



Frequent moving has a negative affect on the school achievement of foster children makes the case for reform

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ABSTRACT

This study will investigate how the frequent school and home mobility of foster children affects their overall academic achievement in school. It will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How is School Achievement affected by the Mobility of Foster Children?
2. What can society, as well as state and federal governments do to establish long-term consistent care that will ensure long-term success and achievement of all foster care children?
3. What can school and welfare agencies do to help improve the academic achievement of foster care children? Foster children are subjected to many obstacles during their education in public schools. Most of these children move from school to school because they frequently change foster homes. Since improved academic achievement in school is important to all foster children, this study examines the dilemma of the foster care child in the classroom. Furthermore, this study examines the academic performance of children in foster care and describes what the research believes can be done to solve this problem and improve the chances for the foster child's academic success.

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1. Introduction

Tom is a fifteen year old foster child. He is currently placed in a ninth grade self-contained class in a highly regarded suburban Middle School on Long Island, New York. From his first day at the school, Tom has been experiencing great success in his class and in his social relationships with his classmates. Tom is classified for special education services because of his learning disabilities. What makes this current placement successful since Tom has a complicated history of assorted school and home placement in his past?

Consider that Tom was placed in foster care at the age of three and his current placement at the high school is the sixth school that he has attended since first starting kindergarten at the age of five. Tom was placed in foster care because his mother and father abandoned him. Since entering the foster care system he has lived in seven different foster homes.

Tom was identified as a special education student at the end of first grade. When he began second grade Tom was placed in a self-contained classroom at a regional Special Education School run by the Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES). The district Committee on Special Education at that time believed that he was in need of individual academic assistance and that his emotional/social needs could be better met in a class with a smaller class size.

In the middle of sixth grade Tom moved to his fourth foster home and to his third school placement in a different BOCES self-contained class placement. He encountered difficulty adjusting to the new school and foster home. The difficulties began when he was registered in school by his foster parents. They were told by the school district that Tom's records were incomplete and that he could not start school until the school district received all his official records. With the assistance of a conscientious caseworker's help, Tom was finally enrolled in school after waiting about one month at home.

Within the first two months of this placement, Tom began to experience frustration in school and at home. He had no friends and he felt different from the other kids. At home he began to exhibit daily acting out behavior, and the foster care parents told Tom's caseworker that they could not care for his needs. In this home placement, Tom was living with two other children that were also under foster care.

By the end of sixth grade, Tom had an emotional breakdown and he was hospitalized in a children's psychiatric center. He was under psychiatric care for two months and when he was discharged from the hospital Tom was placed in Residential Treatment Center pending a placement in a new foster home. This was his fourth school placement and he stayed at the Residential School for three months.

In seventh and eighth grades Tom was in his current foster home and in a Middle School BOCES program. He was placed in a self-contained classroom and participated in school sports and clubs. During the two year period, Tom had experienced great success in school and was recognized by the school as an outstanding student. By

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the end of eighth grade his foster parents and caseworker asked the school district if Tom could be placed in a self-contained classroom at the district's High School.

At an annual review meeting of the district's Committee of Special Education it was decided that because Tom had never attended a regular public school program and he should stay at the BOCES High School Program for one more year to see if he can demonstrate continued progress with high school subjects. The school district also agreed that he would be mainstreamed at the local public high school if he could demonstrate good grades in his BOCES Program.

Tom continued in the BOCES program, his sixth school placement, for an entire school year. At his annual review meeting, the school district was again reluctant to follow through on placing him at the local public high school. There was expressed fear that Tom might feel lost at the high school because it has about 1100 students. There was also concern that Tom had never been placed in a public school before and what would he do if he failed a subject? By the end of the meeting it was agreed that Tom would attend a self-contained classroom at the public high school. Tom also received individual counseling three times per week from the school's Social Worker.

During his first year in the public high school Tom has been a major success. He has been mainstreamed for some regular academic classes including physical education. Tom has been greeted warmly by the school's administrators, teachers and other students. The school has also welcomed the participation of Tom's caseworker in planning his academic program.

