

## Education Review

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**Johnson, R. M. (2024).** *From foster care to college: Navigating educational challenges and creating possibilities.* Teachers College Press.

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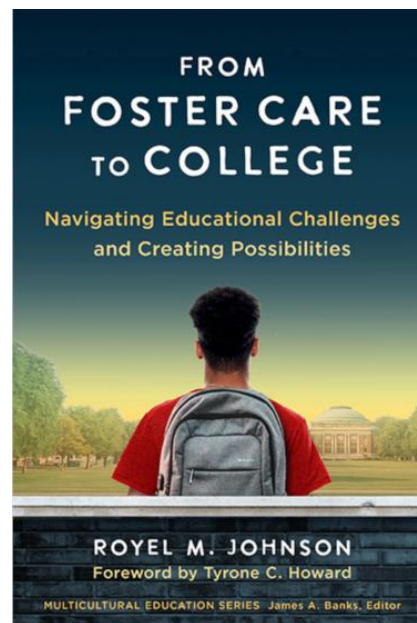
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In *From Foster Care to College*, Royel M. Johnson offers a variety of inspiring narratives on how young people in foster care have navigated the education system. Through stories and lived experiences of 49 individuals, Johnson acknowledges how systems have failed our youth. However, the focus is on the students' perseverance, resilience and hope as well as highlighting the need for advocacy and action for young people in foster care.

Johnson writes of his own lived experiences growing up in kinship care, which provides a unique perspective and emotional depth to what youth in foster care are truly experiencing. Similar to those in these stories, he has overcome adversity and is now a scholar, speaker, and consultant, as well as Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of Southern California.

Prior to this book, Johnson wrote a systemic review of literature researching undergraduate youth formerly in foster care, the most underserved student population in higher education. Johnson's research pointed to the challenge in prioritizing college access and completion for youth formerly in foster care is due to a lack of public awareness about the child welfare system. In fact, 83% of adults know very little about the experiences of youth in foster care, let alone their postsecondary education experiences.

Johnson organizes this book into six chapters with two forewords and an appendix. Tyrone C. Howard, a UCLA professor wrote the main foreword and James A. Banks, the book series editor, wrote the series foreword. The forewords provide a history and purpose of the foster care system and how the lives of young people



have been impacted. Johnson points out these individuals are the exception and not the norm. He captures the complexity of the lives of young people in care and wants his audience to learn how “dreaming, persistence, determination, support, hope, resistance, and possibility can change the lives of young people in foster care” (p. xi)

Chapter 1 provides important background about the foster care system and exposes societal inequities. Johnson’s structure and methodology foster a clear understanding of the challenges and opportunities for youth in foster care. Asking the question, “how do young people in the foster care system navigate an education system ill-equipped to address their unique needs?” Johnson uses “humanizing research” defined as more than a theory or method, that is, an ethical commitment to the participants (p. 5). The use of resilience theory helps frame how youth adapt and persevere through adversity. His use of positionality, sharing that he was raised by his aunt in kinship care, reflects his goal of transforming these unstable circumstances of young people in foster care by dismantling the barriers that hamper their educational goals.

Chapter 2 contextualizes the foster care system and provides a history of legislative changes, racial bias, and system failures. Johnson shares a review of literature on youth in foster care and shows evidence of failure, despite its mission to provide safety and stability. He also includes an overview of the foster care process. As the system evolved, so did racial composition of its youth and factors that include biased reporting and investigations of child abuse and neglect are filed against families of color. Johnson refers to Niqi’s story, who spoke of her challenges not as defeats but as sources of strength and resilience, and her desire to “fight more” despite the issues she had experienced (p. 21). This story showcases how young people demonstrate resistance and pave their way forward fighting the odds against them.

Chapter 3 focuses on how youth in foster care achieve their goals of going to college while experiencing school mobility, trauma, bullying, and a lack of resources and advocacy. One student, Shanice, stated “I knew I wanted to go to college, but it’s hard to prepare when you’re pretty much constantly moving around (p. 32). Johnson shares these students’ unstable lives and their fear of “aging out” of the system. This term is defined as the legal age of 18 when most states recognize these individuals as independent and no longer eligible for support services. Johnson’s work builds on the work of Rios and Rocco (2014) as they indicated academic barriers that limit academic achievement of career goals can come from close relationships such as family members, classmates, or social and cultural systems.

Johnson writes in Chapter 4 about the challenges associated with college choice. The idea of belonging on a college campus is critical for youth in foster care. As Espino, Thompson, and Whitman (2024) highlighted, these individuals often struggle to feel a sense of connection within school environments due to frequent school changes, stigma, and unstable relationships. When these youth reported feeling known and valued by teachers and peers, their sense of belonging increased, leading to improved engagement and academic motivation. Belonging is a human need that shapes their decisions and transitions and emerges as a central theme in this chapter. These students search for institutions that offer resources and support as well as affirm their identities. One of the students, Wendy, stated “It’s not just the

college you choose, it's also about how that college chooses to support you" (p. 45). This statement reiterates the work of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and the decision-making process students navigate through predisposition, search, and college choice stages. This chapter critiques the traditional style of college choice that does not encompass the factors of those in the foster care system. I appreciate how Johnson acknowledges choosing the right "fit" goes beyond academic and financial needs and includes the sense of belonging.

