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Challenging The Norm: Raising the Bar for Educators of Foster Youth

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**Recipes to Combat the “isms”:
Volume One - Equity**

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Editors

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CHAPTER 4

CHALLENGING THE NORM: RAISING THE BAR FOR EDUCATORS OF FOSTER YOUTH

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Abstract

An increasing number of foster youth find themselves representing a vast majority of the most academically vulnerable population. The trauma and neglect experienced by foster youth is but one of many factors influencing educational achievement. The role of educators in foster youth educational attainment is critical. It requires teachers and school leaders to understand the complexities of trauma; to positively develop comprehensive knowledge of trauma-informed practices; and the ability to create a learning environment where foster youth feel supported in their educational journey.

Key Words

Attainment, Educational Attainment, Foster Youth, Support Services, Trauma

This chapter begins with a descriptive summary of the crisis facing educators today who are teaching students who have and continue to experience trauma which frequently leads to both school and societal exclusion. Readers are exposed to the factors (ingredients) that contribute to the crises as well as strategies and tools (recipe) for ensuring that school is a positive experience for foster youth.

The role of educators in foster youth educational attainment is critical and requires educators to collaborate with child welfare in understanding the complexities of trauma, the importance of trauma-informed practices, and fostering a learning environment where foster youth feel supported in their educational journey.

Current Practice

Most likely in a high school setting a teacher will teach daily a foster care youth (Hanson, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). What does this mean for both the teacher and the student? For the student it means that they are likely to be in one of three situations: (1) living in a foster family or group home, in custody of the child welfare system; (2) running away from foster care and most likely homeless; or (3) aging out of foster care and most likely homeless with less than “5%” chance of graduating from college (Day et al, 2021, p. 12). For the teacher it is likely that they are (1) interacting with a traumatized student with possibly a psychosocial and emotional special need; (2) wrestling with the identification of appropriate pedagogical practices with little or no knowledge of a student’s trauma; (3) dealing with over/under identification of a student’s special educational need; and (4) confronting incomprehensible anti-social behavior.

“An estimated 442,733 children were in foster care as of September 2017” (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021, topics, foster care, p.1). However, “less than 50% of foster youth (see Table 1 for definition of frequently used terms) are completing high school” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019, p. 2). The rate varies significantly by state as some states, such as Georgia report only “8%” of youth in foster care are graduating from high school (Georgia Division of Family and Child Services, 2017, p. 19). While states such as California and Texas have some of the highest graduation rates at “59% and 58% respectively” despite caring for “nearly 15%” of the nation’s foster youth (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 2021; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

There are several factors impacting foster youth graduation rates which help to explain the discrepancy between states. Foster youth are removed from or are unable to live with their biological parents for many reasons for example, abuse, neglect, trauma, illness, and deceased parents. These experiences cause children in foster care to become a vulnerable population to the potential of school failure (Berardi & Morton, 2017; Morton, 2018; Zetlin et al., 2012). In fact, it is not uncommon for foster youth to attend eight to ten different schools, in eight to ten different school districts in their PK-12 educational life which unsurprisingly can have a significant negative impact on their educational success (Jones & O’Kelley, 2005). Indeed, foster youth tend to perform worse in school in the areas of academics, social/emotional intelligence, and behavior compared to their non-foster peers (Pears et al, 2018). Variables such as placement frequency, traumatic experiences, lack of early education exposure, and lack of consistent support all influence academic

performance for foster youth (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Morton, 2015; Morton, 2018; Nagel, 2009).

Table 1. Essential Terms

Author	Word or Term	Defined As...
Child Welfare Information Gateway (2019)	Foster Child/Youth	Youth raised by someone other than their natural or adoptive parents
Child Welfare Information Gateway (2019)	Foster Care	Out-of-home care
Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013)	Child Welfare System	A group of services designed to promote the well-being of children by ensuring safety, achieving permanency, and strengthening families to care for their children successfully.
Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016)	Court System *inclusive of judges and attorneys	Understand and implement the laws and work together to ensure timely, safe, and stable permanent families for children.
Great Schools Partnership (2013)	Education System	Generally, refers to public schooling, kindergarten through high school programs, and comprises of everything that goes into educating public-school students at the federal, state, or community levels: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laws, policies, and regulations • Public funding, resource allocations, and procedures for determining funding levels • State and district administrative offices, school facilities, and transportation vehicles

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human resources, staffing, contracts, compensation, and employee benefits • Books, computers, teaching resources, and other learning materials
Johnson (2004)	Caregiver * referred also as a foster parent or foster family home	An individual or family licensed or approved as meeting the standards established by the State licensing or approval authority (ies) that provides 24- hour out-of-home care for children
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2017)	Special Education Services	Special education is instruction that is specially designed to meet the unique needs of children who have disabilities. Special education and related services are provided in public schools at no cost to the parents and can include special instruction in the classroom, at home, in hospitals or institutions, or in other settings.

