The Educational Experiences of Foster Youth: The Current State of Knowledge and Directions for Future Research

By Amy Proger

There is ample evidence that foster youth fare exceptionally poorly in school. This article describes the current state of knowledge on the educational experiences of foster youth, examining research that focuses on five outcomes: academic achievement, special education, grade retention, behavior problems and disciplinary incidents, and educational attainment. This article discusses what is known about the pathways that lead to each outcome. It concludes by suggesting both substantive and methodological directions for future research into the educational experiences of foster youth.

Prior to the 1970s, the literature on abuse, neglect, and foster placement typically centered on the medical consequences of maltreatment. In the 1970s, researchers began to explore the effects of maltreatment on psychosocial development. This article explores one effect of maltreatment, the effect of maltreatment on education. In 1974, Rebecca Canning first documented the educational difficulties experienced by foster youth. Through her interviews with foster youth and their teachers, she found that the youth were often overage for their grade level, had poor attendance records, were inadequately prepared to engage in classroom activities, and had significant behavior problems. Canning's 1974 study opened the door to more rigorous research into the educational problems experienced by foster youth.

A study by P. David Kurtz and associates (1993) aptly observes that the impact of maltreatment does not stop at the school door. In recognition of this reality, research documenting foster youths' educational experiences has expanded rapidly. Ample evidence indicates that foster youth fare exceptionally poorly in school (Canning, 1974; Goerge and van Voorhis, 1992; Eckenrode,

Laird, and Doris, 1993; Kurtz et al., 1993; Sawyer and Dubowitz, 1994; Buehler et al., 2000; Newton, Litrownik, and Landsverk, 2000; Burley and Halpern, 2001; Courtney et al., 2001; Kortenkamp and Ehrle, 2002; Lansford et al., 2002; McMillen et al., 2003; Shin, 2003; Zetlin, Weinberg, and Kimm, 2003; Courtney, Roderick et al., 2004; Courtney, Terao, and Bost, 2004; Smithgall et al., 2004; Zetlin, Weinberg, and Luderer, 2004; Courtney et al., 2005; Smithgall et al., 2005). The following literature review describes the current state of knowledge on these youths' educational experiences and suggests directions for future research.

THE CURRENT STATE OF KNOWLEDGE ON THE
EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER YOUTH

The literature on the educational experiences of foster youth examines multiple educational outcomes. This article summarizes research in five domains: academic achievement, special education status, grade retention, behavior problems and disciplinary incidents, and educational attainment. The article pays particular attention to the pathways from foster care placement to each outcome. Although the outcomes are presented separately, they have complex relationships with each other, and some outcomes can serve as pathways to other outcomes. Such relationships are documented elsewhere in education literature and not discussed here, but the educational outcomes are presented in roughly the order in which they occur during a youth's life course. Educational attainment is presented last, as it can be considered a culmination of each of the other outcomes; academic achievement, special education status, grade retention, and behavior problems and disciplinary incidents all predict eventual educational attainment (Grissom and Shepard, 1989; Ensminger and Slusarcick, 1992; Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 1995; Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani, 2001; Allensworth, 2004).

Academic Achievement

Several researchers use standardized test scores to examine the academic achievement of foster youth. They consistently find that foster youth have poorer reading and math achievement than do their peers who are not in foster care. Standardized test score data from several states reveal that the two groups are separated by wide gaps in achievement (Eckenrode, Laird, and Doris, 1993; Burley and Halpern, 2001; Smithgall et al., 2004). In addition, analyses of reading levels reveal that very few foster care youth read at grade level and many read several years below grade level (Courtney et al., 2001; Shin, 2003; Courtney, Terao, and Bost, 2004).