Although success is finally being achieved in school, there are problems in the foster home, and Tom again faces the potential of moving to another home. If this does happen, it will mean that Tom will have to move to another High School for tenth grade. Because of Tom's high mobility rate, he experienced a fragmented educational program. His reading skills are equivalent to those of a fifth grade student, and his math ability is equal to the average sixth grader. He has learned to compensate for her reading deficiencies in the content subjects by using her listening skills. He now also receives additional help from a speech therapist, reading specialist and from his special education teacher. The act of reading and writing for Tom, however, is often very frustrating, and it prevents him from experiencing success in her other academic classes.

Tom's case is the exception and not the rule. He has made progress in school because people have cared and communicated his needs. Most foster care children are not like Tom and they move so frequently that progress is never made. Since improved academic achievement in school is important to all foster children, this study examines the dilemma of the foster care child in the classroom and it asks the question "How is School Achievement affected by the Mobility of Foster Children?" Furthermore, this study examines the academic performance of children in foster care and describes what the research believes can be done to solve this problem and improve the chances for the foster child's academic success. It also asks and answers the question, "What can society, as well as state and federal governments do to establish long-term consistent care that will ensure long-term success and achievement of all foster care children?"

As Educational Advocates, teachers and administrators for foster children for many years, we have observed that many foster care children are not unlike Tom. They are subjected to many obstacles during their education in public schools. Most of these children move from school to school because they frequently change foster homes.

When they arrive in a new community, they are greeted by their new school with delays in registration, inappropriate classroom placement and, if they are in need of Special Education or Remedial services, there will be a significant delay in the implementation of these services. These blocks to the education of the foster child are compounded if the school staff has a negative perception about the child because of his/her previous academic and social history (Vacca, 2004).

2. How is School Achievement affected by the Mobility of Foster Children?

Children in foster care are often defined by their frequency of moves from one school district to another. These moves leave foster child with severe educational needs and the lack of a consistent educational advocate in their lives. Changes in home placement often necessitate changes in schools, and the foster child must adjust to new expectations and curricula, new friends and teachers, and new school settings. School staff are frequently unaware that a child is in foster care or unaware of the educational implications of foster care placement (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004)

According to Vacca (2004) the research shows that improved educational achievement is a major problem for foster children in school. For foster children academic achievement it is also critical to a successful transition to a new school setting when they are forced to move to a new foster home. Children in foster care are faced with instruction that is often interrupted by frequent moves to different communities and schools, living in different foster homes with new families where academic are not a priority, a lack of parent support with the school, and a few opportunities to have consistent peer groups for interaction and socialization. Foster children, moreover, generally lack positive relationships with school administrators, support staff, teachers and classmates.

A study by the Gillespie (1999) concluded that since the 1980's between 16 and 20% of the population changed residence in the United States. The study looked at the following four major areas:

- Who is most likely to move?
- The research done on mobility and its impact upon children and school functioning.
- An attempt to differentiate between the types of student mobility naming "movers," "changers," and "leavers."
- The effect of mobility on student achievement for children in school.

The authors concluded that the individuals who have highest rates of residential mobility tend to be families who are low-income, urban or rural poor, renters, non-married (divorced or never married), and prone to make multiple moves in one year. They further suggested that students who are highly mobile are more likely to experience academic, social, emotional problems than students who have low rates of mobility. Finally, the authors maintained that the effect of mobility on student achievement for children in elementary years appears to be negative. For those who are more economically disadvantaged and who had more social stressors (poverty, racism, and abuse) frequent mobility is often a major problem. The study did maintain, however, that the transition time between moving and adjusting is extremely important and that if that transition period is not carefully conceived, any child who changes schools at any time in their education can experience extremely negative educational effects.

The success of foster children in reading and in all other areas of academic achievement is generally affected by their frequent school and home mobility and a breakdown in communication and coordination among key people and agencies responsible for their education (Vacca, 2007). In addition, these children frequently do not have a consistent and knowledgeable advocate who can act on their behalf for special education and remedial reading services. The foster parents who are typically the most familiar with the needs of the children are unprepared to negotiate services under both the Special Education and Section 504 systems. Finally, frequent placement changes disrupt the authority of foster parents to represent children's educational interests.

