

A Qualitative Study Exploring the Role of Caregivers and Teachers in the Academic Achievement of Youth in Foster Care

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Abstract: Using an exploratory framework, this study explores the relationship between the academic achievement of youth in foster care and the amount of time invested by caregivers and teachers to promote academic success. **Methods:** This study randomly chose 5 caregivers from a community based group home agency and 5 teachers (Public, Charter and Non-Public) who work directly with the youth placed within that agency to conduct an in-depth interview. **Results:** Youth in foster care need additional independent living skills to promote academic success; foster youth need consistent coaching and mentoring; and nurturing caregivers and teachers. **Discussion:** Despite the academic support of youth in foster care, the youth themselves have to be motivated to reach academic achievement in order for them to be truly successful.

Key words: academic achievement, foster youth, caregiver support, teacher support

1. Introduction

According to O’Mally, Renshaw & Eklund (2015), “approximately 1% of all children in the United States are currently placed in the foster care system” (p. 144). These children who have a history of neglect and/or abuse are at high risk for school failure (Pecora et al., 2006) for many different reasons. Youth in foster care are more likely to have a lack of school stability due to home–placement disruptions which can occur unexpectedly and frequently which can lead to frequent school changes and absences. Other barriers are the inadequate educational advocacy when needing to explore special education and inadequate support and lack of awareness by even the youth’s educator (Pecora et al., 2006). With all these barriers for youth in foster care, “caregivers believe their involvement is an important part of their role to make a positive difference for the children in their care” (Beiss & Tyre, 2013, p. 15). Through this study, the researcher will investigate whether the time caregivers and teachers spend academically supporting these youth in foster care positively affects their academic achievements. Research questions such as what differentiates the success and failures of these youth academically and whether the amount of time these youth spend with caregivers and/or teachers contribute to their academic achievement will also be investigated during this study.

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1.1 Background Literature

Youth in foster care face barriers daily that challenge optimal development due to the lack of stability and consistency. According to O'Malley, Renshaw & Eklund (2015), "youth in foster care are among those in greatest need of thoughtfully designed, enriched, developmentally supportive school environment that are intended to prevent deleterious outcomes and promote their wellbeing" (p. 144). For youth in foster care that have experienced trauma, abuse and/or neglect often are disrupted from placement and schools frequently and often lack adequate and/or consistent nurturing, guidance, and support (Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2006, p. 165) which are only some barriers these youth have to overcome to be academically successful. During these frequent moves in placements and schools, most youth in foster care can either be checked out of schools for an extended period of time and/or not even properly checked out of their previous school so they continue to receive absences and failing grades (Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2006). California legislation AB490 was passed to "emphasize a stable school placement, placement in the least restrictive education program, and access to the same academic resources, services, and extracurricular and enrichment activities as other children" (Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2006, p. 166) due to twice as many foster youth not receiving credit so repeating the same grade, changing schools frequently during the year, youth refusing to attend school and even a difficult time enrolling them in the special education program when compared with non-foster youth children (Pecora et al., 2006).

With the known trauma of most foster youth, mental health concerns are also not being properly addressed and supported by the school system. As many, if not all, youth in foster care have undergone some type of trauma (physical, emotional, mental, and/or sexual), school staff are not properly trained on how to identify triggers and ways they can support this population. Due to the lack of education about the trauma of this population and its effects on development, many youth are labeled as defiant, disrespectful or disruptive and pushed to be removed from the classroom or even the school. These mental health problems (ADHD, oppositional defiance disorder, major depression disorder, adjustment disorder) effect the student's ability to concentrate as "hyperactivity, inability to get along with classmates, disorganization, incomplete in-class and homework assignments, and emotional responses in interactions" (Cox, 2013, p. 59) increase the risk of getting involved in criminal activities and not completing high school (O'Malley, Renshaw & Eklund, 2015). Independent Educational Plans (IEP) are completed to help place youth in appropriate programs, but the process to receive services are either drawn out or problematic for youth in foster care (Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2010). Many youth in foster care are not able to properly get an assessment because the frequent changes in schools due to unstable placement. Another barrier is identifying the educational rights holder. Getting approval to start the process can be difficult if the educational rights holder is not involved or interested in the youth's academic well-being. Hindering the youth in getting a proper evaluation completed most often leads to an over identification and/or under identification for special education services (Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2006). The youth that are over identified are essentially placed in environments where they are not challenged and can be a distraction in their classrooms due to not being stimulated while the under identified youth are placed in classrooms that are above their ability to comprehend so they most times rather not participate. According to Burley & Halpern (2011), "a lack of continuity exists as students adjust to different curriculum, standards, and teachers, possibly finding that they have to repeat material already covered at the previous school or that they have missed various credits and are behind the rest of the class" (p. 9) which affects their grade retention.

