Rethinking Education for Foster Children: Addressing Struggles Through Comprehensive Educational Strategies

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

This paper utilized an observational case study and grounded theory approach. Data collection was primarily conducted through online qualitative interviews of individuals experienced in working with foster children's education. Interview questions followed a general structure, although follow-up questions were asked depending on the responses: the experience of the individual in working with foster children, struggles that they have perceived first-hand, as well as potential solutions to these issues. The interview questions differed depending on the individual's role. Interviews generally lasted between ten to thirty minutes. Interviews were the primary sources in this paper and the main source of data. Secondary sources were mentioned in rudimentary research of the topic and were used to help create survey questions and ideate initiatives. Through these methods, the paper hoped to identify issues that call for the attention of individuals and potential data analysis, policy, and advocacy projects. All participants consented to an interview and audio recording through Otter.ai. Survey questions were approved by the student's mentor and the IRB.

IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Various challenges exist for foster youth in education, especially institutional and systemic barriers. These roadblocks have translated into different academic and social challenges: from achievement gaps and a lack of willingness to attend school, to an aversion towards intimate relationships with peers and adults. Overall, school connectedness, a supportive family, stable home environment, and need for well-informed staff members is vital. The most commonly mentioned barriers were school instability, feelings of school connectedness, a difficulty in forming connections and relationships, and a lack of trauma-informed practices. While there are many other issues, a plethora of these factors are linked. For instance, more access to technology would increase a foster youth's motivation to learn, and placements with families with a mutual culture would create a safe and welcoming environment for foster youth to excel in academics. However, the author notes that challenges can vary based on location and an individual's unique experience. Due to the lack of research in foster care, it is important to conduct interviews with foster youth, their foster and biological parents, and other individuals in the future. Data-driven research can promote policy and systems change to provide better services to this marginalized group.

INTRODUCTION

Education in foster care presents unique challenges for children's academic development. Previous research shows that foster children have lower educational attainment, graduation rates, college participation, and higher participation in special education. According to Somers et. al[1], foster children are twice as likely to have an out-of-school suspension, have a higher rate of referrals and grade retention, and score lower on state assessments. Additionally, the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education found that only 50% of foster youth graduate high school by age 18, compared to 84% of their peers. The instability of the foster care system disrupts their education, making it difficult to progress academically or develop meaningful connections. Foster children may struggle with motivation due to numerous commitments interfering with their studies, such as court appearances. These obligations and frequent placement changes can disrupt school attendance and study. The achievement gap is significant, with only 24% of foster students meeting standards in English language arts and 15% in mathematics, compared to 51% and 40% for other students. Addressing these challenges requires collaboration between child welfare agencies, schools, and community partners to ensure foster children receive the support needed to succeed academically and beyond. [1]Somers, Cheryl L et al. "Academic Achievement Among a Sample of Youth in Foster Care: The Role of School Connectedness." Psychology in the schools vol. 57,12 (2020): 1845-1863. doi:10.1002/pits.22433

CONCLUSIONS AND ANALYSIS

- **School and district staff**
  - School instability affects emotional wellbeing, academic achievement, and social skills
  - Inconsistent course credit transfer process
  - Feelings of belonging and engagement at school differs based on a foster youth's personality and extroversion
    - Generally less comfortable in forming intimate relationships
  - Effective communication between agencies is needed
- **County Office of Education employees**
  - School changes = significant disruption in academic and social aspect
    - Require more attention and an extra "push" to make up for gaps
  - Difficulty in enrollment for IEP and accommodation services
    - Approval process timeline and lack of required documents results in a delay
  - School staff have a lack of training in trauma-informed practices and awareness of the foster care system
    - Important for school staff to be aware of a foster youth's status
    - Foster youth should not receive special treatment or stigmatization
    - Educators and school staff should not remind of a student of their status
  - Home placements with bicultural disconnect forces students to adjust and adapt
  - Foster youth should be aware of their rights and advocate for themselves
- **Individuals from nonprofit organizations**
  - More access to transportation, technology, and extracurricular opportunities
  - Foster youth often feel uncomfortable to make meaningful relationships
  - Traditional school setting decreases feeling of isolation
  - Stable and supportive home environment is important
  - Teachers need to be more understanding of foster care
    - Foster youth could be more willing to share their worries and come to school
  - More consistency in policies across schools
  - Varying age limit for various programs
    - Lack of funding to extend and create consistency
    - Extended age limits important to support foster youth in career assistance and planning for the future
      - Many foster youth do not realize the importance of education until later and often after support services are offered

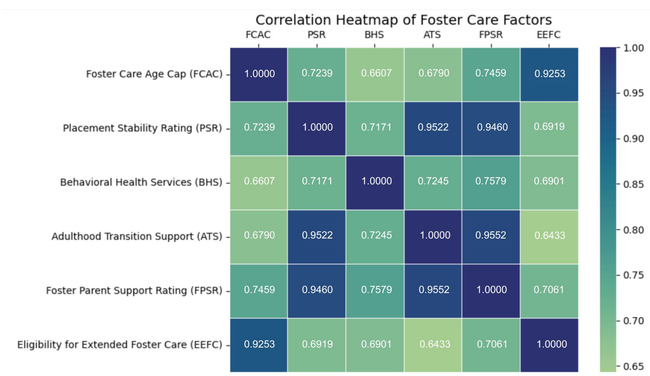
DATA AND FINDINGS

A total of twenty individuals, that can be categorized into three groups, were interviewed. The first group involves members of a school or district staff that have directly interacted with foster children in their career. This includes school psychologists, counselors, and special education directors. The second involves employees at local County Offices of Education that work with foster children or relevant data. The last group includes individuals in nonprofit organizations that support foster children through initiatives such as material objects, mentoring, policy, and advocacy.

Figure 1: Common issues faced by foster youth and the frequency the issue was mentioned in accordance with interview responses

School and district staff	County Office of Education employees	Individuals from nonprofit organizations
School instability (3)	School instability (5)	School instability (4)
Course credit transfer (2)	Academic discrepancies (2)	Consistency across schools (1)
Feelings of school connectedness (3)	Emotional and behavioral readiness (2)	Feelings of school connectedness (4)
Support from foster family (2)	Placements with mismatched cultures (1)	Home instability decreasing motivation to learn (1)
Chronic absenteeism (2)	Chronic absenteeism (1)	Inefficient communication between liasions (1)
IEP or academic accomodation approval (1)	Enrollment and IEP difficulty (1)	School-of-origin implementation (1)
Comfort in sharing foster youth status (3)	Stigmatization (1)	Lack of awareness in schhool staff (1)
Institutional barriers (3)	Lack of trauma-informed practices (3)	Lack of trauma-informed practices (1)
	Lack of educational motivation (1)	Lack of access to technology (1)
	Difficulty in forming meaningful connections (4)	Need for extracurriculars and transportation (2)
		Inefficient support services (1)
		Lack of funding to sustain programs (1)
		Career assistance beyond program age limits (1)

Figure 2: Correlational heatmap of factors like foster care age cap, placement stability rating, and adulthood transition support



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