Part but not all of this gap in academic achievement can be explained by demographic (Eckenrode et al., 1993) and school (Smithgall et al., 2004) characteristics. In addition, aspects of foster care placement may explain some portion of the gap. Richard Sawyer and Howard Dubowitz (1994) find that youth who are placed in foster care between the ages of 18 months and 5 years, or who live in foster homes with more than five children, are most at risk for poor academic achievement. Sonny Shin (2003) determined that placement in relative foster care is an important predictor of reading ability, but he acknowledges that youth with the fewest difficulties are the most likely to be placed in relative foster care.

Special Education

Foster youth are more likely than similarly aged children in the general population to be placed in special education, and in particular, to be classified as emotionally disturbed (ED; Goerge and van Voorhis, 1992; Smithgall et al., 2005). In Chicago, the rates of youth who were classified as ED but who were not victims of substantiated abuse remained stable between 1995 and 2004 (at about 1.5 percent); by contrast, the percentage of foster youth who had an ED classification increased rapidly (from 6.3 to 17.3 percent; Smithgall et al., 2005). Cheryl Smithgall and associates (2005) attribute this trend to the fact that foster youth with an ED classification are much less likely to transition to permanent homes; over time, these youth comprise a growing proportion of the foster care population. Further, the authors' interviews with caseworkers reveal that caseworkers often refer youth for special education evaluations out of frustration or because they do not know how else to help. This misclassification is particularly troublesome because the classification is seldom removed (Smithgall et al., 2005).

Grade Retention

There is evidence that foster youth repeat grades at higher rates than do youth who are not in foster care. John Eckenrode and colleagues (1993) find that maltreated youth are 2.5 times more likely to repeat a grade than are nonmaltreated youth. The finding persists even after Eckenrode and colleagues (1993) control for public assistance status, age, and gender. Controlling for demographic characteristics and school characteristics, Smithgall and associates (2004) find that foster youth in Chicago are 1.8 times as likely as other students to be overage for grade (i.e., older than one's same-grade peers). They are 1.2 times as likely as other students to have been retained (i.e., held back). Frequent

changes in foster placement provide another possible explanation for high rates of retention among foster youth; frequent changes in foster placement are typically accompanied by frequent changes in school placement. As children change schools, their academic and social development can be adversely affected. Adverse effects are particularly pronounced if children change schools during the school year, because changing schools disrupts educational instruction and social relationships (Courtney, Roderick et al., 2004). Thus, multiple placement changes are associated with grade retention and with being overage for grade. They are also associated with an array of emotional and behavioral difficulties. Many foster parents have trouble managing such difficulties and often give up, asking that the child be moved to a new home (Newton et al., 2000). These same emotional and behavioral difficulties are associated with additional negative outcomes (described below) for foster youth.

Behavior Problems and Disciplinary Incidents

Behavior problems among foster youth often begin early and escalate in a dynamic process as youth progress through school. Eckenrode and associates (1993) suggest that educational difficulties represent a continuation of disadvantage for maltreated children, who exhibit early developmental difficulties, such as insecure attachment to their mothers. Indeed, many youth enter foster care with behavioral difficulties that stem from child characteristics associated with maltreatment (e.g., difficult temperament). Maltreatment and aspects of foster care placement may contribute to additional behavioral difficulties. For instance, foster youth with behavior problems are more likely to experience placement disruptions than foster youth without behavior problems, but placement disruptions strongly predict increased behavior problems (Newton et al., 2000). In addition, length of time in foster care is significantly related to behavior problems. Bonnie Zima and associates (2000) find that each additional year in foster care corresponds to a 118 percent increase in the likelihood of being suspended (Zima et al., 2000).