Schubert (2001) suggests that the breaks in school enrollment happen because the foster care system is concerned with the child's safety first and foremost and that educational needs can end up taking

second priority. Another problem, the author suggests, is that the multiple agencies that are frequently involved in placing foster children do not share information in a timely fashion. Schubert further says that very little information about the students' educational background and their academic needs is shared among the foster parents, schools and caseworkers.

According to Zetlin, Weinberg, and Shea (2006) whether the foster child comes into the system already with needs for special educational services or whether challenges develop due to frequent moves, lack of learning supports, or unmet emotional and other needs, they tend to struggle academically and socially. In addition, several studies reported that compared to non-foster youth, foster children have higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals, significant below-grade-level academic performance, higher rates of grade retention, and disproportionate rates of special education placement (George, Van Vooris, Grant, Casey, & Robinson, 1992; Leiter & Johnson, 1997; Parrish et al., 2001).

Furthermore, on standardized achievement tests in reading and mathematics, foster children perform significantly lower than non-foster youth, and they exhibit with greater frequency behavioral problems in school ranging from aggressive, demanding, immature, and attention-seeking behaviors to withdrawn, anxious, and over-compliant behaviors (Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993; Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994).

Child advocates have long recognized that children in foster care don't perform in school as well as many of their classmates. In the state of Washington, nearly 18,500 children were placed in foster or group homes between June 2000 and July 2001. About 70% of those were of school age. The findings showed (Schubert, 2001):

- Extensive health care needs, but they do not receive adequate health services.
- Below average academic performance and cognitive skills, school behavior problems, poor study habits and low attention skills.
- Approximately 52%, developmental and school behavioral problems due to prenatal drug exposure.

Many students in foster care are not being provided fair educations or opportunities for academic achievement (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). Additionally, many foster children are not encouraged to pursue advanced education.

It is safe to say, moreover, that the education of foster children is often overlooked, and they are one of the most educationally vulnerable populations in our schools (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). School personnel must develop a deeper understanding of the challenge of transforming their schools into caring and cohesive institutions that focus on helping every student succeed. Obviously, this important goal is not easy to accomplish.

3. What can society, as well as state and federal governments do to establish long-term consistent care that will ensure long-term success and achievement of all foster care children?

The only way for the foster child to have a fighting chance, especially under the graduation requirements of No Child Left Behind, is for researchers and educators to be given incentives by the federal, state and local governments to develop and implement innovative programs and interventions that help these students succeed (Vacca, 2007).

Policies must be put into place at the national, state, and local levels that support effective educational reforms and innovative practices. Interventions that bring students, like foster children, up to grade level and provide experiences that bring real-world relevance into classrooms are as critical as school environments that support excellence in teaching and learning. Improving schools will lead to increased student achievement and higher graduation rates, which

will result in lowered crime and incarceration rates and increased economic activity (Vacca, 2007).

The estimated 518,000 children who are currently in foster care are among the most at risk youngsters in American society. Research shows that adults who formerly were in the foster care are more likely than the general population to succumb to poor life outcomes. For foster kids, one major obstacle is the difficult transition from out-of-state care into adulthood. Education is a key factor in determining whether a foster child successfully makes the transition. Regrettably, many do not.

Compared to their peers, foster children have lower scores on standardized tests and higher absenteeism, tardiness and drop-out rates (Lips USA Today 2007). Furthermore, half of foster youths do not finish high school before they leave the state's care. They do not earn enough money to afford housing. They have trouble finding meaningful work and are unable to navigate the education, welfare and health care systems. They have had no long-term relationships with family or other adults who could provide support and care. In reality, they have been abandoned by family and society as they have been moved from one foster home to another multiple times. This constant movement from one home to another is paralleled by movement from one school to another school multiple times. Lips (2007) maintained that foster children do not have the same level of financial, emotional and social support that most young people get from their families, friends and communities.

We as a society and with the support of government agencies need to develop a system or structure that provides homes for foster kids that gives them strength, support, hope and a feeling of continuity, not abandonment and desertion. We need to give foster kids a sense of what it feels like to have a happy home life—a sense of belonging and the feeling that someone really cares about them.

Agencies should look at what is being done for foster care children in Europe. European foster care children go into care for the same reasons as their counterparts in the United States. Germany's foster care system, for example, seems to be much more successful than that found in the US. In Germany, children in foster care go on to higher education, get jobs and seem to lead trouble-free lives.