It is reported that youth in foster care have the same influences that effect their educational attainment such

as educational aspirations, involvement with extracurricular activities, and drug use as the youth in the general population (Shin, 2003), so what other factors affect our youth to perform lower in test scores than the general population? Unfortunately, even if caregivers and teachers are familiar with barriers the youth in foster care have to overcome to keep a stable educational experience, many caregivers and teachers hold low expectations of academic success while ignoring the untreated mental health problems from their trauma (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Due to the frequent change in placements and schools, most youth in this population are not able to receive the appropriate GPA which can limit their extracurricular activities because they are not eligible to participate in school activities and/or sports. For the youth that reside in group homes, the six youth to one staff ratio of the program can also interfere with transportation to extracurricular activities which can lead to frustration, hopelessness and increase in drug use for the youth. According to Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea (2006), “school liaisons felt that a strong home-school partnership was critically missing in dealing with students in foster care” (p. 249) and there was no accountability for the caregivers to monitor the youth’s academic status or progress (Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2006). Support from caregivers and teachers are the most important network these youth need to be academically successful. As the educational background of the caregivers and teachers are important to enable youth in foster care to catch up with their peers (Martin & Jackson, 2002), training caregivers to track and monitor the youth’s academic performance (Blome, 1997), along with best practices to integrate with schools, being aware of available tutoring programs, and relationship building groups (Cox, 2013) would benefit the caregivers to create an environment where there is consistency, structure and organization for youth to study while caregivers monitor the youth completing homework and assisting the youth with academic tasks as needed (Beisse & Tyre, 2013) to help maintain or improve their grade point average.

According to Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea (2006) “it is clear that no single group/agency has the resources or expertise to provide the services and supports required to better serve this vulnerable population of students at risk for poor educational outcomes and lifetime consequences” (p. 253), that is crucial for these youth to have developed a network of supportive relationships so they can have a sense that someone cares about their progress and process (Martin & Jackson, 2002). With knowledge of the predictors of high school competition being entering into the foster care system at an older age, fewer placement changes, the youth’s employment history, independent living training during the time in foster care, and less criminal behaviors, the most important protective factor is having a positive relationship with their caregivers (Pecora et al., 2006).

1.2 Hypothesis

According to Coulling (2000), the youth in foster care, “successful educational experiences had little do with (their) academic ability but more to do with being well supported by (caregivers) and school to reach potential” (p. 33). It is predicted that the more involved caregivers and teachers are in a youth’s daily academic life, the higher the academic achievement of that youth. The researcher will compare the amount of hours the participants report spending on academically related tasks with the youth under their care with the grades the youth achieve at the end of the semester.

1.3 Site of Study

The study was conducted in two different locations. The in-depth interview with the caregivers from a community based group home agency was held at their main office in Mission Hills, Ca. The in-depth interviews with the teachers who work in affiliated high schools (Los Angeles County, Charter, and Non-public) of youth placed within that agency was conducted on their campus. An appointment was made prior to meeting with the

participants in the locations listed above. A private space to conduct the in-depth interviews was coordinated prior to the meeting date at both locations.

2. Methods

IRB approval from California State University, Northridge was received before starting the exploratory study. The community based group home agency is located in the San Fernando Valley and serves male foster youth ages 11–18 years old. A list of all caregivers within that agency and affiliated teachers were provided to the researcher in which each participant was randomly selected. The participants contacted were informed about the study and an appointment was set with each participant who agreed to complete the in-depth interview. At the day of each appointment, the researcher reviewed the adult consent form with participants. During the interview, the participants were able to provide their experience working with this population in regards of academic achievements. With the wide range of experience of grade levels (8th grade to 12th grade), youth of different ethnicity (Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, Asian, and other), background (cultural), trauma (physical, mental, and/or emotional abuse and/or neglect), and mental health conditions (Major Depression Disorder, Adjustment Disorder, Oppositional Defiance Disorder), these caregivers and teachers were able to provide a spectrum of experiences working academically with youth in foster care. Detailed notes were taken during the time of the interview to be later analyzed. Content analysis was utilized to analyze the qualitative study and all documentation were properly disposed (shredded) of at a later time. All participants remained confidential and were labeled as “Caregiver 1–5” or “Teacher 1–5”. The number after their association (caregiver or teacher) was purely based on the order the interviews occurred.

