, youth participants adamantly expressed the need for support in both personal and educational matters.

## Personal Support

Respectful treatment, motivation and encouragement were emphasized as important aspects of support. A wide range of support people were identified. These included teachers, family members, foster parents, principals, police officers, guidance counselors, social workers, therapists and friends. Youth emphasized the connection between school and personal life. In order to be successful in school, one's personal life must have certain qualities such as stability, self-esteem and a strong support network.

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*“The only positive thing that ever happened to me in school was when I was on the cross-country team and I was really determined. We had made it to the provincials and my brother came to see me and it was like the only thing that I’ve accomplished in my life. He was like, ‘You can do it! You can do it!’ ... The whole time I was running I was basically doing it for him ... I got to the finish line and I won first place ... It was the most outstanding thing that ever happened to me at school.”*

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*“The principal at my school was the best. He helped me to get out of a negative relationship with a guy who was hitting me. He took the time to listen to me and to understand what I was going through.”*

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*“You need friends and family to motivate you for self-esteem. If you are constantly told that you will amount to nothing then your confidence will go down.”*

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## Preparation for Independence

Older youth expressed a great deal of concern over leaving the child welfare system, living independently and obtaining funding for their post-secondary education. In all groups, the issue of funding for further education was raised. Also expressed was a need for life skills programs that emphasize education. Many of the youth were already living independently and they often found it difficult to balance the daily chores and necessities of their living situation with the demands of education. Several youth who were not currently enrolled in school emphasized the need to sort out their personal affairs before returning to school, in order to be successful.

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*“It has nothing to do with school ...  
When you leave you are looking for a place  
to get money, a place to stay, where to get  
food or how to support your child ...  
When I get home the first thing on my  
mind is not homework.”*

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*“We need more scholarships and bursaries  
within the communities. Our town does not  
have anything like that.”*

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## **Educational Support**

Many youth said that non-mainstream educational programs had helped them. Examples of such programs included alternative schools, correspondence courses, accelerated learning programs, schools with day-care programs, and home schooling. Some participants said that they needed to work at their own pace while others expressed a desire for more hands-on practical learning. The youth advocated for more diversity in programs and a better fit between students and their learning environment.

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*“High school needs more diversity in the  
programs. Subjects like music, sports,  
cosmetology, woodworking, etc. The more  
diverse the school is, the better, because the  
students will find their own vocation.”*

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Almost all of the youth involved in the focus groups said that they intended to complete their high school education and most planned to pursue some form of post-secondary education. In order for this to occur, personal and financial support is required both in the home and school settings. Programs that prepare youth for independent living, and programs which also focus on the personal management skills required to attend school while living independently, would be very useful. A wider array of educational options and sensitivity training for school staff working with youth in care could help to optimize the school experience for these youth. Again, it is vital that the youth be given an active voice in their educational planning.

# Empowerment

## Preparation for Independence

Through respectful treatment, encouragement and support, youth will eventually learn to make decisions that are right for them. They will become empowered and gain control of their own lives. In order for this to occur, it is paramount that the youth acquire the life skills necessary for success in the world. This includes not only basic self-care and study skills, but also the self-management skills that are necessary in order to juggle the demands of living independently while attending school.

## Leaving Care

Many youth fear the loss of their support networks once they have “aged out,” that is, become too old to be supported by the child welfare system. The youth’s emotional and financial support often comes from the child welfare system. For example, a social worker may have been a source of personal support to the youth while they were in foster care, but once the youth is no longer in the child welfare system, contact with the social worker will be minimized. Financial resources such as extended care and maintenance plans, in which the child welfare agency assists the youth with basic living costs, are also removed once the youth has left the child welfare system. The prospect of being on one’s own – without the resources and supports to which one has grown accustomed – is frightening.

