

Academic Success of Students in the Foster Care System

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Abstract

Foster care remains prevalent in the lives of many youth today. This literature review aims to acknowledge the different factors of the foster care system that can lead to a student's academic decline. Among these articles, five are empirical reports, with three literature reviews, three methodological reports, and four theoretical or argumentative pieces. After careful analysis, there are two clear factors that lead to academic failure within foster youth. Through the statistical data of foster care demographics and the perspectives of teachers and parents, the main factors leading to academic failure are school placement, school attendance, and the trauma of separation from birth parents and siblings.

Keywords: Foster care; Education; Academic Success; Schools; Schooling; Youth; Trauma; Achievement; Educational supports; Educational outcomes; At-Risk; Academic Failure; and School performance.

Introduction

As of 2018, 437,283 children are registered within the foster care system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020). This complicated and trying system takes an immense toll on parents, teachers, and children in a variety of ways, however, it can be argued that the children are most affected. Stripped away from their primary caregivers and homes, these kids are placed into unpredictable and isolated situations. Research has shown that children in the foster care system perform poorly in school compared to their peers. Likewise, there is ample amount of research done about the specific factors that cause this low academic performance in foster children. These factors include, but are not limited to, placement into new homes, transferring schools, high absence rates (due to external factors such as court dates and meetings), and the emotional toll of being taken away from their family.

Government and Academic Aspects of the Foster Care System

The number of children in foster care grows dramatically each year. For many, this occurs at a young age, and the burden of the transition and complicated homelives can affect academic performance. According to *The Invisible Achievement Gap: Education Outcomes of Students in Foster Care in California's Public Schools*, when it comes to foster youth and their school experiences, "Each year, tens of thousands of children in communities across California are found through the state's Child Protective Services system to be unsafe in their homes due to the existence or risk of abuse or neglect" (Barrat & Berliner, 2013, p. 2). The end goal of the foster care system is to reconnect children with their birth families, be placed with a legal guardian, or enter the adoption system.

For family reunification, the next of kin must take the necessary steps mandated by the court to be reunited with their child. While these children are in the system, their parents are no

longer legally responsible for them, and instead, the state is. Social workers can take on approximately 50 cases at a time, making it hard to keep track of each case, and delays the process of reunification or adoption. Due to this, children often get lost or overlooked in the foster care system.

Oftentimes, it is the responsibility of these social workers to assist foster parents in placing their children in school. In California, “5,969,112 K–12 students ages 5–17 were enrolled in the state’s public schools for the 2009/10 school year.* Among these students were 43,140—about 1 of every 150 students—who would spend a period of time in child welfare supervised foster care that year” (Barrat & Berliner, 2013, pg. 6). In some California school districts, there could be up to 50-99 students in the foster care system and in others between 1-49 students in the system per year. California has one of the highest amounts of children in the foster care system compared to any other state.

Foster Care Demographics

Foster care demographics range depending on age and socioeconomic class. Furthermore, “Nearly one-third of these children (32 percent) were in relative homes, and nearly half (46 percent) were in nonrelative foster family homes” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020, p. 2). In addition, “about half (56 percent) had a case goal of reunification with their parents or primary caretakers,” and “close to half of the children (43 percent) who left foster care in FY 2018 were in care for less than 1 year” (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2020, p. 2). According to Child Welfare Information Gateway, only 3% of children are in the system for more than 5 years. The average age of children in the foster care system is 7.5 years old with 52% of them being male and 48% of them being female. The racial demographics of the children in the foster care system are as follows: “44 percent were White. 23 percent were Black or

African-American. 21 percent were Hispanic (of any race). 10 percent were other races or multiracial. 1 percent were unknown or unable to be determined” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020, p. 9). However, while uncommon, some youth remain in the foster care system their whole lives, and eventually age out of the system when they turn 18.

Furthermore, the issue of maltreatment in foster homes is a common factor seen in most foster homes. In 2015, around 3.4 million maltreatment reports were filed, resulting in 683,000 confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect (Segermark, 2017). According to *Students in Foster Care at Risk of School Failure: Addressing Multiple Needs*, “Of those confirmed cases of maltreatment, 75.3 percent were neglect, 17.2 percent were physical abuse, and 8.4 percent were sexual abuse” (Segermark, 2017, p. 6).

