

Aiding Teachers in Understanding and Reducing Trauma for Children in Foster Care in an Educational Setting

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Abstract: When children are removed from their homes and placed in foster care, their lives are forever changed. Children are not only being separated from their families but from their schools. Many children are already struggling academically without adding the factor of being placed in foster care, due to no fault of your own. If children in foster care lose their sense of safety in their home, the next place children feel safe is at school. What happens if they no longer have that? How can teachers reduce extended trauma in an educational classroom for children in foster care? This article examines this trauma, explains the Foster Connection and Increasing Adoption Act (2008), and describes the role of teachers and school counselors in ensuring a sense of belonging in the school environment.

Keywords: foster care, education, k-12, school setting, teachers, trauma, teacher's aide, school counselors

Introduction

Over 407,000 children are in the foster care system, and of those children, 270,000 are of school age (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). Many of these children face academic challenges even prior to their admission into foster care; however, entering the system increases their risk of academic delay. Children in foster care are part of a vulnerable population of students, due to a higher risk of abuse and neglect. Many have traumatic backgrounds and a history of mental health issues. Children in foster care are also more likely to have behavioral problems. Research identifies a higher risk of dropping out of school and not earning a high school diploma, which increases their likelihood of becoming dependent on public assistance and being involved in, or exposed to, criminal activities (Zetlin et al., 2005). Often, their academic and social emotional needs are not met in the classroom. In addition, they frequently do not receive access to services prior to entering the foster care system (Zetlin et al., 2006).

When children in foster care are placed in a foster home, they often enter a new school system. Over one third of youth in foster care experience five or more school changes contributing to a negative impact on their educational track (Skyles et al., 2007). Placement moves occur for several reasons including running away, physical harm to self or others, suicidal or homicidal intentions, aggression to people inside the home, sexual assault, and

SRATE Journal

A peer-reviewed publication of the
Southeastern Regional Association of Teacher Educators (SRATE)
2023, Volume 32, Issue 1
SRATE.org



defiance (James & Burch, 1999; Finkelhor et al., 2014). Children who struggle with both academics and social interactions prior to entering the system often fall further behind and intensify their inappropriate behavior after entering into a new home and school. Many may think this is an opportunity to start over or turn over a new leaf for the student, however, with children that have suffered trauma this is not the case. According to Scherr (2014), trauma can range from physical or sexual abuse, neglect, loss of family, community, and friends; and with each move comes more trauma.

Due to academic challenges faced by children in foster care, including delayed enrollments, early unenrollment, and incomplete academic records, there is a higher chance of retention and a lower likelihood of appropriate identification for resources, such as special education services (Trout et al., 2008). Furthermore, with the potential for exhibiting behavior problems, students in foster care receive more disciplinary action in school. Many students in foster care are not receiving an equitable education, nor an opportunity for academic success (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). Educational instability for students in foster care is a disservice to them and this article offers suggestions for improvement.

Understanding Trauma

The effect of foster care on a child's psyche can be significant, leading to a higher risk of developmental delays and emotional disturbance. The stages of development, according to Erikson (1982), are: trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus role confusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation, and integrity versus despair. Due to the instability and sometimes abuse in the lives of children in foster care, many critical developmental steps are missed, laying the foundations for uncertainty and unpredictability in their future — domestically, socially, emotionally, and academically. Unfortunately, lacking the solid foundation of stable childhood experiences coupled with exposure to mistreatment, neglect, and abuse can lead to distrust in others (Schofield & Beek, 2005). Once children are removed from their family and environment, they are hesitant to trust others (Greene & Powers, 2007). At the point of entering foster care, children tend to go into survival mode, which leads them to becoming self-reliant in every situation (Kools, 1997; Pan et al., 2017).

According to Hedin (2011), many adolescents placed in foster homes lacked a sense of belonging, even in extended placements. They detach themselves and put up walls for protection (Karen, 1994; Gabrielli et al., 2015). According to Singer et al. (2013), research revealed that many children in foster care did not see their foster parents as part of their inner support system. Although it may be challenging, a teacher becoming that inner support system, by developing trust with children in foster care in their classroom, creates a network of safety and stability in the lives of children who may otherwise lack this basic need (Hollow et al., 2010). When building a rapport of trust with students in foster care, teachers acknowledge that they may have special needs. Anxiety and depression are common symptoms of children in foster care thrust into a new school. These emotional challenges often detract from appropriate interactions with lessons, teachers, and peers. Teachers may be aware of the underlying factors preventing children in foster care from truly connecting academically and emotionally within the classroom; and thereby mindful of how they interact with children in foster care.. Classroom teachers may be able to change the lives of children in foster care by being a supportive mentor and stable authority figure, recognizing

their influence on children with high risk factors. Teachers have the potential to sow the positive seeds that lead to success for the children in foster care during their educational and emotional journey.