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*“You only have yourself to depend on. Those supports aren’t always going to be there so you shouldn’t come to depend on them.”*

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## Personal Determinants

The youth emphasized motivation, determination, goal setting and self-reliance as important factors. Motivation and determination were cited as vital in order to overcome the many obstacles faced by youth in care. Prejudice, past experiences and discouragement could all be overcome, stated many youth, but not without some inner force driving them towards success.

Goal setting, both long- and short-term, was emphasized as a necessary component of success in all areas of life. The prevalent attitude among the youth was that those who had set a series of goals and were driven to achieve them would succeed, despite daunting circumstances.

Many youth did not believe that they had an adequate support network or group of people who assisted and supported them. This may be due in part to the loss of supports provided by the child welfare system when the youth become too old to access these services. The youth may be afraid to become dependent on resources that are temporary. Their support network may also be more limited than that of other youth. Family contacts may be limited,

reducing the amount of support that can be provided by immediate and extended families. Foster families and group homes may not provide the same range or type of support that a natural family would have otherwise provided. Transience may also be a factor as long-term friendships and relationships with adults in mentoring roles may be limited by frequent moving.

If the youth felt that support networks were inadequate, their ability to make decisions on their own and fend for themselves was emphasized. Self-reliance and independence were common to all focus groups. Perhaps because youth in care often feel that they lack the support they require, they have learned to be extremely self-reliant. Many of the youth cited themselves as a source of support or as the person who helped them the most with decisions in their lives.

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*“I realize where I don’t have my family, I have to focus all of my attention on school because it’s helping me. If I don’t help myself, no one is going to help me. I can prove myself through school.”*

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Unfortunately, this self-reliance does not guarantee that the youth will make appropriate and informed decisions and it may even cause them to close themselves off to possible sources of support in the future.

Consistency can help youth gain confidence in their abilities. It is important that long-term supports are in place and that the youth know that these supports are there once they have left the child welfare system. Minimizing the number of transitions in order to promote long-term friendships is one way to help the youth to develop a long-term support system.

Planning for a discharge from foster care that includes a gradual removal of resources may be useful. The youth should be actively involved in such planning to ensure that their needs are met.

Life-skills programs leading up to independent living would be useful in teaching basic skills and personal management skills, as well as helping the youth to build confidence in their ability to succeed on their own.



# Recommendations and Implications for Policy

This research study was qualitative and exploratory in nature, as there has been very little previous research done on the educational needs of youth in care. For this reason, when recommendations and implications for policy are suggested, it may be important to first qualify the findings with further, more specific research.

## Overarching Recommendations

### ***Basic national standards of care must be established and adopted.***

While child welfare and child protection are issues of national concern, the policies and procedures related to child welfare and protection are under the jurisdiction of each province or territory. The terminology, age limits, services and policies regarding child welfare vary across the country, causing a great deal of difficulty in providing consistent care for youth, and creating havoc in the lives of those youth in care who move from one province to another. Basic national standards of care will help to ease the debilitating effects of these transitions. The federal/ provincial/territorial governments must take the lead to work with child welfare agencies, non-governmental organizations, and youth in care to establish basic national standards of care. These standards must then be adopted by all provinces and territories.

### ***A comprehensive and consistent tracking system must be implemented across provinces and territories.***

Because the policies and procedures related to child welfare and protection are under provincial jurisdiction, and they vary from province to territory, there is no clear definitive way of tracking the situation of youth in care nationally. As ages and definitions of state care change from east to west, it is impossible to say exactly how many children and youth in care there are in Canada at any one time.

And because jurisdictions vary even within a province or territory for youth in the care of child welfare authorities, youth justice facilities or mental health institutions, following the course of one youth's life is nearly impossible if the youth moves from one jurisdiction to another. Without a system of communication between jurisdictions in place, it is impossible to track the situation of children and youth in care in Canada, much less track the individual status of youth in care over the course of their lives.

Only through tracking youth in care will we be able to understand and support the development of those factors which lead to successful, healthy lives. The federal/provincial/territorial governments must take the lead to work with child welfare agencies, non-governmental organizations, academics and youth in care to establish a comprehensive and consistent tracking system. This tracking system must then be implemented by all provinces and territories.