Cumulative Prevalence of Confirmed Maltreatment and Foster Care Placement for US Children by Race/Ethnicity, 2011–2016, stated, “American Indian/Alaska Native children experienced the largest change, an 18.0% increase in confirmed maltreatment risk from 13.4%, to 15.8%, and a 21% increase in foster care placement risk” (Yi, Y., Edwards, F. R., & Wildeman, C., 2020, p. 704). Racial and ethnic variations are significant factors of maltreatment, “Black children have the highest risk of confirmed maltreatment at 18.4%. The second highest group-specific cumulative risk of this event is 15.8% for American Indian/Alaska Native children. Hispanic and White children have the next highest risks, at 11.0% and 10.5%, respectively. Finally, children who are Asian/Pacific Islander are notable in their comparatively low risk of confirmed maltreatment.” (Yi, Y., Edwards, F. R., & Wildeman, C., 2020, p. 708).

Factors for Academic Success: Attendance and Transferring

Two of the most consistent factors impeding academic success include poor attendance records and transferring schools. According to April Moyer, “School attendance, special

education needs, and high school graduation rates have been shown to be worse for foster youth compared to their peers” (Moyer, 2018, p. 2). Moreover, Dawn Segermark’s article, *Students in Foster Care at Risk of School Failure: Addressing Multiple Needs*, further proved April Moyers observation, addressing significant information regarding the reasons behind foster students academic failures, as well as statistics on school transfers and attendance records. According to Segermark, students in foster care are more likely to change schools, which perpetuates the disruption in their educational progress, thus, causing more emotional distress (Segermark, 2017).

The amount of time spent in the foster care system directly correlates to the number of school transfers, and differs with each living situation. In kinship foster homes, the child is placed with an immediate family member and typically is a smoother transition between schools. On the other hand, in congregate foster homes, the child is randomly placed with assigned caretakers, and if moved often, endures multiple school transfers. According to Dylan Conger and Alison Rebeck, “The probability that a child in a foster boarding home transferred to a new school was almost 69 percent, compared with a probability of 49 percent for children in kinship and congregate homes” (Conger & Rebeck, 2001, p. 21).

Furthermore, the transferring of schools resulted in many students reporting feeling insecure and anxious due to the lack of control over their life; “Though they often feel a sense of the impending disruption” (Moyer, 2018, p. 21). Switching schools midyear or at the start of each academic year can lead to kids feeling like they are missing out on things such as sports teams, extracurriculars, and making friends. Transferring schools proves difficult for foster care children to keep up in their schoolwork. Therefore, “Most of the studies that have been conducted to date indicate that when children change schools, their performance suffers because

they must adjust to new classmates, teachers, and curricula” (Conger & Rebeck, 2001, p. 9).

Conger and Rebeck conclude that, “Children in foster care report that moving causes disruptions and delays that make schoolwork difficult. Social workers agree, reporting that returns to school in the middle of the year cause many disruptions for the foster child and the school” (Conger & Rebeck, 2001, p. 8).

Many foster children also struggle with maintaining adequate attendance. Transferring schools, court dates, social worker meetings, and even emotional hardships can contribute to poor attendance records. While attendance decreased on a larger scale for the majority of foster students, in some studies, it increased depending on the type of foster home. It is important to note slight discrepancies in attendance records between foster children in congregate homes versus kinship homes, “Bivariate analysis using attendance data from before and after placement, showed the students increased attendance by 4.4 percent in foster homes, and 7 percent in kinship homes” (Segermark, 2017, p. 26). In another study discussed by Conger and Rebeck, children in kinship homes had “an average attendance rate of 80 percent prior to placement, which increased to 87 percent in the semester following placement”(Conger & Rebeck, 2001, p. 18).

