The voices of youth formerly in foster care: Perspectives on educational attainment gaps

CrossMark

Elysia V. Clemens*, Heather M. Helm, Kristin Myers, Christina Thomas, Matt Tis

University of Northern Colorado, 501 20th St., Greeley, CO 80639, United States

ABSTRACT

As a population, youth who experience foster care graduate from high school at rates well below their non-foster care peers (National Working Group for Foster Care & Education, 2014). A Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) study was conducted to better understand the perspective of former foster youth on the graduation gap and their experience in school. Analysis of focus group data revealed one overarching domain, *emotional consequences*, as well as seven additional domains that related to youths' experiences surrounding their educational attainment: resilience, basic needs, internalized messages about education, educational stability, consequences of school mobility, fastest or easiest positive exit from K-12, and recommendations from youth. This research highlights the challenges faced by 16 former foster youth, their perspectives regarding the need to raise expectations, and their suggestions for closing the educational attainment gap.

1. Introduction

Middle- and high-school students in foster care, as a population, are failing to meet grade-level academic standards or attain high school credentials at rates comparable to their non-foster care peers (e.g., Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2014; U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The large gaps in academic achievement and educational attainment between students in foster care and their non-foster care peers have been amply demonstrated by linking state-wide child welfare and education data (e.g., Barratt & Berliner, 2013; Burley, 2013; Clemens & Tis, 2016; Colorado Department of Education, 2016; Texas Education Agency, 2013). Researchers have offered possible explanations for the gaps in achievement and attainment based on correlational studies, which have established connections among factors such as trauma history, residential mobility, school mobility, and poor educational outcomes (Chambers & Palmer, 2010; Clemens, Lalonde, & Sheesley, 2016; Reynolds, Chen, & Herbers, 2009; Romano, Babchishin, Marquis, & Fréchette, 2015). Advocates suggest that for students in foster care, the trauma and mobility factors are exacerbated by a lack of communication and alignment between the child welfare and education systems (e.g., Annie E. Casey, 2014).

Foster care students' relatively low academic achievement and educational attainment is a complex problem of practice, and as such, the solution likely requires dramatic systemic change. Specifically, both education and child welfare systems need to not only change internally, but also become better aligned with one another. Increasingly, partnerships between local child welfare and educational agencies are attempting to improve alignment and systematically address the educational needs of youth in foster care. Agencies in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Allegheny County, Pennsylvania have shown that such innovative collaborations can be successful (American Bar Association, 2015; Public Broadcasting Service, 2016). In these counties, educational and child welfare information is shared in real time, informing educator, child welfare, and liaison staff's efforts to ensure that the educational needs of youth in foster care are being met. Substantial gains have been made in graduation rates for students in foster care through these child welfare and education agency partnerships (American Bar Association, 2015; Public Broadcasting Service, 2016). However, though such local partnerships are growing in popularity, they are not yet the standard practice for most youth in foster care. In most geographic areas, schools do not even have records of which students are in foster care, much less best practices for supporting these students (Annie E. Casey, 2014; Smithgall, Jarpe-Ratner, & Walker, 2010).

In the face of this complex problem of practice, researchers, policymakers, and thought leaders have limited access to rigorous thematic analysis of youth's experiences as students in the foster care system (Levy et al., 2014). Even less information is available on youth's own recommendations for improving their educational experiences and supporting their progress toward a high school diploma. According to Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, and Fogarty (2012), allowing youth who are direct recipients of publicly funded services, such as

---

foster care, to actively participate in creating change will ultimately benefit the youth and the community. Indeed, there is a long history of the federal government seeking the perspective of special populations to aid in decision-making. For example, many state and local governments have specifically established youth councils to provide youth's perspectives regarding the development of legislation and the funding of youth programs (Forum for Youth Investment, 2010; Harper, 2016). In the case of foster care students' educational experiences, the value of listening to the youth's perspectives is to provide educators, child welfare staff, and policy-makers with commonsense and experience-based recommendations that are not clouded by administrative barriers to service delivery.

In this study, the researchers invited youth who had experienced foster care during middle school or high school to review educational data points from their state, share their experiences relative to that data, and offer recommendations for closing the foster care high school graduation gap. Researchers used a Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) method to identify themes in youth's experience that may offer insight into how to support student progress toward earning a high school credential. Through this approach, the human experience contextualizes and augments the quantitative data, such as low high school graduation and high school mobility rates. The resulting recommendations are grounded in the youth's experiences.