***Cooperation and coordination among agencies and departments must occur across jurisdictions for successful outcomes.***

In order for planning to occur across several domains, the agencies involved must be capable of coordinating services and cooperating towards a common goal. Currently, youth in care utilize a wide array of services (social, educational, medical), none of which are coordinated to operate together. Little information is shared between agencies, leaving the client, the youth in care, as the only substantial connection and potential conduit through which to share information. Given that a young person is unlikely to have the resources to bring several organizations into partnership with one another, an institutionalized link is required to promote better cooperation.

Using the findings of the recently completed *Looking After Children In Canada* (LAC) study, in combination with this report, an information-sharing model can be constructed to promote inter-agency dialogue that is youth-centred. LAC describes seven “developmental dimensions” or distinct areas of a child’s life in which development and growth occur. These are: health, education, identity, family and social relationships, social presentation, emotional and behavioural development, and self-care skills. Sound case management decisions cannot be made unless all seven dimensions are understood and considered. Unfortunately, no single professional or agency is exposed to all seven dimensions at any given time. This means that each agency misses out on valuable perspectives and critical information about the youth.

A proposed solution to this problem is an information tool modeled after the Assessment and Action Record used in LAC. It is a simple, one-page record, containing spaces for brief entries based on the seven development

dimensions described by LAC. The record can be completed during conferences attended by the teacher (or, in the case of more than one teacher, the teacher of the young person’s choice), the social worker, the young person, and a supporter for the young person, if they choose to have one present. The process of discussing and completing the record is considered to be more important than the paper record produced. The record’s primary function is guidance. It directs the dialogue, focusing all parties on the young person’s strengths and developmental needs, rather than on unrelated institutional and administrative needs. The dialogue process will allow all the parties to share perspectives and to collaborate in the development of a wide range of proposed goals for the young person.

A major consideration in the design of the tool is the young person’s level of comfort with the content. Youth in care have repeatedly reported the damaging effects of child welfare record-keeping practices, which tend to focus on negative events and perceived “behavioural problems.” To help prevent this, youth in and from care must participate in the design of the record. When the record tool is actually being used, consensus must be reached by the participants about what can and cannot be entered into the record. This will allow the youth in care a significant voice in the discussion and resulting record-keeping.

***Youth in care must be provided with opportunities to participate in child welfare policy decisions. These opportunities must be provided at both the provincial/territorial and national levels.***

Youth participation in child welfare policy undergirds all recommendations to improve school outcomes for youth in care. Youth in care possess a unique and valuable perspective

on the child welfare system, and they are the best experts on their own needs. Most child welfare agencies have measures in place for youth in care to participate in decisions specific to a single youth. At the provincial/territorial level, however, youth in care participation is lacking. Child welfare statutes, standards, regulations, and funding decisions are all made at the provincial or territorial level, by the ministry responsible for child welfare. Despite the importance of youth's participation in system-wide policy decisions, examples of this practice are rare. Few of the provincial/territorial governments have provided youth in care with a long-term mechanism to participate in system-wide policy decisions.

The Government of British Columbia demonstrates the most appropriate model for provincial-level policy participation. The B.C. government provides funding to the Federation of British Columbia Youth In Care Networks (FBCYICN), which has an extensive network of community-level youth in care groups and individual youth in care members across the province. The FBCYICN holds regular, structured consultations with its membership, and it works directly with the provincial ministry responsible for child welfare to ensure that youth voices are heard at the highest levels of government. This model is efficient, cooperative, and promotes the most meaningful possible participation by youth in care at the provincial level. The Government of British Columbia benefits from the expert advice provided by youth in care across the province, and this allows for more effective programs and policies. Other provincial and territorial governments should adopt this model and implement it to improve youth in care participation within their own jurisdictions.

