Education liaisons work to improve educational outcomes of foster youth: A mixed methods case study ☆

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ABSTRACT

Education liaisons have been used to address educational barriers of foster youth and improve their educational outcomes. This mixed methods case study tests three propositions related to the educational outcomes of 32 foster youth whose education was supported by four education liaisons. The propositions tested focus on positive changes occurring on measures of school stability, school achievement, and school engagement; relationships existing between variables (e.g., school moves and attendance); and practices engaged in by the education liaisons being consistent with the reduction of risk factors and the increase of educational success of foster youth. Results show that although there was no statistically significant change on measures studied over a three-year period, nevertheless, some of the quantitative results are important (e.g. low rates of yearly school moves, high rates of attendance at traditional versus alternative schools), since they run counter to some research findings. Significant correlations were found between some of the variables (e.g., the number of school moves and attendance rates). Using a priori themes interview data show that the education liaisons built relationships with the youth, provided positive support, and troubleshot educational barriers, among other risk reducing and success building practices. Suggestions for further study are delineated.

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1. Introduction

Youth placed in foster care have exceedingly poor educational outcomes. Studies show that foster youth in general have poorer school grades, lower scores on standardized tests, higher rates of behavior problems and school suspensions, and receive special education services at higher rates than comparison youth (Courtney, Tereo, & Bost, 2004; Cozier & Barth, 2005; Scherr, 2007). Not surprisingly, a high percentage of youth in foster care do not earn a high school diploma or general education equivalency (GED) diploma before exiting the foster care system (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005), and by the time they reach 21 still have not attained either diploma (Courtney et al., 2007).

The reasons for placement in foster care – abuse or neglect and out-of-home placement – are risk factors that alone have been shown to be associated with poor educational performance (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2013). High numbers of youth in foster care also experience other risk factors such as multiple home and school placement changes (Courtney et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2005; Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, &

Courtney, 2004) and high rates of disabilities, including emotional and behavioral disorders (Burns et al., 2004; Webb et al., 2007; Zima et al., 2000). Pecora (2012) provides data that indicate that home instability and school instability, which often lead to school enrollment problems and grade retention, partially explain the poor educational performance of youth in foster care.

Once children who have been abused or neglected enter the foster care system, they frequently experience systemic barriers that further interfere with their progress in school (Leone & Weinberg, 2012). These include a lack of interagency coordination and collaboration among the agencies that serve them (such as school districts, child protective services (CPS), foster family agencies), inappropriate school services, and no single person with enough knowledge about the children to effectively advocate on their behalf related to their educational and other needs.

The literature on resiliency in foster youth indicates that two major factors for educational success are educational stability in high school and a challenging school curriculum (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). In relation to stability, Pecora's (2012) analysis shows that home placement stability has one of the highest positive effects for youth in foster care finishing high school before leaving care. Another important factor for this population is having a supportive adult in the youth's life that intervenes or provides advocacy at crucial times. Research has also found it to be vital for all agencies that serve these youth

to work together to ensure that their needs are comprehensively addressed (Altschuler, 2003). These agencies, however, typically operate separately, even though their actions affect the same children.

Educational liaisons have been used by some jurisdictions to bridge the gap between agencies (i.e., school districts, child protection services, etc.) and to provide the ongoing support and advocacy that these youth need (Weinberg, Zetlin, & Shea, 2004). They troubleshoot education barriers and seek to improve the education outcomes of children and youth in foster care (Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc., 2012). Over the last ten years, education liaison programs have been implemented in a number of states (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2013). The strategies they use may vary but most feature cross-agency policies and procedures for addressing the educational functioning of foster youth.

This paper describes the educational outcomes of a cohort of foster youth over a three-year period. It also describes the strategies used by education liaisons to support and provide advocacy to them in order to improve their educational outcomes.