Emotional Toll

There is significant trauma in being separated from family and placed in the foster system. The main factor of academic failures in foster youth is the emotional toll the system has on these children. While studies show that 80% of youth have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lifetime, it is twice as high for foster children. According to Moyer, “foster care alumni had nearly five times the likelihood of being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; 21%) than their peers” (Moyer, 2018, p. 10). There are four distinct categories

of emotional factors leading to the overwhelming rates of academic failure of foster students.

These components are: adjusting to new situations, missing home and biological parents, family worries and sibling responsibilities, and behavioral issues.

Adjusting to new situations is a major factor that leads to emotional trauma in foster youth. When children are abruptly taken out of their homes and placed into a completely different environment, these kids can feel afraid and uneasy. A study conducted in, *What Keeps Children in Foster Care from Succeeding in School?: Views of Early Adolescents and the Adults in Their Lives*, by Vera Researchers, focuses on the experiences and perspectives of 25 foster children. 79 interviews were conducted with students and their teachers. This qualitative study discussed different perspectives of youth ranging from grades 5-8. It discussed how children felt distracted by, “thoughts of home and being upset by having to meet a parent at court, for example. But none referred to their number of placements or registration delays due to a school transfer to explain their predicaments. Instead, most blamed themselves for traumatic events, such as being taken away from a biological parent, for their educational failings” (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002, p. 14). For many of these kids, being taken away from their families and having to adjust to a new life greatly affected their academic performance.

Following adjusting to new environments, missing their biological parents and homesickness are the most consistent factors leading to academic failure. One child named Eric, was interviewed for the study and said his grades in school were fine “until they took me from my mother” (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002, p. 15). Likewise, another child named Darcie was interviewed for the study and believed that the reason her grades were so bad was because she “kept worrying about things outside of school, like foster care and going to courts” (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002, p. 15). From these interviews, it can be presumed that

the separation from one's family, adjusting to new environments, and worries about situations out of their control were the most common factors that led to poor performance in school. According to Finkelstein, Wamsley, and Miranda, "In some cases, children described these foster care-related concerns as rising to the level of distraction, overwhelming their thoughts and inhibiting their concentration on school matters" (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002, pg. 17).

Furthermore, the factor of family worries and sibling responsibilities also affects school performance. The foster care system does not prioritize keeping siblings together, leading to feelings of separation and abandonment within foster siblings. Likewise, family court cases create an overwhelming sense of worry about the future. According to Finkelstein, Wamsley, and Miranda, "These disruptive feelings pervaded many aspects of children's lives, and were fed by what the children perceived as misinformation or a lack of information from caseworkers about their cases and families"(Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002, p. 19).

The fourth leading factor affecting foster youth in academic achievement is behavioral issues. Oftentimes, behavioral issues arise in school when there are external circumstances, such as the death of a family member or pet, divorce, or being placed in the foster care system. Teachers have reported that children in foster care display more "externalizing behavioral problems in school than other students and have more difficulties forming relationships with peers" (Moyer, 2018, p. 9). Behavioral issues are common issues among students in the foster care system because they feel they do not have control over their own life. According to Brinser and Wissel, authors of *Serving Students in Foster Care: Implications and Interventions for School Counselors. The Professional Counselor*, "These extreme emotions and behaviors often result in several different placements, the loss of relationships, and the loss of school and community connections" (Brinser & Wissel, 2020, p. 174). Teachers frequently shift their focus

from academics in order to accommodate behavioral concerns. This causes foster youth to see “themselves as automatically being treated unfairly, and believe that many adults simply expected them to fall short. These opinions drift dangerously toward becoming self-fulfilling” (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002, p. 24).

From the study conducted by Vera researchers in the article written by Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, most children indicated that their grades were higher than they actually were, “the average GPA for our study sample was very low, consistently hovering in the high 60s across all subjects and grading periods (which is equivalent to a D+ average). Only two children for whom we have grades earned a GPA of over 80 (B average)” (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002, p. 13). Thus, proving the effects trauma has on the grades of youth in the foster care system.