## Recommendations Related to Stability and Safety

### ***The disruptive effects of frequent relocation and transiency of youth in care need to be examined and prevented.***

Many youth feel that frequent relocation has affected all areas of their lives. Youth often discussed the difficulty of readjusting. This can be particularly problematic when the youth must change schools midway through the year and must “catch up” on what they have missed.

The lives of youth in care must be comprehensively followed from case file to case file across jurisdictions and homes. Documentation of the number and condition of relocations and the resulting effects on the youth will help us to assess the impact of transition and begin to understand the resiliency factors associated with positive adjustment.

Moving toward a system with less frequent moves, less dramatic moves and fewer moves overall is recommended. This may be more likely to occur if both the youth and the foster parents have input in the decision.

By giving youth a voice in relevant decisions, such as where they will live, it becomes less likely that the youth will want to leave that placement of their own accord. The fit between the needs of the youth and the placement should be addressed. A home should involve more than the basic qualities that are required to sustain life. A home should also focus on what is required in order for youth in care to thrive and succeed in their environment. Finally, wherever possible, long-term placements should be sought.

***Further study and promotion of the support and mentoring role of teachers on youth in care is required.***

Does prejudice exist? What are the specific mechanisms of the youth in care stereotype? Is this likely to lead to discrimination? More exhaustive research must be conducted to determine if this perceived stereotype is a common reality. If the stereotype proves to be an overarching problem, provincial education ministries must provide education and training resources for teachers to address these issues. A model that has been successfully used with social workers involves youth in care as the “trainers,” speaking out about their specific challenges and needs to students and staff.

More information should be provided to teachers about the nature of the child welfare system as it is experienced by the youth involved. Child welfare agencies or youth in care networks should be properly assisted in providing teachers with this first-hand information. Such programs would encourage understanding, support and advocacy, providing information and working towards mutually agreeable solutions to problems commonly encountered. One focus group participant described a simple solution agreed to by him and his vice principal for times when he was having difficulty in school:

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*“I would just ask him, if I needed to go for a walk to cool off. I didn’t abuse this privilege and it was very effective for me.”*

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In this case, the vice principal was able to understand that the youth was being affected by factors outside of school. The youth was allowed to remove himself from a frustrating situation before it escalated. Such strategies based on the individual needs of the youth are

very effective, particularly at difficult times, such as the transition to a new home. Good communication between the school, the youth and the social agency will maximize the potential of such strategies. Teachers, therefore, should be consulted and advised during the development of the youth’s plan of care.

***Teachers and social workers must understand youth’s perceptions of safety and its effects on youth, and they must support the youth accordingly.***

Youth from violent homes may be particularly at risk of becoming involved with violence in the school system. Efforts must be made to provide coping strategies for these youth, which may involve removing them from the situation if that is what they feel they need, such as removing them from a school where they have experienced violence.

These youth may also become perpetrators of violence in school. Participants emphasized that when this was the case, empathy and support are required in order to deal with the problem. Several participants cited courses such as anger management as being useful to them. One participant described her experience as a school bully and her subsequent guilt for her actions:

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*“When you’ve got troubles at home you don’t really feel stable in everyday life so when I was going to school I was more of a bully ... I’m not a mean person, it’s just that the environment that I grew up in was pretty harsh and violent so I guess I took it out in school ... I’m kind of worried now because I see these girls that I went to school with and they’re like ‘don’t hurt me!’ Oh my God, I’m so sorry ...”*

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In cases where school itself is the source of frustration, a different type of school is an option that should be discussed with the youth.

In all cases, the youth's perception of safety must be identified and realized. Teachers and social workers must work together with the youth to understand the reality the young person lives in and be able to support them by whatever means necessary. Issues of stability and safety must be explored during the development of the young person's plan of care, and teachers should be consulted and advised throughout this process.