The answer to their success might be found in Germany's approach to foster care which is more comprehensive and encompassing than our fragmented system. Germany's system is built on ideas championed by Austrian child psychologist, Bruno Betelheim and Hungarian pediatrician, Emmi Pickler, that creates a stable, loving environment that promotes children's well-being and gives them a sense of promise.

According to Benjamin (2006) the system is called Kinderhaus. From the outside, Kinderhaus looks like an impersonal, sterile, council housing block, except for the giant painted chrysanthemums that adorn the front of the seven story building. The flowers hint at what is inside—a warm, friendly, family-like environment. Its huge size belies the one to one support that all 244 residents receive from teams of professional educators, social workers and “pedagogues” whose job it is to nurture the development of these emotionally damaged children and adolescents. This team enables the children in their care to build strong relationship with others, and works with some of the parents, designing ways to address problems, improve parenting skills and showing them ways to rebuild family units.

One of the keys to Kinderhaus' success is the longevity of the staff who are retained by training opportunities, reasonable pay and rewarding work. Visitors to Kinderhaus have impressed by the professionalism and maturity of the staff and their education and training. Also, the cost per foster child was of interest.

Considering that about half the students at Kinderhaus come with severe learning problems, it is significant that even 1 to 2% of Kinderhaus residents go on to the universities; three quarters pass the

General Certificate of Education (the equivalent of our U.S. High School Diploma), and 95% of Kinderhaus residents go on to vocational training. The German government acknowledges that Kinderhaus has some of the avenues for improving the life of foster children in their care.

If one were to look at the United States, after foster care statistics—post eighteen years of age, a 1998 Wisconsin study of 157 former foster care youths 12 to 18 months after leaving, shows the following (Anderson, 2003): (1) 37% had finished high school; (2) 39% had a job; (3) 32% were on public assistance; (4) 18% had been incarcerated at some point since emancipating; (5) many had trouble obtaining health care; and (6) half of those who needed health services while in care were still getting it.

Although this German model does not hold all the answers to what is wrong with foster care in the United States, it does offer an alternative to containing the significant amount of mobility that foster care children have in this country. The German system also shows that foster children continue to make gains after they leave the foster care system at age eighteen.

We need to explore and pilot alternatives to our current foster care system in the United States and stop this system of continued failure. The closest we come to replicating Germany's Kinderhaus program is Boys Town in Nebraska and the Milton Hershey School in Pennsylvania. However, the Milton Hershey school admission criteria states that to be considered for enrollment, the child must be free of serious emotional and behavioral problems that disrupt life in the classroom or home. Therefore, we should look at Boys Town and Kinderhaus as an alternative to our current foster care system in America. Several pilot programs should be enacted throughout our country and the results of these endeavors should be scrutinized and if viable alternatives, they should be put into effect immediately to help our children in foster care achieve full inclusion in our society.

4. Reflection

As teachers and School Administrators for many years we have observed that many foster care children are subjected to many roadblocks to their success in public schools. The majority of these children move from school to school because they are forced to change foster homes. It is beyond the control of the child, yet they enter a new school and are greeted by delays in registration, inappropriate classroom placements and, if they are in need of Special Education or Remedial services, there will be a significant delay in the implementation of these services. These blocks to the education of the foster child are compounded if the school staff has a negative attitude about the child because of his/her previous academic and social history (Vacca, 2007).

It is essential that policies be put into place at the national, state, and local levels that support effective educational reforms and innovative practices. Interventions that bring foster children, up to grade level and provide experiences that bring real-world relevance into classrooms are as critical as school environments that support excellence in teaching and learning. Improving school achievement for foster children will lead to increased graduation rates, which will result in lowered crime and incarceration rates and increased economic activity (Vacca, 2004).

Finally, where possible states and local governments should look at what is working in other countries like Germany. It is essential that agencies also begin to listen to and include foster youths in the policy planning and in foster care reform. States should follow the model set by California, the state with the highest foster care population (Ferrell, 2004). They have the California Youth Connection (CYC), one of the most well-developed and active youth advisory groups in the country. These and other considerations are vitally important for helping foster youth achieve their learning potential and lead successful lives.

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