2. Method

2.1. Theoretical propositions

The recommended method of studying a case is to test theoretical propositions upon which it is based (Yin, 2003). The propositions tested by this mixed methods case study are the following: (1) Positive changes will occur in the educational outcomes of a cohort of foster youth who are supported by education liaisons on measures of school stability, school achievement, and school engagement over a three-year period. (2) Relationships will be found between variables (e.g., school moves and attendance). (3) Practices engaged in by the education liaisons to increase school stability, achievement, and engagement will be consistent with the reduction of risk factors and the increase of educational success of foster youth.

2.2. Research design

This study uses a single case study research design, employing quantitative and qualitative data from one county in California, to test the theoretical propositions described above. This case study may be considered a critical case (Yin, 2003) since it is being used to test propositions related to a theoretical perspective regarding the effectiveness of education liaisons for improving education outcomes of foster youth. The case study took place over a three-year period, from the 2008–09 to 2010–11 school years.

2.3. Data sources

The data for this study were collected as part of Ready to Succeed: Improving Education for Children and Youth in Foster Care, a multi-component initiative by the Stuart Foundation designed to improve education outcomes for California's foster children and youth. Quantitative data used in this study are extant data that were collected by four education liaisons that work in one of the 58 county offices of education (COE) in the state. The data on each youth came from school district records and were input into a secure COE database. One of the program specialists who supervised the education liaisons removed the names and ethnicity of the youth to protect their confidentiality and provided the data to the researchers with an assigned number for each youth.

Qualitative data were obtained from interviews of personnel from the COE and local school districts, CPS, the county mental health agency, caregivers of foster children, and an attorney from an agency that represents foster children. Qualitative data were also extracted from documents provided by the COE project specialist or program administrator.

2.4. Sample, participant, and document selection

2.4.1. Quantitative data

The quantitative data used in this case study were from the records of a cohort of 32 foster youth that were collected for the 2008–09, 2009–10, and 2010–11 school years. Twelve (37.5%) of the youth received special education services each year. These 32 youth were selected from a larger cohort of foster youth served by the education liaisons because they were consistently served over the three-year period. Foster youth in 7th or 8th grade from ten school districts in the county and the COE were selected each year to receive service by the education liaisons. Table 1 shows the grade levels of the 32 youth across the three years.

One hundred and two foster youth were in the larger cohort in 2008–09, 74 in 2009–10, and 81 in 2010–11. The data of the 32 youth are not intended to be a representative sample of the larger population of foster youth served by the education liaisons. Rather, the records of these youth provide consistent data over a three-year period allowing for a test of the theoretical propositions being studied.

2.4.2. Qualitative data

The qualitative data used purposive sampling — selecting study participants to interview who could provide information in detail on the implementation of the project and the work of the education liaisons. Interviews were conducted twice a year, from January 2009 to May 2011. In total, 25 individuals were interviewed with some interviewed multiple times over the three years. See Table 2 for roles and number of participants interviewed.

The interviews varied in length from 20 minutes to close to an hour. Most interviews were recorded and transcribed. Where recordings did not occur, note takers took detailed notes. Documents described in interviews were collected subsequent to the interviews.

Documents reviewed included minutes of interagency countywide meetings, slide presentations of trainings by the project specialists to other agencies, memorandum of understanding between the CPS and Regional Center (an agency that provides or procures services for individuals with developmental disability), lists of other education liaisons from school districts, project evaluations of the education liaison program for funding agencies, a booklet describing the database that stored foster youth education data, mini-lesson pamphlets used by education liaisons with the youth, and program intake forms.

2.5. Measures

Data on all the youth served, including the 32 served consistently, were collected for school stability, academic performance, and school engagement variables. See Table 3 for a list of the variables in each category.

Table 1
Grade level of foster youth sample.

Grade level	Frequency	Percent
Grade level 2008–2009		
7	12	37.5
8	13	40.6
9	7	21.9
Grade level 2009–2010		
8	13	40.6
9	12	37.5
10	7	21.9
Grade level 2010–2011		
9	13	40.6
10	12	37.5
11	7	21.9