## Recommendations Related to Resources and Choices

***Further study must be conducted to determine if and how youth in care are informed about their post-secondary options, and efforts must be made to increase their awareness of and access to these resources.***

Many youth were unaware of the types of post-secondary programs available to them. They were also unaware of the scholarships and bursaries available to youth in care that would allow them to access those programs. In a "regular" home setting, many of these questions might be answered with the help of parents or relatives. In the foster care setting, there may be a number of people involved with the youth, all of whom believe that someone else is helping with these decisions. The youth are left to search for and decipher that information on their own, when and if they uncover it.

Planning for post-secondary education should become a part of youth's plans for care and educational planning. The educational support person for the youth must have access to information regarding scholarships and post-secondary programs in order to be able to assist

youth with their decisions. It appears that many youth in care are living independently by the time they graduate from high school. The support provided for educational planning would need to address these youth as well as youth in foster placements and group homes.

***Financial resources intended to cover educational costs (books, tuition, housing etc.) must be made more readily available and easily accessible to youth in care.***

It has been suggested by many youth that social agencies must be more involved in helping youth to cover the rising costs of education. Several high school students stated that book fees and lab fees were often not paid for by the social agencies. There seemed to be little consistency in the types of costs that social agencies would cover. Costs such as transportation to and from school were also an issue for some youth, particularly in rural communities where public transit was limited. Here again, there appeared to be little consistency in terms of the involvement of the agencies. Where costs may not be covered directly by the agencies, teaching financial planning skills may be useful.

## Recommendations Related to Personal and Educational Support and Empowerment

***Training in independent living, focusing on basic life skills and personal management, must be made available to youth.***

Independent living and life-skills training were often cited as a missing resource. Of the youth who had experienced life-skills courses, many found that the courses were not what they were looking for. Youth in care need to learn not only basic life skills, but also how to balance

their many responsibilities. Many of the youth in this sample were already living independently. Several participants had children of their own and found that they had difficulty balancing the many things that were required of them as parents, students, employees, tenants, etc.

Independent living and life-skills training programs must be made available to all youth in care by local child welfare agencies or alternate service providers, such as youth in care networks. Youth in care must be involved in the planning and delivery of these programs in order to ensure that the courses are relevant. Resources must be made available to these agencies by provincial ministries in order to enable provision of these programs.

***Youth leaving care must be afforded a process of gradual discharge.***

The prospect of being on one's own as early as 16 years of age and without the resources and support to which one has grown accustomed is daunting. And unlike other youth of the "boomerang generation," who have the luxury of returning to the parental home throughout their early adulthood for personal and financial support, youth in care are "abandoned" immediately after their care is terminated or they are discharged. Youth in care are not able to return to their caregivers for support or guidance. Discharge from care that includes a gradual removal of resources may be useful. Youth should be actively involved in such planning to ensure their needs are met. The process and effectiveness of gradual discharge should be explored in more depth by child welfare researchers.

***Alternative educational programs must be explored in more depth and made available to youth in care.***

The traditional high school may be less effective for youth in care than non-mainstream

educational programs, such as alternative schools, correspondence courses, accelerated learning programs, and the like. Additional research must be conducted to explore the varying dynamics and effectiveness of these alternative educational programs for youth in care. In addition, youth in care must be given the opportunity by social workers to advocate for a diverse array of alternative educational programs to ensure that there is an appropriate fit between their needs and their learning environment.

***Youth in care must be active participants in their educational planning for both high school and post-secondary education.***

Perhaps because so many people are involved in the lives of youth in care, the responsibility for presenting educational options to youth becomes diffused. It is not enough that the resources simply exist in some capacity, as several youth have indicated that they are hesitant about asking for help and often discouraged when they do ask. Instead, an educational plan could become a part of the planning for the future of the youth in care. This could be done through social workers, foster parents, group home workers or a central education resource person, as long as that person was able to approach the youth and discuss with them their educational options.

The ultimate decision-makers regarding the education of youth in care must be the youth themselves. All efforts to respect their opinions and choices must be made. The role of the support person should be that of presenting options to the youth and helping them to make the appropriate plans, once the youth has reached an informed decision.