Author created

Action Required by Educators to Meet the Needs of Students in Foster Care

The trauma and neglect experienced by foster youth and lack of educational monitoring, advocacy and support create some of the most dismal educational outcomes (Zetlin, 2006). A disproportionate percentage of foster youth “15%” (Zetlin, 2006, p. 161) are performing at grade level compared to their non-foster peers (Morton, 2015; Morton, 2018). Meanwhile, there is an over-representation of foster youth receiving special education services. While only 10% of the general population is placed in special education, almost a third to a half of the foster population receives special education services (Zetlin, 2006). This statistic is alarming, making it even more crucial for educators to understand the complexities of the

problems faced by foster youth when attempting to access special education resources.

According to a report by Child Welfare Information Gateway, *2017 Foster Care Statistics*, over “47%” of foster youth were receiving special education services of some sort (2019, p. 2). However, this number does not include the many foster youth that are unable to receive the special education support services that are specifically assigned to them because of an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The constant changing of schools experienced by foster youth has a significant impact on the child’s IEP (Vacca, 2008; Zetlin, 2006). Increasing the chances of the IEP getting lost in the system or the child not being placed in the necessary class setting to get the proper resources as directed by the IEP. When a foster youth changes schools, interim conformities to the current IEP should be put in place; however, all too often there is no one educator monitoring if the student is enrolled in the proper placement and receiving the necessary services to progress successfully. The lack of consistency, support, and implementation of IEPs places the foster student at an even higher risk of academic failure (Morton, 2015).

Zetlin (2006) draws attention to the fact that child welfare and judicial systems do not always consider a student’s education when making a placement. Zetlin (2006) identifies five factors that influence the foster youth’s experience with special education such as: over-representation of foster youth in the special education system, under-identification of foster children in special education, issues related to IEP, problem related to special education procedures and concerns related to enrollment. More recently Day et al (2015) acknowledge that overrepresentation in special education programs may be due to many foster youth being diagnosed with learning disabilities without the consideration of stress, trauma, and emotional regulation.

Working in Partnership to Support Foster Youth in Schools

On average, children in out-of-home care move to new placements three times per year with each move resulting in a change in school. Frequent changes in school disrupt connections to peers but more importantly such changes disrupt the relationships with school and community professionals that might have otherwise provided social and academic support (Day et al, 2015). However, digging deeper, researchers such as Morton, Jones, O’Kelley and Day have found that it is not just support from educational, child welfare, and court professionals that is needed but rather the entities must communicate and collaborate to best support academic success for foster youth.

Action Required for Supporting Foster Youth in the K-12 System

Recipe: Ingredients

- ◆ *Advocacy from cross-system professionals to understand how behavior, trauma and learning intersect (Day et al., 2015)*
- ◆ *Creation of a plan for systematic changes that establish guidelines for inter-agency communication, intervention planning and monitoring of student achievement (Jones & O’Kelley, 2005)*
- ◆ *Continuous, consistent, and collaborative support that fosters the academic and life success of traumatized foster youth (Jones & O’Kelley, 2005)*

Method-Action Required

In a group discuss:

1. The ingredient quantities required to develop a transformational educational model designed specifically to meet the needs of foster care youth.
2. The organization structure of your educational model.
3. Whether your designed transformational educational model resembles the dish we prepared earlier (see below).

Recipe in Action: Dish Prepared Earlier

In 2015, C.B. Community School (CBCS) opened in Philadelphia having received its private school license from Pennsylvania State Department of Education. The school’s mission is “to engage, educate, and ensure that vulnerable students, who are currently involved in or were formerly involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice system, learn, heal, and grow into caring, confident, competent citizens of the world” (C.B. Community School website, 2022). The school is unique in two ways. First, it provides academic and support services for older foster youth (14-21 years old). Second, the school is structured around competency rather than grade.

The school’s unique instructional delivery model focuses on competency rather than grade levels (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior) meaning that the current 65 students’ pathway is determined by their credits rather than grade level. This approach is reflected in the school’s name i.e., C.B.-competency based. Student learning is assessed as

“highly competent, competent, not competent,” thereby removing the language of failure (Tonini, 2021).

Classes are small and special education support and resources are accessible to all students. A Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) team is also available twenty-four hours a day (e.g., a clinician, a nurse, and a school counselor, as well as partnerships with Big Brothers Big Sisters, The Center for Grieving Children, ELECT's parenting program, and GALAEI's healthy relationships curriculum). Over the last six years the graduation rate has consistently been around 90% (Tonini, 2021).

Action Review

In a group discuss:

1. What are the benefits of this model for foster care youth in comparison to the traditional educational model?
2. How does the leadership of a school district impact the development of strategies designed to specifically address student trauma?

Outcomes

Educators' cognizance of factors that influences academic success for foster youth increases teacher advocacy, communication, and collaboration with systems such as child welfare, education, caregiver, and court (Day et al., 2015). There is an urgent need to “transform our educational models to provide healing-centered supports that empower our young people to build the skills they need for the world” (C.B. Community School website, n.d., para. 1). But this will only occur if 21st century educators and leaders are prepared through graduate program courses such as: Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion; Education and Social Justice; and Inclusion Perspectives for example.

The knowledge gained in this chapter will help all educators understand both the social determinants of mental health and the complexities faced by foster youth when accessing services (Cox, 2013; Nagel, 2009; Zetlin, 2006) in order to advocate for evidence-based services and trauma-informed practices (Day et al, 2015). Reimagining how educators can better serve all students equitably will greatly enhance the aspiration of all students succeeding in K-12.

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