Foster Children: A Hidden Group

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Abstract

This essay discusses a student subgroup hidden within school data. Schools are not always apprised of information regarding students in their population. While subgroups are identified through the current federal legislation, this smaller subgroup within those identified by that legislation cannot be separated out due to issues of confidentiality. Numbers per school may be small;but these children have an impact on student achievement scores. Schools may be unconsciously overlooking the needs of foster children because they do not know them as students with special needs. Foster children havespecial needs; most are not academic but impact academic process. They have been identified as one of the most at-risk populations in the United States and the very laws that are implemented to protect them may actually be raising barriers to the action research and planning process schools use to identify and serve students. Confidentiality issues create barriers for inquiry and identification. This essay offers practical solutions and strategies for administrators and other school personnel involved in instructional planning, data analysis and school improvement. A resiliency model is suggested as a part of creating a balance between the affective and cognitive domains of learning for these students.

Keywords: Foster Children, Circle of Courage, Domains of Learning, accountability movement in education, learning community.

Introduction

The ever constant educational reform efforts in the United States have, of late,been focused on the standards based movement. Since the decade or soprior to the inception of *Goals 2000;*the US government has taken a more active approach to public education. The culminating legislation for that movement was the enactment of *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*. The NCLB Act, reauthorized the ESEA, and incorporated specific principles and strategies for the improvement of America's public schools. The principles and strategies included increased accountability for states, school districts, and schools; greater choice for parents and students, particularly those attending low-performing schools; more flexibility for states and local educational agencies (LEAs) in the use of federal education dollars; and a stronger emphasis on reading, especially for our youngest children (NCLB; www.ed.gov).The purpose of the act was to strengthen accountability for Title I (ESEA) by forcing states to address the effectiveness of schools regarding the achievement of all students within those schools. This action required states to devise systems which centered the attention of education professionals on data driven research and data driven decision making for instructional facilitation, student achievement assessment and expenditure of public funds.

The newly established systems were to be based on challenging standards in reading and mathematics. The law required annual testing of all students grades 3-8 (currently includes grades 9-12) and annual statewide progress benchmarks to ensure that all children in America's public schools reach proficiency within 12 years. Progress benchmarks were to be broken out by subgroups, according to poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency. This disaggregation of data helped schools and districts to unveil hidden areas where small, isolated groups of students were not achieving according to expectation for grade or subject within overall academic processes.However, even as we move toward a new reauthorization of the ESEA via President Obama's *Blue Print for Education,* the needs of children placed in foster care are not likely to be addressed due to confidentiality restraints, lack of meaningful communication with the significant adult persons in their lives, and the ever increasing mobility of these students.

Problem

Public schools are soon to face the end of the 12 year time frame set forth in that legislation. Unfortunately, there are still schools and districts throughout the nation which have 25% or more of their students not reaching proficiency goals.   While there are a number of mitigating factors and theories that impact this lack of achievement and the continuation of achievement gaps between the pre-determined groups, there is still at least one unidentified sub-group hidden within the others. The members of this group are stratified due to their life experiences and are known as foster children. Schools are not always apprised of information regarding students in their population. Even though subgroups are identified through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, this smaller subgroup within those identified through NCLB cannot be separated out due to issues of confidentiality. Numbers per school may be small; but these children have an impact on student achievement scores. Schools may be unconsciously overlooking the needs of foster children because they do not know them as students with special needs.   Foster children have special needs; most are not academic but impact academic process. Until there is a way that schools can identify this group and address the emotional/social issues which literally freeze the learning process, the idea of "no child left behind" may not be an attainable goal in US public education.

Discussion

Who are foster children?