## **Summary**

An alarmingly high percentage of the 60,000 children and youth in the care of Canadian

child welfare authorities will not complete high school. Some will not even make it to high school. Without a post-secondary degree in today's society, their employment prospects are slim. Without even a high school diploma, the prospects for youth in care are simply grim.

Youth in care are not afforded the opportunity to have an active voice in many aspects of their lives, including their education. The decisions that are made in their lives are institutionally controlled by a mechanistic system that knows them only as a case number. While those decisions are made with the child's best interests in mind, many times the wishes and desires of the child are not heard, much less understood. Youth who are actively involved in determining the course of their own lives are not only more satisfied with their lives, they are also more successful in their transition to independence.

Through this study, we listened as youth in care across Canada told us about their experiences, dreams and visions. They told us what they need to be able to participate successfully in their high school education. Together, we developed recommendations and explored the implications for policies that could help support youth in care to achieve their dream of completing high school and entering adulthood with a strong foundation for success and stability.

Stability and safety, the consistency of one's environment, and the feelings of personal security within that environment are of great concern to youth in care. Transiency is one of the largest contributing factors to the instability experienced by youth in care.

Foster care inevitably involves movement from one placement to another, often with changes in schools, sometimes even between school boards. Adjusting to these disruptions is difficult, especially if the disruptions occur during the school year or occur more than once. Feeling support from teachers and feeling secure from violence within schools were great contributors

to the sense of safety and stability experienced by youth in care.

Teachers' lack of understanding of youth in care and lack of knowledge about their life situations creates a sense of distrust and discrimination, resulting in youth in care's perceptions of not being safe to be who they are or not receiving the support they deserve. Violence within schools not only adds to the disruption and fear in the lives of youth in care, it also has the effect of feeding into the discrimination and distrust they feel towards teachers and others in authority.

Resources and choices in educational matters are also of great importance to youth in care. Youth in care are generally not aware of, or have difficulty accessing, resources which could assist them in their educational pursuits. Inaccessibility and lack of financial resources also make the achievement of education extremely difficult for youth in care. Generally, youth in care are not given the opportunity to be active participants in decisions regarding their schooling. There is an inexcusable gap between what youth in care need and what they are provided with. Without the ability to have a choice, youth in care are left with a feeling of despair.

Personal and educational support would greatly improve the educational experiences of youth in care. Respectful treatment, motivation and encouragement from a wide range of support people (teachers, family members, foster parents, principals, police officers, guidance counselors, social workers, therapists, and friends) would assist youth in care to bridge the gap between their school and personal lives. Youth in care do not feel prepared to leave the child welfare system for independence and they require assistance with financial management, life-skills training, and personal management. Also, traditional high school does not appear to work for some youth in care. Non-mainstream educational programs appear to be more effective alternatives for those youth.

Empowerment is a dream of youth in care that is as yet unrealized. To be empowered, youth in care need to be prepared for independence and supported while leaving care. Success in education and in life can only happen for youth in care who have had personal determinants nurtured and developed, such as motivation, determination, goal-setting and self-reliance. When youth in care are empowered and supported in their personal lives, their chances of completing high school are greatly increased.

***Youth in care recommend the following actions to create a more positive school experience and to improve the outcomes for future youth in care:***

**1. Youth in care must be provided with opportunities to participate in child welfare policy decisions.**

These opportunities must be provided at both the provincial/territorial and national levels. Few of the provincial/territorial governments have provided youth in care with a long-term mechanism to participate in system-wide policy decisions. Provincial and territorial governments should adopt a model of provincial-level policy participation for youth in care – similar to the model in British Columbia – and implement it to improve youth in care's participation within their own jurisdictions.

**2. Youth in care must be active participants in their educational planning for both high school and post-secondary education.**

The ultimate decision-makers regarding the education of youth in care must be the youth themselves. All efforts to respect their opinions and choices must be made. The role of the support person should be that of presenting options to the youth and helping them to make the appropriate plans once they have reached an informed decision.