Academic achievement of the youth was determined by the grades (As, Bs, and Cs) they received at the end of the semester. The community based group home agency provided data for each youth in their program which entailed the youth’s grade level and letter grades for the past semester. The researcher then compared the letter grades to the amount of hours participants reported spending with them.

3. Results

This study consisted of 10 participants. $N = 5$ were caregivers from the community based group home agency and the remaining $n = 5$ were teachers from an affiliated high school (Los Angeles County, Charter and Non-Public).

Each participant was interviewed about their idea of academic achievement and whether they felt that youth in foster care have reached their idea of academic achievement. As Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea (2006) reports the disruption of these youth’s placements interfere with stable academic opportunities in which many youth are not able to properly complete classes to acquire the full credit. Many youth in foster care are also not able to successfully complete classes due to the lack of the basic knowledge of the subject or the distraction (problems at placement, drug use, and/or other crises that are occurring emotionally (sense of abandonment from family).

Caregiver 1 reported:

“My idea of academic achievement is graduating high school. These kids come to our placement with barely any credits. One boy came with thirty credits and he was sixteen years old which really surprised me. Many of our clients can’t reach my idea of academic achievement because they have no motivation to do well in school and are consumed with self-medicating with marijuana, alcohol, and/or other drugs to suppress their trauma.”

Caregiver 4 reported:

“Academic achievement for this population is receiving a C or better in the classes they are enrolled in. But because I know the struggles these boys go through on a daily basis here at the group home and the trauma they have experienced up to this point, these small accomplishments academically is success. Unfortunately, most of our clients don’t reach my idea of academic achievement because of those traumas I just mentioned. Many of our youth don’t even stay long because of their behavioral issues and are usually moved out our agency before they’re able to complete the school year or semester.”

Teacher 2 reported:

“My idea of academic achievement is for students to not only successfully complete classes, but to be able to apply what they have learned. I don’t feel that population reaches my idea of achievement because they are usually not able to successfully complete the class or even stay enrolled in this school for a full school year.”

When participants were asked how many hours a day they spend to contribute in the youth’s academic progress, caregivers and teachers reported less than 1 hour a day. Caregivers reported less than 1 hour a day because the tasks they have to complete as staff (monitor all six residents, prepare dinner, clean facility, completing documentation and/or reports, handle crises, transporting youth). Caregivers reported that their clients receive tutoring services through an outside resource at the facility 1x/week individually for 1 hour. They also reported that there are additional staff that can be arranged to come help their clients academically as needed, but most clients refuse services. Teachers reported less than 1 hour a day because class time is usually reserved to teach the material and they are faced with many different challenges and distractions (verbal/ physical aggression, random outbursts, defiance, and disrespect) which decrease the time they can contribute academically. Teachers reported that there are tutoring programs offered before and after school to youth who are not passing their classes, but few youth in group homes participate.

Caregiver 3 reported:

“Unfortunately, I generally don’t have time to provide everyone with the supplemental materials to assist their academic progress like I would love to. There are many barriers when working with six teenage boys with different needs, but there is a tutor that comes to the facility once a week to meet with the boys. Many of the boys refuse the tutoring service and don’t take advantage of services provided to them.”

Caregiver 1 reported:

We have “a school liaison who checks up on attendance, behavior, and grades monthly for all our kids. Then the case managers usually will refer them to resources that can help them academically because I typically don’t have time to dedicate to each kid other than answering quick questions on their homework.”

Teacher 4 reported:

“The time I have to spend with my students are very limited. Most the youth I encounter that are a part of the foster care system are behind academically and become more so distractions in my classroom. You know, sometimes, I spend more time addressing their behavioral issues than contributing to them academically, which I’m not happy about. We do have free tutoring opportunities here before and after school, but even if they attend, they are usually distracted and not fully dedicated.”