According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, there are almost half a million (463,000) children in Foster Care in the US. There is a median age of 9.8 years and a median length of time spent in foster care of 16 months. Almost half or those children are placed in homes that are not biologically related to them. The gender division is almost equally divided with 53% being male and 47% being female. Ethnically, about 120,000 are Caucasian, followed by 70,000 black children and 55,000 Hispanic children placed in foster care. Other ethnic groups have very low numbers (between 2 and 3 percent of the total statistic (AFCARS Report, 2008). A foster child is defined as a child without parental support and protection, placed with a person or family to be cared for, usually by local welfare services or by court order (www.chna.org, 2010). The foster families often do not have legal guardianship but work as team members to advocate for the child's needs. Foster care is a safety service for children when they are unable to remain safely at home. Children are provided with a substitute or supplemental family life experience through a state regulated health and human services agency. This agency approves or licenses home where foster children are placed for a planned, temporary period of time. The legal or biological parents of these children receive support in working toward reunifying their family or an alternate permanent plan for their child. The primary goal for children in foster care is to return them to their families.As part of a team of professionals, foster parents have the responsibility of helping children and their parents achieve this goal.

School administrators and teachers may encounter several types of foster care as they seek to identify individual student needs: (1) *Emergency Care* - In some cases, a child will be left with no family to care for him, or the child's immediate removal from his current home is necessitated by extreme circumstances; (2) The child in emergency care may be moved to a *Long-termCare*status when efforts to reunify the families of these children deteriorate and the child's safety is in question should they return home;(3) *Traditional Care* is a type of fostering usually for children who have had to be taken from their parents because of neglect or abuse, but it is thought that there is hope that the parents' behavior can be redirected so the family can be reunified; and finally, (4) a more intensive type of foster care called *Therapeutic Care.* Children in therapeutic care (THF) often have a history of medical issues or have been traumatized in some way (www.fosterparenting.com). They may be experiencing post traumatic stress issues and present serious emotional or behavioral manifestations from their experiences. Therapeutic foster care children are in homes where the parents provide medical support, or implement arigorousplan of action to turn these children around.THF children may be delinquent, self-harming, act as bullies, or be abusive to any living being with which they are in contact. They are often very accomplished in the art of self-survival and may be manipulative, defiant of authority and skilled liars and are often quite intelligent. Highly-trained, dedicated, specialist foster parents (THFP) working with state service agency personnel look after these children and provide a therapeutic environment which is part of an overall treatment plan.

This therapeutic caresupplements professional medical care and/or therapy. THFP's will be very experienced and often have already raised biological families. These parents are now professional parents which have undergone extensive education in techniques of dealing with very ill, troubled and/or difficult children and provide continuity of care for THR children (www.fosterparenting.com, 2010).

What does this mean to schools?

Research implies that there is an increased risk for academic failure for foster children. One reason is that, on average, foster children change schools 1-2 times within an academic year (Shaffer, 2008).Foster children often attend schools within the service area where the foster parents live. The children are sometimes enrolled through the front office and moved immediately into the school setting without the attention of administrators, counselors or teachers. This is in large part due to issues of confidentiality and policies guided by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) since most foster children are financially supported by the federal Medicaid programs. Foster parents cannot disclose the issues of the children they are caring for without breaching the HIPAA regulations. This includes medical issues, mental health issues and juvenile delinquency issues. Therefore, school personnel know very little about a child that comes to the school with regard to making an informed decision regarding classroom and academic placement, safety issues and disciplinary boundaries (www.abanet.org, 2010). While FERPA guides the disclosure and presentation of Special Education needs, issues regarding student achievement are often still in question because school personnel do not have the whole picture of a child's background. Schools are literally grasping in the dark in their efforts to bring these children to a place of proficiency.

Many times children from foster care have gaps in their learning because they are transferred from school to school due to changes in foster homes. Often times they may be misplaced or misidentified for special education programs because they are very adept at covering their inadequacies or are so far behind it is impossible to pass achievement assessments and are referred for yet another deficiency model program. On the other hand, schools are responsible for meeting the achievement rates required by NCLB and while foster children are most likely identified by ethnicity, by poverty guidelines and if available by disability, the school is missing important information that could help bring the students to a sustainable level of proficiency expedient for both the child and the school.   This brings all parties to a moral, political, and educational conundrum.