**3. Cooperation and coordination between agencies and departments must occur across jurisdictions for successful outcomes.**

In order for planning to occur across several domains, the agencies involved must be capable of coordinating services and cooperating toward a common goal. Currently, youth in care utilize a wide array of services (social, educational, medical), none of which are coordinated to operate together. A proposed solution to this problem is an information tool modeled after the Assessment and Action Record used in the *Looking After Children In Canada* (LAC) study. The development of this information tool must be spearheaded by the provincial ministries responsible for child welfare in collaboration with youth in care. Child welfare agencies must then commit to take the lead on implementing the tool with each youth in care.

**4. Training in independent living, focusing on basic life skills and personal management, must be made available to youth.**

Independent living and life-skills training programs must be made available to all youth in care by local child welfare agencies or alternate service providers, such as youth in care networks. Youth in care must be involved in the planning and delivery of these programs to ensure that the courses are relevant to them. Resources must be made available to these agencies by provincial ministries so that the agencies are able to provide these programs.

**5. Youth leaving care must be afforded a process of gradual discharge.**

Youth in care are not able to return to their caregivers for support or guidance. Discharge from care that includes a gradual



removal of resources may be useful. Youth should be actively involved in such planning to ensure that their needs are met. The process and effectiveness of gradual discharge should be explored in greater depth by child welfare researchers.

**6. Basic national standards of care must be established and adopted.**

The federal/provincial/territorial governments must take the lead to work with child welfare agencies, non-governmental organizations, and youth in care to establish basic national standards of care. All provinces and territories must then adopt these standards.

**7. A comprehensive and consistent tracking system must be implemented across provinces and territories.**

Only through tracking youth in care will we be able to understand and support the development of those factors that lead to successful, healthy lives. The federal/provincial/territorial governments must take the lead to work with child welfare agencies, non-governmental organizations, academics and youth in care to establish a comprehensive and consistent tracking system. All provinces and territories must then implement this tracking system.

**8. Financial resources intended to cover educational costs (books, tuition, housing etc.) must be made more readily available and easily accessible to youth in care.**

Social agencies must be more involved in helping youth to cover the rising costs of education. Where costs may not be covered directly by the agencies, teaching financial planning skills may be useful.

**9. The disruptive effects of frequent relocation and transiency of youth in care need to be explored and prevented.**

The lives of youth in care must be comprehensively followed from case file to case file across jurisdictions and homes. Documentation of the number and condition of relocations and the resulting effects on the youth will help us to assess the impact of these transitions so that we can begin to understand the resiliency factors associated with positive adjustment. Moving toward a system with less frequent moves, less dramatic moves and fewer moves overall is recommended. This may be more likely to occur if both the youth and the foster parents have input in the decision.

**10. Further study must be conducted to determine if and how youth in care are informed about their post-secondary options, and efforts must be made to increase their awareness of and access to these resources.**

Planning for post-secondary education should become a part of the youth's plan of care and educational planning. The educational support person for the youth must have access to information regarding scholarships and post-secondary programs in order to be able to assist the youth with their decisions.

**11. Alternative educational programs must be explored in more depth and made available to youth in care.**

Additional research must be conducted to explore the varying dynamics and effectiveness of these alternative educational programs for youth in care. In addition, youth in care must be given the opportunity by social workers to advocate for a diverse array of alternative educational programs to ensure that there is an appropriate fit between their needs and their learning environment.

**12. Further study and promotion of the support and mentoring role of teachers on youth in care is required.**

More conclusive research must be conducted to determine if the perceived youth in care stereotyping is a common reality. More information should be provided to teachers about the nature of the child welfare system as it is experienced by the youth involved. Child welfare agencies or youth in care networks should be properly assisted in providing teachers with this first-hand information.

