

ABSTRACT

While the experiences of foster youth (FY) are relevant in policy and system reform, very little research attempts to hear from them directly. Our methodology involved training FY to conduct a study with other FY. Despite challenges inherent to participant action research, this pilot study has highlighted the potential for youth to participate in the process. Results for FY participating in the Peace4Kids creative education program revealed a common positive attitude about the future: 1) foster youth value education as a pathway to change their future for the better, and 2) FY have found resources for support and love outside of their family.

HYPOTHESIS

Participant FY share common experiences in the foster care system that contribute to the development of foster youth culture.

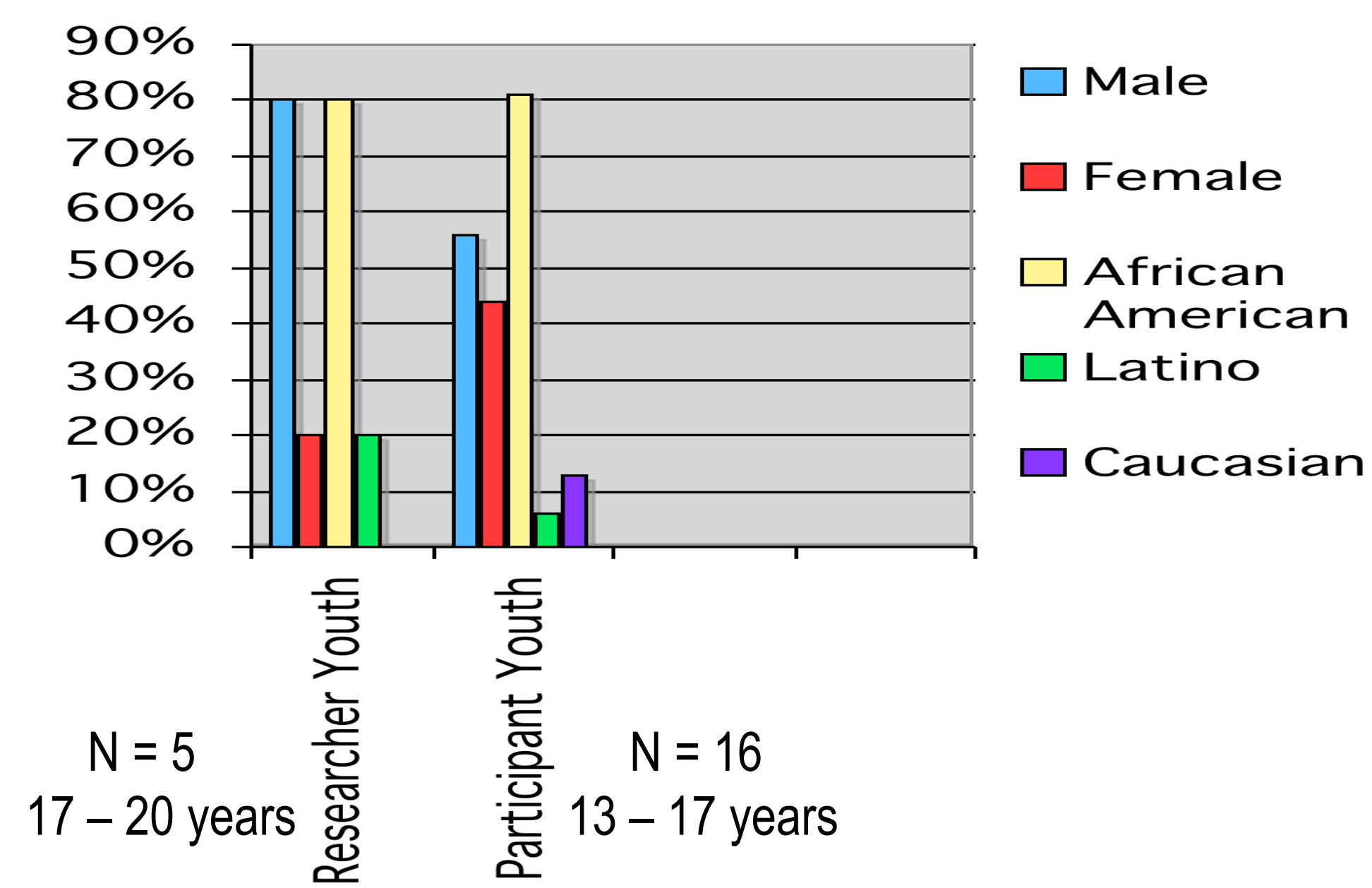
LITERATURE REVIEW

- Research and training for professionals working with FY typically use a deficit-based model (Collins, Hill, & Miranda, 2008)
 - Therefore, this study seeks to capture the strengths that FY possess (Costello, Toles, Spielberger, & Wynn, 2001).
- The foster care system itself reduces the opportunities that FY have to form decisions regarding their future.
 - The competence and confidence that youth need to gain in order to function well in society as adults can only come from participation in that world (Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2001).
 - Participation in the foster care system creates a set of unique shared experiences that influence cultural identity
- Research with teenagers indicates that they are likely to have difficulty with surveys and interviews (Long & Dart, 2001). FY increase these obstacles with literacy and trust issues.
 - Participant Action Research (PAR) methods empower participants to identify their strengths and resources, and gives them more control in their lives (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 1996; Small, 1995).

CHALLENGES

- Scheduling conflicts during training and data collection
 - Researcher FY school and work responsibilities
 - Transportation issues
- Inexperienced researchers
 - Inconsistencies in interview techniques
 - Questions asked by researcher FY varied
 - Not all questions asked
 - Level of probing varied
 - Length of interviews varied greatly