Chapter 5 identifies bridges that create support to help youth in foster care thrive in all aspects of their lives. Identity empowerment, chosen family, financial literacy, and strong mentorship are all identified as protected factors. The story of Dylan and his "chosen family" highlights the importance of finding a supportive network who are not necessarily family members (p. 58). Johnson points out only 8-10% of youth in foster care who enroll in college actually graduate, which signifies the real barriers that exist for this population. These barriers include housing and food insecurity, lack of academic preparation and college readiness, and the absence of family support. As Okpych and Courtney (2017) note, by age 25 young adults in the US are more than five times as likely to have earned a college degree as those who were in foster care as adolescents. Johnson challenges institutions and educators to reimagine their policies to improve these statistics and provides direction on how to better support these vulnerable students.

In the final chapter, Johnson synthesizes his findings and provides a call to action for educators and child welfare professionals. He communicates the importance of an equity-minded approach to improve conditions for young people in the foster care system. His inspirational stories do not just tell sad stories of adversity but highlight experiences to showcase student resilience and "hope in the unseen" (p. 70). Johnson inspires his readers to reflect and consider the role they play in the lives of youth, and the responsibility to meet their needs and improve their lives. I found Johnson's recommendations of extending foster care nationally, decreasing school mobility, ensuring year-round campus housing, and investing in campus-based support programs to be inspirational, but grand in gesture.

In the appendix, Johnson provides an overview explaining the design of the study, which included the input from four individuals from a Community Advisory Board. Two of these individuals were graduate students with experience in foster care. Johnson included how participants were recruited, and how data was collected and analyzed. Additionally, a breakdown of the participants' demographic and background information was provided.

One area of strength is the positive perspective from which Johnson shares the stories of youth in foster care. He stated, "my aim was not to dwell on the doom and gloom, despite the serious challenges these young people confront and navigate, but to focus on illustrating their agency, resistance, and resilience" (p. 69). Johnson writes in a clear and compassionate tone, allowing the reader to connect to the students and their stories. Reading about the adversity faced by students featured, and then the perseverance to achieve their goals is heartwarming. While inspiring and inclusive to all audiences, this book is most relevant for those working in the educational system. As Ahearn (2021) suggests, college and career decisions made during adolescence are

critical to educational attainment and occupational opportunities in early adulthood, and relationships with significant others are most impactful in those decisions.

With this book, Johnson makes a lasting contribution on how educators view access to education. Through deeply personal stories the author ignites an emotional connection to resiliency. This contribution inspired me to re-think the concept of at-risk youth and the power that connection and belonging can bring to their educational path. This book is accessible, and the structure and writing is easy to read. I strongly recommended this book to high school counselors and teachers, college professors and admissions representatives, and child welfare professionals. They would benefit by gaining awareness, understanding barriers of youth in foster care, and learning strategies to advocate for a positive educational experience. This book advances the educational field by focusing on resiliency in systems of inequity. Narratives of adversity and perseverance pull at the heartstrings of educators, and new research offers methods to transform how to best support marginalized students.

However, this book does not come without a few areas for improvement. Johnson's call to action and recommendations to help meet the needs and improve the lives of students in foster care are appreciated. However, these ideas of change and advocacy are large in scope and could be difficult for readers to accomplish single handedly. As Ahearn's (2021) research indicates, college and career planning policies do little to address inequality. Small scale changes and ways to make an immediate difference may seem more realistic to readers. While relatively short in length, additional stories and observations from both peers and adults who know the individuals in these stories would add a valuable perspective. Narratives from family, friends, teachers, or caseworkers could help to paint a larger picture of these students' lives. An additional concern is the lack of information about college transition. Despite chapters dedicated to choosing a college and the college experience, additional longitudinal data on college matriculation, retention, and completion are important to consider. Data on college graduation and employment outcomes are recommended to better understand educational trajectories of youth in foster care. Potential benefits of this longitudinal data are to showcase the importance of relationships and how they influence and assist in postsecondary planning. There are multiple ways to continue to expand research on this topic, including broadening the population of students in foster care and their educational experiences, even those that chose not to pursue a college education. Additional research on youth in foster care outside of the United States would offer a global perspective on foster care models and their impact on postsecondary education.

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### About the Reviewer



**Courtney O'Connor** is a college and career counselor at University High School in Normal, Illinois. After graduating from Eastern Illinois University with a bachelor's degree in psychology, she went on to attend Bradley University to earn a master's degree in school counseling. Courtney is committed to supporting students in developing their postsecondary plans. She ensures that each student's goals, strengths, and support system are incorporated in the planning process. Courtney is currently a doctoral candidate in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State

University. Her research interests include examining successful counseling programs to increase student college and career readiness.

### About the Book Author

**Royel M. Johnson** is an associate professor in the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California, with a courtesy appointment in the Dworak-Peck School of Social Work. He is Co-Chair of the PhD in education program and is Director of the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates in the USC Race and Equity Center, which is the nation's leading tool for assessing campus racial climates. He is also Co-Director of the Research Institute for Scholars of Equity (RISE) based at North Carolina Central University. Johnson's interdisciplinary research



focuses on educational access, racial equity, and student belonging and success, particularly for Black and intersectionally marginalized groups impacted by the criminal punishment, child welfare, and inequitable educational systems.

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