**13. Teachers and social workers must understand youth's perceptions of safety and its effects on the youth, and they must support the youth accordingly.**

Youth in care's perception of safety must be identified and realized. Teachers and social workers must work together with the youth to help understand the reality the young person lives in and help support them by whatever means necessary. Issues of stability and safety must be examined during the development of the young person's plan of care, and teachers should be consulted and advised throughout this process.

This study is one of the first steps in understanding how to support youth in care throughout their high school education. At this time, additional research must be conducted in several areas – on issues such as transiency, inter-agency cross-jurisdictional coordination, teacher support, sub-population specific issues, and others – in order to deepen our knowledge of the specific issues. An open, inclusive discussion must begin to occur among federal/provincial/territorial governments, child welfare agencies and youth in care to build these recommendations into comprehensive action plans.

Youth in care have shared their personal experiences, both struggles and successes, in the hopes of beginning the discussion. This discussion, long overdue, must happen immediately to support those youth in care who are currently struggling through high school and to prevent future youth in care from experiencing the fate of those who have gone before.

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# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Smith, Butler-Kisber, LaRoque, Portelli, Shields, Sparks & Vibert, 1998.
- <sup>2</sup> Geroski & Knauss, 2000
- <sup>3</sup> Ryerse, 1990
- <sup>4</sup> Kufeldt, Baker, Bennett & Tite, 1998; Raychaba, 1993
- <sup>5</sup> Kufeldt, 1995
- <sup>6</sup> Fitzgerald, 1998
- <sup>7</sup> Kufeldt, Baker, Bennett & Tite, 1998
- <sup>8</sup> Kufeldt, 1995
- <sup>9</sup> See for example: Smucker, Kauffman & Ball, 1996; Bauer & Dubowitz, 1994; Dubowitz, Feigelman, Harrington, Starr, Zuravin & Sawyer, 1994; Colton & Heath, 1994; Heath, Colton & Aldgate, 1994; Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994; Stein, 1994; Colton & Jackson, 1993; Trupin, 1993; Fanshel, Finch & Grundy, 1989.
- <sup>10</sup> Kufeldt, 1995
- <sup>11</sup> Mates & Allison, 1992
- <sup>12</sup> See for example: Gilbert, 1993
- <sup>13</sup> Wyman, Cowen, Work, Raoof, Gribble, Parker & Wannon, 1992; Luthar & Ziegler, 1991; Hetherington, 1989
- <sup>14</sup> Hetherington, 1989
- <sup>15</sup> See for example: Garmenzy, 1993; Luthar & Ziegler, 1991; Sandler, Miller, Short & Wolchik, 1989; Werner, 1984
- <sup>16</sup> Garmenzy, 1991
- <sup>17</sup> DeWit, Offord, Rye, Sanford, Shain & Wright, 1993
- <sup>18</sup> Beard, 1991
- <sup>19</sup> Geroski & Knauss, 2000
- <sup>20</sup> Gilligan, 1999
- <sup>21</sup> Kronick & Hargis, 1998; Volpe, Clancy, Buteau & Tilleczek, 1998; Ryerse, 1990
- <sup>22</sup> Mech & Fung, 1999
- <sup>23</sup> Courtney & Barth, 1996
- <sup>24</sup> Kronick & Hargis, 1998, Scannapieco, Schagrin & Scannapieco, 1995
- <sup>25</sup> Coulling, 2000
- <sup>26</sup> Kronick & Hargis, 1998
- <sup>27</sup> Kufeldt, 1995; Matherson & Charles, 1990
- <sup>28</sup> DeWit, Offord, Rye, Sanford, Shain & Wright, 1993
- <sup>29</sup> Smith, Butler-Kisber, LaRoque, Portelli, Shields, Sparks & Vibert, 1998
- <sup>30</sup> Thomas & O'Kane, 1999
- <sup>31</sup> Labonte, 1993
- <sup>32</sup> Not all demographic questions were answered by all participants. The information presented here is a composite of the youth involved in this study which may differ from national figures regarding youth in care.