Teacher and Parent Perspectives

It is important to evaluate the perspective of teachers, as they are responsible for recognizing and bettering their students’ academic performance. However, there are some discrepancies among teacher perspectives, as some teachers claim they do not notice a difference in school behavior and academic performance of foster youth compared to their classmates, while others did. Finkelstein, Wamsley, and Miranda, wrote that some teachers “felt compelled to argue that the overall populations of their schools shared many similar characteristics, such as dysfunctional families, poverty, and abuse,” while conversely, others noted, “academic deficiencies, health issues, reclusiveness, embarrassment, self esteem issues, and lack of trust” (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002, p. 31) significantly affect foster youth more than their peers.

These contrasting opinions create a sense of confusion, and shows that each individual is dependent on their specific situation. Additionally, school teachers were split over why foster youth present so many problems academically. It was concluded that, “while a few claimed that the children were frustrated over their own school performance, most pinpointed foster children’s lack of stability and criticized other adults in their lives for not taking greater responsibility” (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002, p. 33). Conclusively, some teachers pointed the finger at foster parents as the reasons for a student's academic failures, not themselves. Foster homes can at times be unstable which causes greater problems in school settings. School staff have noted that they believe foster parents were motivated by money, and that “the ineptitude of other foster parents was at the base of many foster children’s problems, as well as the reason why those problems were rarely solved” (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002, p. 34).

While there are different opinions on the effects of the foster system, one fact remains true for all teachers: there is an overwhelming feeling of lack of support of foster students in the school system. Moyer and Goldberg reported that teachers desired for “inservices and workshops that would provide them with specific strategies to help children in care, especially with respect to their emotional and behavioral needs” (Moyer & Goldberg, 2020, p. 124). The mutual feeling of uncertainty on how to care for foster children in the school system is extremely lacking in this field of work and study. While there is heavy focus in getting help and services for kids in the system, teachers are not provided with adequate resources to effectively do so.

Parent perspectives offer an interesting insight into the complex world of foster care. In a study with a small sample size of foster parents, Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda reported that the quality of a child's home environment is the most important variable in a foster child's

success. Likewise, teachers have reported that foster parents are not very involved in their foster child's schoolwork (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002). This may have to do with the fact that many foster parents reported that their children do not discuss academics with them. One of the foster parents from the study said, "She hardly ever talks about that. She hardly ever tells me anything about school or her friends." When asked why she thought Joanne didn't talk about school, she replied, "I think it's because she doesn't have any problems, I imagine."

(Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002, p. 36). This study discovered that many foster parents are more concerned with their child's behavioral issues than their academic performance. So why do these parents put such an emphasis on their child's behavioral issues instead of their academic success?

Conclusion

After reading, analyzing, coding, and organizing information from the above sources, it can be concluded that while there are many discoveries on the factors that affect the academic performance of foster children, there is significant lacking within overall research. More research should be conducted, as small sample sizes do not provide sufficient information. There is a lack of programming for teachers, as well as students who age out of the foster system, and inadequate research on the support foster youth need from their foster parents in regards to their education and mental health. Additionally, there should be a program for foster youth who transfer schools to prevent them from falling further behind academically. For these youth, there should be free mental health programs to help these students manage the academic and emotional toll of the foster care system.

The research in these reviews offers strong evidence of the emotional and academic tolls that the foster care system places on students. The foster care system is known for its

inconsistency and unreliability at its core, and needs to be adjusted in order to lessen the emotional and academic burdens on its youth. Through qualitative and quantitative data presented in many of the referenced articles, it is clear that foster youth are vulnerable, malleable, and can be full of potential given the right opportunities and support programs.

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Appendix

Response to Dr. Woods Comments on Initial Submission of Interview Reports:

- Dr. Woods comments were mainly to fix the APA intext citation formatting when quoting directly from the source or when paraphrasing from a source. I went online and looked up the correct formatting of this and went back throughout my Literature Review and fixed all the errors. All I had to do was go back in and put a page number next to the year in the in text citations.
- Dr. Wood told me to just put the last names of the authors in the intext citation and not to also put their first and middle initials. This only occurred once in my paper so I just went back in and deleted the first and middle initials from the citation.
- The only other feedback Dr. Wood gave me was words of encouragement and recognizing the parts of the paper she liked and thought were interesting. So, thank you for taking the time to read this paper and giving me positive feedback and constructive criticisms.