SAMPLE

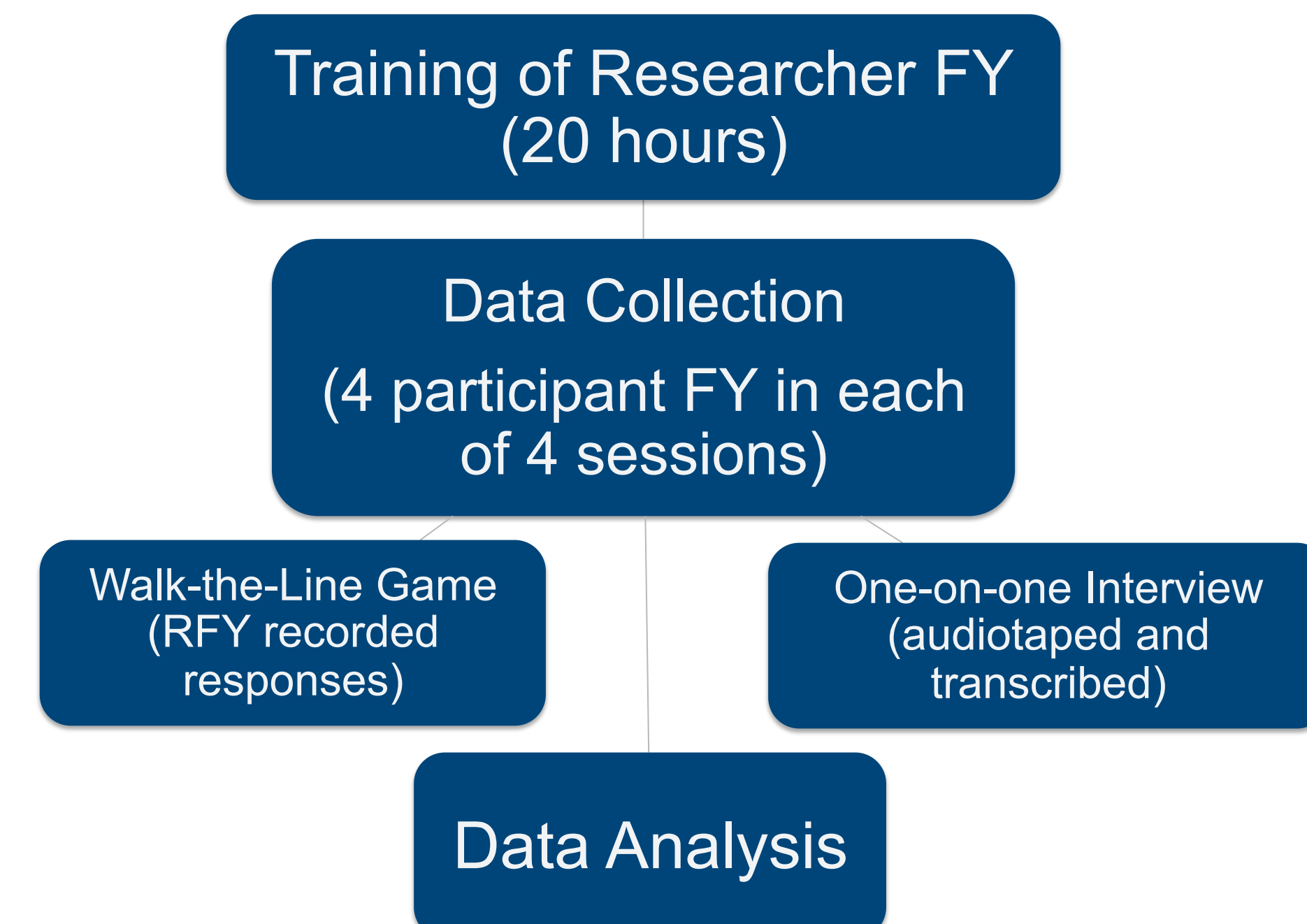


MEASURES

- Walk-the-Line game with prompts created by researcher FY
- Interview based on responses in Walk-the-Line game

PROCEDURES

- Researcher FY were educated on cultural identity through theory, research, and related activities
 - Choice of measures evolved from discussions and activities
 - Professional researcher trained researcher FY on data collection procedures
- Participants volunteered from Peace4Kids teen program and were brought to the research room in small groups of 4
 - Project coordinator assigned each participant an ID and reviewed consent procedures and game instructions
- 1 researcher FY read Walk-the-Line game prompts to 4 participant FY while 4 researcher FY were assigned to record participant FY steps on the line in response to each prompt
- Researcher FY individually interviewed participant FY about their responses in the game; audio-tapes were transcribed and coded



RESULTS

- Strength: Value education to achieve**

"For me to be successful, I would have to go to school. I would have to have a positive attitude to be well-educated to be who I want to be."

 - 61% experienced 2 or more school transfers in a single year
 - 94% believe they will have some success in school
- Strength: Seek love and support outside of the family**

"When I'm in trouble, I can easily call my mentor, I can just talk it out with him and he'll probably get my head right, or just tell me something I can do to get out of trouble or just stay away from what happened, or something like that."

 - 25% have stable placements
 - 50% experienced 2 or more foster homes in a single year
 - 69% have been in foster care for 3 or more years
 - 31% believe they have family support
- Strength: Resourceful**

"You gotta know who your resources are. Peace4Kids is a really good resource and they have more resources... its like a chain reaction."

 - 87.5% have some level of trust in others
 - 75% have someone to turn to for guidance
 - 69% feel loved and respected by someone
 - 69% were willing to seek help
- Strength: Positive attitude**

"It's a lot of things you could get out of foster care, like a regular person couldn't get... different types of programs that, like, help you with your future and stuff."