Other correlates of foster care placement may contribute to behavioral difficulties. Smithgall and associates (2005) document the high rate of ED classification among foster youth. They contend that the rate is only partially explained by behavioral disorders. Regardless of whether they are in foster care, students who are classified as ED are the most likely to violate the disciplinary code. Thus, ED classification may have important ramifications for foster youth (Smithgall et al., 2005). In addition, socioeconomic risk and family structure may explain behavioral problems to some extent. Katherine Kortenkamp

and Jennifer Erhle (2002) find that foster youth are significantly more likely to be suspended or expelled form school than are youth who are not in foster care. They also observe, however, that foster youth are only marginally more likely to be suspended or expelled than are youth in socioeconomically disadvantaged, single-parent homes. This may be because many foster youth come from socioeconomically disadvantaged, single-parent homes (Coulton et al., 1995; Ernst, 2000), and given the child welfare system's reliance on kinship foster placements, many foster youth may also be placed in socioeconomically disadvantaged foster homes headed by single parents.

Finally, behavior problems tend to compound; in foster care, a single behavior problem can lead to additional problems. For example, Zima and associates (2000) find that 14 percent of a sample of foster youth were suspended from school at least once, but 55 percent of those who had been suspended were suspended two or more times. Jennifer Lansford and colleagues (2002) examine the number of adjustment problems experienced by adolescents. Problems include: aggression (if observed at clinical levels), anxiety or depression (if observed at clinical levels), school suspension, trouble with the police, pregnancy or impregnating someone, running away from home, and gang membership. Lansford and associates (2002) find that 74 percent of adolescents who reported that they were maltreated also reported at least one adjustment problem. By contrast, at least one adjustment problem was reported by 43 percent of adolescents who never reported maltreatment. In addition, 21 percent of maltreated adolescents reported experiencing three or more adjustment problems; three or more adjustment problems were reported by only 7 percent of adolescents never reported maltreatment (Lansford et al., 2002).

Educational Attainment

In tandem with the dramatic rise in educational aspirations over the past several decades, foster youth have expressed a strong desire to attend college (Courtney et al., 2001; McMillen et al., 2003; Courtney, Terao, and Bost, 2004). Yet, many foster youth do not complete high school education, and few of those who do go on to earn a postsecondary degree. Both the 2005 study by Mark Courtney and colleagues and another 2001 work by Courtney and associates estimate that only about 33 percent of foster youth earn a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma (GED). These low rates are partly due to higher than average dropout and incarceration among foster youth (Smithgall et al., 2004).

In light of the many educational difficulties faced by foster youth, it is no wonder that their educational attainment is so low. According to Karl Alexander

and colleagues (2001), dropping out of high school is a long process of disengagement from school. This process may be fueled, in part, by the low academic achievement, increased special education placement, high rates of grade retention, high rates of behavior problems, and high rates of disciplinary incidents. Further, just as there appears to be an association between foster placement change and retention, there appears to be an association between foster placement change and educational attainment. Research conducted by Russell Rumberger and Katherine Larson (1998) documents the strong positive relationship between school change and educational attainment. The authors find that even one change in school between the eighth grade and twelfth grade doubles the likelihood that students will not complete a high school education. Therefore, a change in foster placement that results in a school change puts foster youth at a higher risk of dropping out.

Due to high rates of dropout, foster youth may be prevented from gaining postsecondary education. Further, among foster youth who do complete high school, opportunities to attend a postsecondary institution may be limited by scarce resources and by inadequate support from adults in navigating the postsecondary admission and enrollment processes. Some states have begun to allow youth to remain in foster care beyond the age of 18. Early research by Courtney and associates (2001) suggests that such policies may have positive effects on youth with high educational aspirations. Compared to youth who leave foster care at the age of 18, youth who remain in foster care beyond the age of 18 are more than twice as likely to receive a high school diploma or GED and more than three times as likely to attend a 2-year or 4-year college (Courtney et al., 2001).

