



Frequent moving has a negative affect on the school achievement of foster children makes the case for reform

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ABSTRACT

This study will investigate how the frequent school and home mobility of foster children affects their overall academic achievement in school. It will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How is School Achievement affected by the Mobility of Foster Children?
2. What can society, as well as state and federal governments do to establish long-term consistent care that will ensure long-term success and achievement of all foster care children?
3. What can school and welfare agencies do to help improve the academic achievement of foster care children? Foster children are subjected to many obstacles during their education in public schools. Most of these children move from school to school because they frequently change foster homes. Since improved academic achievement in school is important to all foster children, this study examines the dilemma of the foster care child in the classroom. Furthermore, this study examines the academic performance of children in foster care and describes what the research believes can be done to solve this problem and improve the chances for the foster child's academic success.

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1. Introduction

Tom is a fifteen year old foster child. He is currently placed in a ninth grade self-contained class in a highly regarded suburban Middle School on Long Island, New York. From his first day at the school, Tom has been experiencing great success in his class and in his social relationships with his classmates. Tom is classified for special education services because of his learning disabilities. What makes this current placement successful since Tom has a complicated history of assorted school and home placement in his past?

Consider that Tom was placed in foster care at the age of three and his current placement at the high school is the sixth school that he has attended since first starting kindergarten at the age of five. Tom was placed in foster care because his mother and father abandoned him. Since entering the foster care system he has lived in seven different foster homes.

Tom was identified as a special education student at the end of first grade. When he began second grade Tom was placed in a self-contained classroom at a regional Special Education School run by the Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES). The district Committee on Special Education at that time believed that he was in need of individual academic assistance and that his emotional/social needs could be better met in a class with a smaller class size.

In the middle of sixth grade Tom moved to his fourth foster home and to his third school placement in a different BOCES self-contained class placement. He encountered difficulty adjusting to the new school and foster home. The difficulties began when he was registered in school by his foster parents. They were told by the school district that Tom's records were incomplete and that he could not start school until the school district received all his official records. With the assistance of a conscientious caseworker's help, Tom was finally enrolled in school after waiting about one month at home.

Within the first two months of this placement, Tom began to experience frustration in school and at home. He had no friends and he felt different from the other kids. At home he began to exhibit daily acting out behavior, and the foster care parents told Tom's caseworker that they could not care for his needs. In this home placement, Tom was living with two other children that were also under foster care.

By the end of sixth grade, Tom had an emotional breakdown and he was hospitalized in a children's psychiatric center. He was under psychiatric care for two months and when he was discharged from the hospital Tom was placed in Residential Treatment Center pending a placement in a new foster home. This was his fourth school placement and he stayed at the Residential School for three months.

In seventh and eighth grades Tom was in his current foster home and in a Middle School BOCES program. He was placed in a self-contained classroom and participated in school sports and clubs. During the two year period, Tom had experienced great success in school and was recognized by the school as an outstanding student. By

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the end of eighth grade his foster parents and caseworker asked the school district if Tom could be placed in a self-contained classroom at the district's High School.

At an annual review meeting of the district's Committee of Special Education it was decided that because Tom had never attended a regular public school program and he should stay at the BOCES High School Program for one more year to see if he can demonstrate continued progress with high school subjects. The school district also agreed that he would be mainstreamed at the local public high school if he could demonstrate good grades in his BOCES Program.

Tom continued in the BOCES program, his sixth school placement, for an entire school year. At his annual review meeting, the school district was again reluctant to follow through on placing him at the local public high school. There was expressed fear that Tom might feel lost at the high school because it has about 1100 students. There was also concern that Tom had never been placed in a public school before and what would he do if he failed a subject? By the end of the meeting it was agreed that Tom would attend a self-contained classroom at the public high school. Tom also received individual counseling three times per week from the school's Social Worker.

During his first year in the public high school Tom has been a major success. He has been mainstreamed for some regular academic classes including physical education. Tom has been greeted warmly by the school's administrators, teachers and other students. The school has also welcomed the participation of Tom's caseworker in planning his academic program.