"People say that foster care is bad, I don't think it's bad. I just think it's a way to have two families..."

	R	p
Expectations for future success	.46	.05*
Length of time in foster care		
Expectations for future success	-.52	.001**
Number of foster care placements		
Trust level	.58	.05*
Support level		
School success beliefs	-.56	.05*
Placement instability		

- Cultural Identity: Foster care experience is an integral contributor to the development of identity**
 - 77% described sharing a mutual understanding with other foster youth that could not be replicated with non-FY

	t	p
Influence of Foster Care Identity	2.43	.05*
Influence of Ethnic/Racial Identity		

DISCUSSION

- FY with fewer placements and fewer school transfers were most likely to believe they would be successful in school
 - FY with unstable school and family lives perceived school success as leading to a better life
 - Belief that education may change their situation for the better
- Interviews revealed that FY have unrealistic views of their potential to achieve success through education
 - Desire to attend UCLA or USC despite history of school failure
 - Positive attitude may help them endure difficult life circumstances = coping strategy
- Family support associated with trust for others
 - Only 31% had strong levels of family support
 - However, nearly 88% of FY had found someone to trust
 - Resources outside of the family such as Peace4Kids
 - Community as Family framework at Peace4Kids
- Foster care (FC) experience formative in development of cultural identity
 - FY describe life strategies in response to multiple home/school moves
 - Emotional numbness
 - Expectation of rejection
 - Distance from peers
 - Strategies are maladaptive outside of FC
 - P4K helps to identify individual strengths and increases focus on finding positive side of FC

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Expansion of project (DOJ Grant under review)
 - New group of researcher youth are in training
 - Data collection outside of Peace4Kids
- Program evaluation of Peace4Kids (DOJ Grant under review)
 - Best practices in mentoring
 - Group mentoring
 - Youth-initiated one-to-one mentoring matches
 - Culturally relevant mentoring
- Create Public Service Announcement for FC professionals
 - Strength-based description of FY and FC culture

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