It is possible that youth who stay in foster care beyond the age of 18 are even better off than youth who have similar background characteristics but never entered foster care. Cheryl Buehler and associates (2000) find that adults formerly in foster care are unlikely to complete any education beyond high school, but they are no less likely seek postsecondary education than are adults who never entered foster care but have similar socioeconomic backgrounds. This finding suggests that foster youth are prevented from pursuing postsecondary education by socioeconomic disadvantage, not foster care. Thus, staying in foster care beyond the age of 18 may provide the stable living arrangements and resources that disadvantaged youth need to pursue postsecondary education. Courtney and Amy Dworsky of the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago are currently evaluating the impact of a new policy that allows foster youth in Illinois to remain in care beyond the age of 18. Their results may provide greater insight into the benefits of this policy and may guide other states considering similar policies.

THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER YOUTH: DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Research clearly documents poor educational outcomes among foster youth, but little is known about the many correlates that predict these poor educational outcomes, and causal directions are not yet understood. Future research on the educational outcomes of foster youth should attempt to untangle the complex relationships among child characteristics, placement characteristics, demographic background, and educational outcomes. Many researchers have undertaken the task. For example, Zima and associates (2000) examine the relationships among behavior problems, academic skill delays, school failure, and placement characteristics. They find that children living in group homes are 3 times more likely to repeat at least one grade than are children living in relative foster care or traditional foster care. However, the cross-sectional design of the study makes this finding difficult to interpret. Is living in a group home a cause or consequence of poor educational outcomes? Is it both? In order to isolate cause from effect, longitudinal research should follow successive cohorts of youth over many years.

State child welfare agencies have already begun to respond to the large body of research that documents the poor educational outcomes of foster youth. The author's experience in Illinois, for example, indicates that educational liaisons assist caseworkers in monitoring educational progress and advocating for the educational needs of foster children. Similar efforts are underway in other states, including California (Zetlin et al., 2003; Zetlin et al., 2004). Evaluative research is necessary to determine the effectiveness of particular interventions.

It is also important to understand the factors that facilitate or hinder successful implementation of an intervention. Two potential difficulties face child welfare caseworkers tasked with implementing educational interventions. First, although school records contain important information about a child's educational history, they are often hard to find or nonexistent (Zetlin et al., 2004). Second, caseworkers lack knowledge of school procedures, educational resources, and students' rights (Zetlin et al., 2003). Mixed methods research that includes interviews with caseworkers can help shed light on the challenges faced by caseworkers as they attempt to meet a child's educational needs. Such research can also assist child welfare agencies in crafting interventions that address such challenges.

Finally, there has been a remarkable increase in research, policy, and philanthropic attention to postsecondary education over the past decade. Specific attention to the postsecondary education experiences of foster youth is

also necessary. It is not sufficient to know how many foster youth enroll in postsecondary education; it is also important to know what types of postsecondary institutions they attend, how they fare while there, and whether they ultimately graduate. Longitudinal research is particularly well-suited to these inquiries, but a central challenge will be constructing a sample of adequate size. To address this issue, researchers should follow successive cohorts of youth. Attrition will be another important concern, and extra efforts must be made to retain members of the original sample. Finally, researchers should conduct qualitative interviews with youth who left foster care by successfully transitioning to postsecondary education. Results may shed light on the internal and external resources that enable such positive outcomes. In order to craft effective policies and programs for foster youth, it is important to understand why some foster youth are successful in school and go on to complete postsecondary education while others struggle so profoundly.

CONCLUSION

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (n.d.) estimates that 513,000 youth currently reside in foster homes. Many more youth may continue to reside in abusive or neglectful homes. Research has begun to elucidate the educational outcomes of foster youth and to reveal the processes that contribute to these outcomes. Child welfare agencies across the country have begun to respond to this research, formulating and implementing policies and programs to support the educational needs of these youth. In order to ensure that these policies and programs improve the educational experiences of foster youth, further research, particularly longitudinal quantitative and qualitative research, is necessary. Finally, in this era of rising educational aspirations and "college-for-all" norms (Rosenbaum, Miller, and Krei, 1996, p. 267; Rosenbaum, 1997) further research into the college-going experiences and career outcomes of foster youth in particular is crucial.

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