Implications

Unraveling the Conundrum: suggestions for school administrators, counselors and teachers

"A mighty fine mess you've gotten us into this time" was the catch phrase of an early 20th Century comedy team, Laurel and Hardy (www.oldtimemovieclassics). This phrase aptly describes how our good intentions to protect the minority or victimized individuals in our country can be placed at greater risk by our policies and laws. HIPAA, FERPA; seeming barriers to communication between advocates for children with risk factors were designed by lobbyist, government personnel and civil rights advocates to keep organizations from exploiting or ignoring the needs of citizens in crisis (www.abanet.org, 2010). What can educators do? We are bound by law to see that all children meet specified levels of proficiency. We are bound by moral impetus to ensure that these children receive a high quality education so their future is not bleak. We must direct them toward a hopeful end where they are able to see beyond their circumstance, rise out of poverty's grasp and enjoy life in a world where they find love, safety, peace and joy.

We are driven by our own fervency as life-long learners to reach past the shields they raise and show them the joy of learning. We are compelled as the citizenry of a democratic society to redirect their dependency on a welfare system and direct them toward self-fulfillment as productive citizens within the American society. How can we bring all the threads of this tangled, complex situation together to create a tapestry of self actuality for these children?First, let's look at some of the characteristics of foster children, particularly those in therapeutic foster care. Foster children develop survival skills early on andsometimes will not openly exhibit behavior and adjustment problems. However, the majority of children in foster care present the effects of the neglect and abuse which characterized their past life (CDC, 2008).

Whether it be from the physical misuse, grief from separation from family, or the trauma and confusion of several moves; the children are suffering – some quietly, others more profusely.With frequent home changes, foster children must adjust to another school, often with different rules and expectations. Paired with the change in school environment is the social – emotional detachment due to a lack of bonding with friends, teachers and support personnel. This causes the foster child to develop an "I don't care" attitude or to withdraw from participating in the cultural climate of the school. Furthermore, they are often not able to engage in extracurricular activities due to consequences from their previous actions or due to restrictions from their treatment plan. These children may self protect by being aggressive or disruptive and reject others first rather than be rejected yet again. Trust does not come easily and they will try you to see if you mean what you say and if your verbal words of care hold true with your actions. They may lie to please; to present themselves in a better light than the reality of their true life and they may defy authority while hungering for structure and parameters. Academically,foster children may expect failure, so they will not perform at any level in order for their efforts to not be fruitless.

They are often far behind and just do not know where to begin or what the expectations mean. More often, it is simply that they have lived in survival mode so long; they do not have the motivation, the will, or the emotional drive to move out of an ongoing neural downshift (ALI, 2009). They are simply struggling to function at the cognitive level. Education is not a high priority in comparison to the other issues that rule their day to day existence. All in all, these children are the epitome of paradox. With all of the above characteristics, these children pull at your heart strings, they stay in your mind, and the cause great levels of frustration to the educator struggling to break through the barriers set up.Now that we have a picture of these children, what can we do to pull them from the ranks of the "all" category of state assessments or even from the "economically disadvantaged" group? How can we identify them as individuals and address their academic needs in a strategically planned manner?

Relationship with foster parents

The most important thing for a school to do is to develop a positive relationship with the foster parents (Noble, 1997). They are responsible for the care and support of these children. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to call and ask for help from the foster parents. The parents work as part of the treatment team and also have goals for the children. They will welcome the opportunity to work with the school regarding academic achievement, motivation and behavioral issues. Remember, there will be issues of confidentiality that the parents cannot breach, but they will be able to confirm or recommend solutions for any issues you may have. Another advantage to developing a positive ongoing relationship with foster parents is that you will know when this parent comes that the child enrolled is in foster care. Due to knowing your parents, there is no breach of confidentiality, just awareness between the school and the parent that there is a new child with great need and ready for your help.