Although success is finally being achieved in school, there are problems in the foster home, and Tom again faces the potential of moving to another home. If this does happen, it will mean that Tom will have to move to another High School for tenth grade. Because of Tom's high mobility rate, he experienced a fragmented educational program. His reading skills are equivalent to those of a fifth grade student, and his math ability is equal to the average sixth grader. He has learned to compensate for her reading deficiencies in the content subjects by using her listening skills. He now also receives additional help from a speech therapist, reading specialist and from his special education teacher. The act of reading and writing for Tom, however, is often very frustrating, and it prevents him from experiencing success in her other academic classes.

Tom's case is the exception and not the rule. He has made progress in school because people have cared and communicated his needs. Most foster care children are not like Tom and they move so frequently that progress is never made. Since improved academic achievement in school is important to all foster children, this study examines the dilemma of the foster care child in the classroom and it asks the question "How is School Achievement affected by the Mobility of Foster Children?" Furthermore, this study examines the academic performance of children in foster care and describes what the research believes can be done to solve this problem and improve the chances for the foster child's academic success. It also asks and answers the question, "What can society, as well as state and federal governments do to establish long-term consistent care that will ensure long-term success and achievement of all foster care children?"

As Educational Advocates, teachers and administrators for foster children for many years, we have observed that many foster care children are not unlike Tom. They are subjected to many obstacles during their education in public schools. Most of these children move from school to school because they frequently change foster homes.

When they arrive in a new community, they are greeted by their new school with delays in registration, inappropriate classroom placement and, if they are in need of Special Education or Remedial services, there will be a significant delay in the implementation of these services. These blocks to the education of the foster child are compounded if the school staff has a negative perception about the child because of his/her previous academic and social history (Vacca, 2004).

2. How is School Achievement affected by the Mobility of Foster Children?

Children in foster care are often defined by their frequency of moves from one school district to another. These moves leave foster child with severe educational needs and the lack of a consistent educational advocate in their lives. Changes in home placement often necessitate changes in schools, and the foster child must adjust to new expectations and curricula, new friends and teachers, and new school settings. School staff are frequently unaware that a child is in foster care or unaware of the educational implications of foster care placement (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004)

According to Vacca (2004) the research shows that improved educational achievement is a major problem for foster children in school. For foster children academic achievement it is also critical to a successful transition to a new school setting when they are forced to move to a new foster home. Children in foster care are faced with instruction that is often interrupted by frequent moves to different communities and schools, living in different foster homes with new families where academic are not a priority, a lack of parent support with the school, and a few opportunities to have consistent peer groups for interaction and socialization. Foster children, moreover, generally lack positive relationships with school administrators, support staff, teachers and classmates.

A study by the Gillespie (1999) concluded that since the 1980's between 16 and 20% of the population changed residence in the United States. The study looked at the following four major areas:

- Who is most likely to move?
- The research done on mobility and its impact upon children and school functioning.
- An attempt to differentiate between the types of student mobility naming "movers," "changers," and "leavers."
- The effect of mobility on student achievement for children in school.

The authors concluded that the individuals who have highest rates of residential mobility tend to be families who are low-income, urban or rural poor, renters, non-married (divorced or never married), and prone to make multiple moves in one year. They further suggested that students who are highly mobile are more likely to experience academic, social, emotional problems than students who have low rates of mobility. Finally, the authors maintained that the effect of mobility on student achievement for children in elementary years appears to be negative. For those who are more economically disadvantaged and who had more social stressors (poverty, racism, and abuse) frequent mobility is often a major problem. The study did maintain, however, that the transition time between moving and adjusting is extremely important and that if that transition period is not carefully conceived, any child who changes schools at any time in their education can experience extremely negative educational effects.

The success of foster children in reading and in all other areas of academic achievement is generally affected by their frequent school and home mobility and a breakdown in communication and coordination among key people and agencies responsible for their education (Vacca, 2007). In addition, these children frequently do not have a consistent and knowledgeable advocate who can act on their behalf for special education and remedial reading services. The foster parents who are typically the most familiar with the needs of the children are unprepared to negotiate services under both the Special Education and Section 504 systems. Finally, frequent placement changes disrupt the authority of foster parents to represent children's educational interests.

Schubert (2001) suggests that the breaks in school enrollment happen because the foster care system is concerned with the child's safety first and foremost and that educational needs can end up taking

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