2. Problem of practice: disparate educational outcomes for secondary students in foster care

Students in foster care across the country are graduating at rates well below their non-foster care peers. The Legal Center for Foster Care and Education (2014) estimated that only half of the students in foster care earn a high school credential by age eighteen, and some statewide studies suggest that rates may be even lower. In Colorado, fewer than one in three students who experience foster care during high school graduate with their class (Clemens, 2014; Colorado Department of Education, 2016). Studies in Washington State suggest that graduation rates for students in foster care are between 35 and 55% (Burley, 2010, 2013). These foster care graduation rates reported by researchers and state agencies are all well below the national graduation rate of 82%, which describes the percentage of all students who earn a high school diploma within four years of initially entering ninth grade (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

The failure of secondary students to make progress toward earning a high school credential is illustrated annually by dropout rates, which is the percentage of students in foster care who stop attending school each year. Students in foster care drop out at 2.5 to 4 times higher rates than their peers (Barratt & Berliner, 2013; Colorado Department of Education, 2017; Texas Education Agency, 2013), and dropout events are dispersed throughout the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades (Barratt & Berliner, 2013; Clemens, 2014). Students who experience foster care tend to drop out earlier in their high school careers than their non-foster care peers (Colorado Department of Education, 2016).

Proportionally, more students who have experienced foster care earn an equivalency diploma (e.g. GED) than their non-foster care peers (Clemens, 2014; Parra & Martinez, 2015; U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016; Wolanin, 2005). The more frequently students in foster care change high schools, the more likely they are to earn an equivalency diploma compared to graduating (Clemens et al., 2016). The disproportionately high rates of equivalency degrees for students in foster care suggests a problem of practice because research indicates these degrees are not equivalent in terms of labor market or employment outcomes. For example, findings from the Midwest study of former foster youth revealed that employment rates and earnings are higher for young people who graduated from high school than those who earned equivalency diplomas (Okpych & Courtney, 2014). The disproportional rates at which youth who experienced foster care earn a diploma suggest there might be

systemic reasons why individuals in this population are experiencing this outcome.

2.1. Reasons for disparate outcomes: trauma and mobility

Research indicates that students in foster care face particular challenges that may account for their disparate educational outcomes. Specifically, when compared to their peers, they are disproportionately affected by trauma and school mobility (Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2014). The practical challenges associated with students' experiences of trauma and mobility can be exacerbated by a lack of coordination, communication, and alignment between the child welfare and education systems (Annie E. Casey, 2014).

2.1.1. Trauma

Students who experience trauma may present in the classroom as disengaged in school or not focused on learning (Cole et al., 2005; Widom, 2013). A study of school adjustment found that maltreated foster children showed lower social-emotional competence, including lower emotional regulation and inhibitory control, than their non-maltreated peers (Pears, Fisher, Bruce, Kim, & Yoerger, 2010). Salazar and colleagues found that transition-age foster youth are approximately twice as likely as their peers in the general population to have met criteria for PTSD at some point in their lifetime, suggesting not just the presence of trauma, but the significance of that trauma's impact (Salazar, Keller, Gowen, & Courtney, 2013).

Youth often enter foster care having experienced recurrent trauma in early childhood at the hands of trusted adults, resulting in complex trauma (Greeson et al., 2011). It is no wonder that maltreated youth may struggle in school since, as Buckley, Lotty, and Meldon (2016) put it, "children who experience on-going trauma over time … are too busy surviving" (p. 36). Complex trauma impairs maltreated youth across multiple domains, including attachment, biology, cognition, and self-concept, in addition to the other domains mentioned above (Cook et al., 2005). Removal from the home and other placement changes are additional traumatic experiences, compounding the problem (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015).

A history of trauma and the resulting deficits often result in maltreated youth meeting the diagnostic criteria for ADHD, conduct disorder, communication disorders, and attachment related disorders (Cook et al., 2005), all of which can present obvious challenges to a student's educational engagement. Further complicating the difficulties posed by foster students' trauma backgrounds are the triggers they are likely to encounter at school. Reminders of their trauma can come unexpectedly from seemingly benign sources, such as a particular word, smell, or topic covered in class; these triggers can catch students off-guard and impact their learning (West, Day, Somers, & Baroni, 2014).

Despite the unique needs presented by students who have experienced trauma, educators may be unaware of these students' need for trauma-informed educational approaches because there may be a lack of systematic coordination and perceived issues of confidentiality (Williamson, 2013). Educators' lack of awareness about trauma-informed approaches can further compound the trauma's impacts on educational outcomes. Training can help educators understand trauma, reduce potential triggers, and create safe environments for students who have experienced trauma (West et al., 2014).

2.1.2. School mobility

Students who experience foster care during high school typically change schools three or more times (Clemens et al., 2016). These frequent changes pose unique challenges. For example, when students change schools, they may be subject to different graduation requirements or lose course credit due to incomplete or delayed transfer of school records (McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2002; Levy et al., 2014; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004). In addition, students who change schools during the academic year may miss