Normalcy

The development of a sense of normalcy and stability is primary to the concept of educational progress (Riggs and Kroll, 2004). It is imperative that teachers and school staff understand this. Often times a tendency to over nurture, over indulge or make allowances for foster children with regard to rules and expectations for behavior allows them to manipulate the circumstances to their favor. They are pushing limits to see if you will follow the structure they need. This can be done in a kind manner, but the road to academic progress begins by helping these children cross the bridge of system manipulation. Foster children flourish under routine and structure (following some initial power struggles).

School Placement

It may be that you have not been told that the new child in the school is in foster care and the processes and procedure for regular enrollment have already been set in motion. Before long, issues regarding academic achievement or behavioral concerns will begin to arise and with it come the referrals for special education programs. While these programs have been instrumental in helping many children meet goals through an individual education plan (IEP) due to a specified learning disability, take care to make assumptions about the capacity of foster children. As discussed previously, these children may be very intelligent but their focus and concern have been primarily on survival – not academics.

These children often perform below grade level, and may have already purposed within themselves to drop-out of school before graduation even though they have strong intellect that have heretofore been used for survival. Learning to piece day to day events together (i.e. the foster parent showing for meetings, the child having a different phone number or address than the person attending meetings or enrolling the student, signatures or papers to be returned have different names) will help an administrator or teacher realize the child is not with biological parents. We live in such a blended society that teachers or administrators rarely question when children from the same address have different names or are ethnically different.

Follow your instinct and ask questions

Be proactive in partnering with the foster family and the agencies that serve these children (Swartz, 1999). Let them know that the purpose of the school is to serve academic needs, but that entails being part of the support team – which means a need for some primary information. One person from the school team can help guide the actions of a student assistance team if there is knowledge that the child is fostered. This person can be the confidential contact at the school and while there are things he/she may not be able to tell due to confidentiality, the both teams (the foster agency family support team *and* the school assistance team) can be assured that the decisions made for this child are in his/her best interest. This understanding will help administrators and school counselors make academic placement decisions, help if any discipline issues occur and start the child on the road to success.The effective educator understands there must be a balance between the affective domain and the cognitive domains if true learning is to occur (Clark, 2010). By understanding the circumstances the foster child faces, school professionals will be able to nurture the affective domain and help release the hold of the neural downshift that binds the teaching and learning efforts of both teacher and child.

Academic Progress

Schools have a natural instinct, due to the pressures of the accountability climate regarding US public school performance, to ensure that test scores are high and that every child shows progress. This can be achieved with foster children if, as previously discussed, teachers are provided full information about previous academic performance. It is also important to realize that foster children need the security and expertise of the most experienced teachers (Riggs & Kroll, 2004). Beyond the obvious need for a master teacher with regards to content and pedagogy, there is the consideration that these children are very sensitive to insecurity projected by novice teachers and may also be able to manipulate the compassion in younger teachers to their advantage. Foster children need a teacher that can motivate while providing challenge, challenge while providing flexibility and be flexible but maintain structure. Clear and concise directions imbued with sincere praise and constructive feedback is most effective with foster children. The foster children need to understand they are meeting short term goals and being successful. Teachers should use these short term accomplishments to increase not only self esteem, but endurance and independence.

High Expectations

Research projects that foster children are among the most at risk faction of the population for not completing high school, not attending training and becoming totally dependent upon welfare programs for daily subsistence. They are also very likely to need and engage in the services of mental health programs provided by the state (Lips, 2007). Brendto, Brokenleg and Bockern (1990) developed a model for reclaiming at- risk children based on the Native American principles for raising children. This resiliency model helps children "bounce back" from the trauma of their early life. It also helps them develop the skills needed for future success and the realization of their greatest potential.The 'Circle of Courage' model adheres to four elements which they assert will help children at risk be able to overcome the obstacles of trauma and deprivation. The four elements of the Circle of Courage model (www.behavioradvisor.com) are belonging, mastery, generosity, and independence (Brendto, Brokenleg, & Bockern, 1990). All four elements can easily become a vital part of any classroom plan for discipline or engagement.