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act

In 2008 the Foster Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was adopted, with the goal to improve educational outcomes for children in foster care, requiring each state to address barriers that children face to increase their opportunities for academic success (110th United States Congress, 2008). Under this Act, states were required to develop an educational plan providing children in foster care the equal opportunity for educational security. There are three key points to the Fostering Connections Act that ensures opportunities for success for students in foster care in the education forum: (1) "Placement of a child in foster care accounts for appropriateness of the current educational setting and proximity to the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of placement", (2) "Ensure that the child remains in the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of placement" and (3) "Immediate and appropriate enrollment in a new school if remaining in a home school is not in the best interests of the child, with all education records of the child provided to the school" (110th United States Congress, 2008, p. 12). This legislation supported more educational stability in the hopes of reducing the dropout rate and developing positive change in the lives of children in foster care (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012).

Teacher's Role

The foundation of trust formed between teachers and students allows students to bond, giving them a sense of belonging (Luke & Coyne, 2008). Teachers who provide extra assistance or allow extra time on assignments, without having an IEP, provide valuable support to children in foster care. A few simple steps that teachers can follow to ease the transition to a new school are offered here. The first step in aiding children in foster care transferring to a new school is to organize a meet-and-greet with the student to establish a positive rapport with the student. This may reduce the student's sense of being overwhelmed by their new environment. The second step is to assign a peer "buddy" for a week to assist in making the transition more comfortable. Step three is to conduct a screening to ensure appropriate grade/group placement. If delays are determined, identify any necessary remediations. Even if the student withdraws before the school year ends, these steps become a part of the student's record. Finally, step four, the teacher continues to monitor the student's progress and encourages the student to communicate their needs. Teachers have many classroom responsibilities; therefore, utilizing support from teacher aides in small groups or with individual students may be helpful to students in foster care.

School Counselor's Role

Many school counselors assist teachers by interacting with students that are in foster care. School counselors have knowledge and training with a unique skill set to help children in crisis (Kerr & Cossar, 2014). According to the American School Counselor Association

(ASCA, 2018), school counselors are aware that the children in foster care are among the most vulnerable subgroups and may need specific interventions. School counselors and teachers can collaborate on working with students displaying behavioral issues, emotional issues, or potential crises. To build trust with students, school counselors provide some basic suggestions, such as: being consistent, truthful, transparent, kind, genuine, and responsive (Schofield & Beek, 2005). Counselors can also provide training to colleagues on boundaries, setting limits with students, responding, addressing negative behaviors, creating a secure attachment, recognizing triggers, and demonstrating reflective listening (Kerr & Cossar, 2014). Another way that school counselors can assist teachers is to share knowledge about de-escalating situations with a student. Since school counselors work with a diverse population, they can educate their colleagues on being culturally responsive in providing services for students (Sue & Sue, 2003). Teachers and school counselors are essential to a students' positive outcomes and long-term success.

Conclusion

There are many factors that impact learning. Teachers have a pivotal role in the educational journey of a child, especially students in foster care. Using small but powerful techniques assist vulnerable children in the education system. For students in foster care, ensuring a smooth transition to a new school involves the coordination of the school, the child welfare agency, and the Board of Education. After students enroll, teachers can follow certain steps to help them acclimate to their new environment. Once a schedule or classroom has been identified for the student then the teachers can set a meet-and-greet with the student and the foster parents. Teachers assign a peer "buddy" for the new student for a week or longer depending on the needs of the student. Teachers can then request assessments to determine appropriate placements. Teachers also complete regular check-ins with the student, as well as with the foster parents, with face-to-face meetings, phone calls, or notes home. Collaborating with school counselors for professional development can help expand knowledge and better meet the needs of their students. This knowledge base helps teachers understand the work of a mentor for children in foster care, address negative behaviors, de-escalate situations, and identify potential triggers. Teachers and school counselors can create a positive support system for vulnerable, at-risk children in foster care, thereby making a positive difference in their success.

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