When all participants were asked what they thought could be implemented to assure academic achievement for youth in foster care, more than half reported enrolling the youth in resources that can dedicate the appropriate amount of time to help these youth not only catch up academically, but excel, gathering the proper documentations so the credits that the youth did accumulate are accounted for, and connecting the youth with

mentors that attend college for the exposure and motivation.

Caregiver 2 reported:

“Observing the residents with their tutors now once a week, I feel like they need this kind of academic support daily. Only if there was a program that can dedicate more time to these kids academically. I think that would be helpful. They need consistency, but I know funding usually doesn’t allow for that.”

Teacher 5 reported:

“I think it is important for these students to be exposed to different college campuses so they can experience the environment and learn about what college has to offer them directly from the college students. If you ask some of these youth of their idea of college they think you just have to be accepted, but don’t think about the work that they’ll need to put in to succeed.”

Teacher 1 reported:

“It seems like the problem is also that they don’t get all their credits since they constantly change placements and schools and most times in different districts. If they were able to keep better track of the credits they do finish, maybe they wouldn’t feel so discouraged when they find out their graduation date.”

When reviewing data provided by the community based group home agency regarding the last final grades of their clients, many youth were failing 80–100% of the courses they are enrolled in. Only 6 out of the 18 youth had grades above a C, but also had failing grades in other enrolled classes. 10 out of 18 of the youth are currently enrolled in a tutoring services once a week for one hour, but more than half refuse services. The other 8 clients were on a wait list to receive tutoring services. Majority of the youth that are attending the tutoring service still did not pass their classes with a C or better. 4 of the 6 youth that have some passing grades (above C), refuse the tutoring service.

Caregiver 2 reported:

“The residents that are passing even some of their classes with a C or better refuse tutoring services because they think they don’t need it. Many of those youth also have their biological parents or family members involved in their treatment unlike that residents that are failing all their classes.”

Caregiver 4 reported:

“Many of our clients come from trauma and unstable placements since an early age so even with an IEP, they have a difficult time keeping up in their class because they don’t understand what’s going on and since they act out, they end up getting suspended and miss more school. We also have a reward system where the youth can earn money for their grades and that incentive is golden for some of the youth, but others can get discouraged and not care.”

4. Discussion

All ten participants recognized the importance of a consistent person that can individually support youth in foster care academically in order for them to thrive due to the identified barriers. All participants reported that they wish they were able to dedicate more time to each youth to support them academically. Caregivers reported that they were able to see academic improvement when the youth consistently participated in tutoring services for specific subjects. More than half of the participants reported that they see potential of academic achievement despite their barriers if the youth is motivated.

Both caregivers and teachers reported that they have seen youth in foster care reach their idea of academic

achievement, but associated that success with not only the amount of support or time the youth received, but more so to the youth's own idea of academic achievement and their drive. No matter how much time caregivers, teachers, and/or tutors spends to academically support the youth in foster care, the youth themselves also have to be motivated to reach academic achievement in order for them to be truly successful.

4.1 Limitations

The reliability and validity of this study were low because it was an interviewing style method. The qualitative style did not allow the instrument for this study to have high validity because even if the same questions were asked to different people, each person had a different perspective based on their years of experience and personal values. Also, because participants did not have a set of responses to choose from or a specific scale to refer to when answering the in-depth questions, each response had to be interpreted independently. The validity was also affected by the limited sample size. The data gathered were reliable because it was the participant's direct experience with supporting the youth reach academic achievement, but were limited in sharing only what they have experienced.

Another limitation was coding and deciphering the importance of the information gathered during the in-depth interviews accurately and without bias. Due to the study being qualitative and exploratory, there were no prior study or measures that could be retested to check validity. This limited the ability for the researcher to compare and contrast findings and cross reference methodologies and outcomes. Also, due to the study's participants being provided by a community based group home agency, the study's results only reflected the youth's successes and barriers of reaching academic achievement for this agency and does not represent the foster youth population as a whole. Lastly, another limitation was that the caregiver's and teacher's time of experience working with this population as it could have affected their outlook on the academic achievements of the youth.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Future Research

Future research to identify the role of caregivers and teachers in the academic achievement of youth in foster care is needed to identify better ways to academically support youth in foster care. Future studies will need a larger sample size which incorporates a variety of agencies that serve the foster youth population in different counties across the United States of America. More extensive questions will also help to identify specific measures that need to be taken to increase the chances of these youth reaching academic achievement.

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