Belonging

One major aspect missing from a foster child's life is a sense of belonging.Foster children, by the very definition, have been removed from their homes;in essence, lost the only family they have known; and been moved from school to school so they have no lasting friendships on which to rely.

If the naturally developing cliques in a class,having already bonded with one another, understand how to embrace new members in a seamless manner, then this can offset a number of the social problems upfront.

Mastery

Having high expectations for social interaction and respect help teach all students skills which will be beneficial through their lifetime. The concept of mastery speaks not just to proficiency in academics, but to excellence in all areas. When teachers maintain high expectations for all students; including those whose life has not been easy or have had trauma, they are paying them a high compliment. This makes a huge statement of trust for children who have not experienced trust in their previous situations. When presented in the appropriate manner, the children will rise to whatever challenge and often surprise teachers and other adults with their tenacity and exuberance for learning. This comes from a strong desire to please the adults in their new world.

Independence

The idea of independence is paradoxical regarding foster children, especially adolescents. Foster children have often been forced to take on the role of adult in their world and will seemingly reject authority or even try to make adult decisions. They may impost themselves into adult conversations or try to interject their opinions about things that are none of their concern. However, these children, in a small period of time, may become very possessive of the attentions of the same adults they reject. They may often cling to the adults and ask the same question over and over just to vie for time and attention. Helping them to become independent learners through use of constructivist or inquiry based models of learning (Brooks & Brooks, 1993) makes use of the problem solving skills these children previously used for survival purposes. They begin to show leadership as they work in teams and gain a measure of positive self esteem that may have been depleted through life experiences.

Generosity

Generosity is one principle of the modelwhich may seem elusive for foster children; some have been so deprived of even the basic necessities of life that they hoard anything- from pencils to bathroom tissue. These children may seem to panic or display a measure of anxiety over small matters of sharing. Those issues can freeze the attention of a child, holding the learning process at bay until the issue is settled. Since the frustrations and anxieties may not be displayed outright, and teachers have little time to spend or even notice the matter, this is just another piece to the complicated puzzle of student achievement in the foster child population. Developing a climate where students applaud one another's achievement and encourage each other in tasks attempted without regard for failure allows the foster child to become more open. This is a facet of generosity that is often overlooked. Foster children have had to live in a world of competition – for attention, for basic necessities and even with those who are supposed to care for them. Amazingly however, these children often have a large capacity for generosity but circumstances have forced them to suppress that natural tendency. Sometimes they may try to "buy" friendship or that sense of belonging by doing things that do not fit within the normal sphere of social interaction. This may include physical expressions, giving away their belongings, sharing answers on schoolwork and on goes the list. When they belong to a community of learners that choose to master their tasks and work until it is finished, then they are able to generously share their hopes, dreams, possessions, and camaraderie with their peers by appropriate means.

Conclusions

While school faculty and staff may not be apprised of all the facts pertaining to new enrollees in the school setting, if they take care to know the families of the students in the school, they should be able to deduce when foster children become members of the student population. If they seek to educate themselves on the processes and laws regarding foster children in their schools, participate as members of community teams that work as resources for these children and avail themselves and the school of resources offered by community based service agencies, they will become more adept at recognizing and intuitively identifying these children. They will then, without breach of confidentiality, be able to create plans of action for these children on an individual basis. Many school districts require Personal Education Plans (PEP) for any child not meeting proficiency (Stephens, 2010). The plans require parent engagement and provide opportunities for relationship building and setting place structures for the increased academic growth of the new student in the school.

These are wonderful tools for identification of the hidden child in a school.Administrators and teachers will continue to disaggregate data. They will continue to use research based programs to increase student achievement scores. However if educators at all levels will use an intuitive and inferential process along with universal structures such as a PEP, a resiliency model and a constructivist approach to learning,they may not only identify this hidden sub-group in a cluster of pre-determined subgroups, they may break the gridlock that brings the school closer to meeting the NCLB mandate of 100% proficiency for all children.

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