

Structuring policies and practices to support educational resilience of foster youth

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THE NEW LUTHERAN SOCIAL SERVICES OF THE SOUTH

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Executive Summary

Foster youth have poor educational outcomes compared to youth not in foster care due to frequent moves while in care and lack of caregiver stability. Drawing on resilience theory, this paper presents a conceptual framework for structuring policies and practices to promote educational resilience of foster youth. Practices and policies from states are highlighted as well as future directions.



Foster youth are at a high risk for poor academic achievement. Compared to youth not in foster care, they have low high school graduation rates,

high grade retention and high absenteeism (Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid & Epstein, 2008; Berger et al., 2015; Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2012; Altshuler, 2003). Because academic achievement is linked to several lifelong positive outcomes, such as higher earnings and greater stability (Newburger & Day, 2002), increased attention has focused on improving educational outcomes of foster youth. This paper provides an overview of the academic achievement gap between foster youth and youth not in foster care, a model for educational resilience of foster youth, an overview of current efforts to promote educational resilience and areas for future directions.

Explaining the Achievement Gap

Foster youth face multiple risk factors that may impact their ability to succeed in school. Beginning with **personal factors**, most foster youth have experienced multiple traumas that impact their well-being. Science has now shown through brain scan imaging that the

brains of children who experience abuse and/or neglect have reduced functioning (Perry & Pollard, 1997). When these children are faced with stimuli that challenge them, they often resort to very basic levels of fright/flight/freeze functioning which may be interpreted by adults as disruptive behavior. The impact of child maltreatment is compounded when a child is removed from his or her home and placed into foster care. The move becomes an additional trauma. The combined separation from family and the lasting impacts of child maltreatment result in foster youth having greater risk of psychological, social and developmental issues (Noonan, 2012; Polihankrinis, 2008). These issues are often complicated by a lack of access to much needed mental health care (Dubowitz, et al. 2000). Within a school environment, these personal risk factors may manifest as issues with peers, such as aggression.

Familial factors also play a strong role in the educational outcomes of foster youth. Youth often enter foster care with histories of instability in their family environment and maladaptive relationships with caregivers (Connor, Doerfler, Toscano, Volungis, & Steingard, 2004; Hussey & Guo, 2005; Kohl, Edleson, English, & Barth, 2005). Once in foster care, placement changes may be frequent. On average youth move two times (Harden, 2004), but older youth and youth in care for long periods of time move more frequently (Unrae, Seita & Putney, 2008). Each move results in a new caregiver who faces a learning curve in understanding the child's behaviors and educational needs. As a result, foster youth tend to lack consistent and strong advocates for their educational needs.

Changes in foster placements often result in changes in schools introducing new **school factors** for youth. Two thirds of foster care alumni reported changing schools five or more times during their time in foster care, and 50% reported changing schools a minimum

of four times (Pecora, et al., 2006; Smithgall, 2004; Emerson and Lovitt, 2003; Zetlin, Weinberg & Kimm, 2005). School mobility is a significant threat to the academic achievement of foster youth (Mehana & Reynolds, 2004; Zetlin, et al. 2006). With each school change, there may be delays in transferring individualized education programs (IEPs), loss of credit transfers and changes in extracurricular activities (Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2006).

Foster youth are also impacted by **community factors** that inhibit their educational success. Traditionally, there has been a lack of coordination between child welfare agencies and schools resulting in diffusion of responsibilities (Zetlin et al, 2004). Misunderstandings and lack of communication may result in foster youth not having access to services like special education due to rules about records transfers.

Turning Risk into Resilience

While studies have largely concluded that foster youth face more barriers to educational attainment than their peers, it is necessary to analyze some of the mechanisms that influence the success of foster youth who are able to do well in school in order to design programs and implement policies that foster educational success. One must consider why it is that some youth, when faced with extreme adversity, are able to triumph.

One approach that attempts to explain the differences in outcomes for children with exposure to similar traumatic events is resilience; resilience has been defined as “the ability to bounce back from adversity, frustration and misfortune” (Ledesma, 2014). In recent years, the concept of resilience has been expanded to include individual resilience, familial resilience, community resilience and educational resilience.

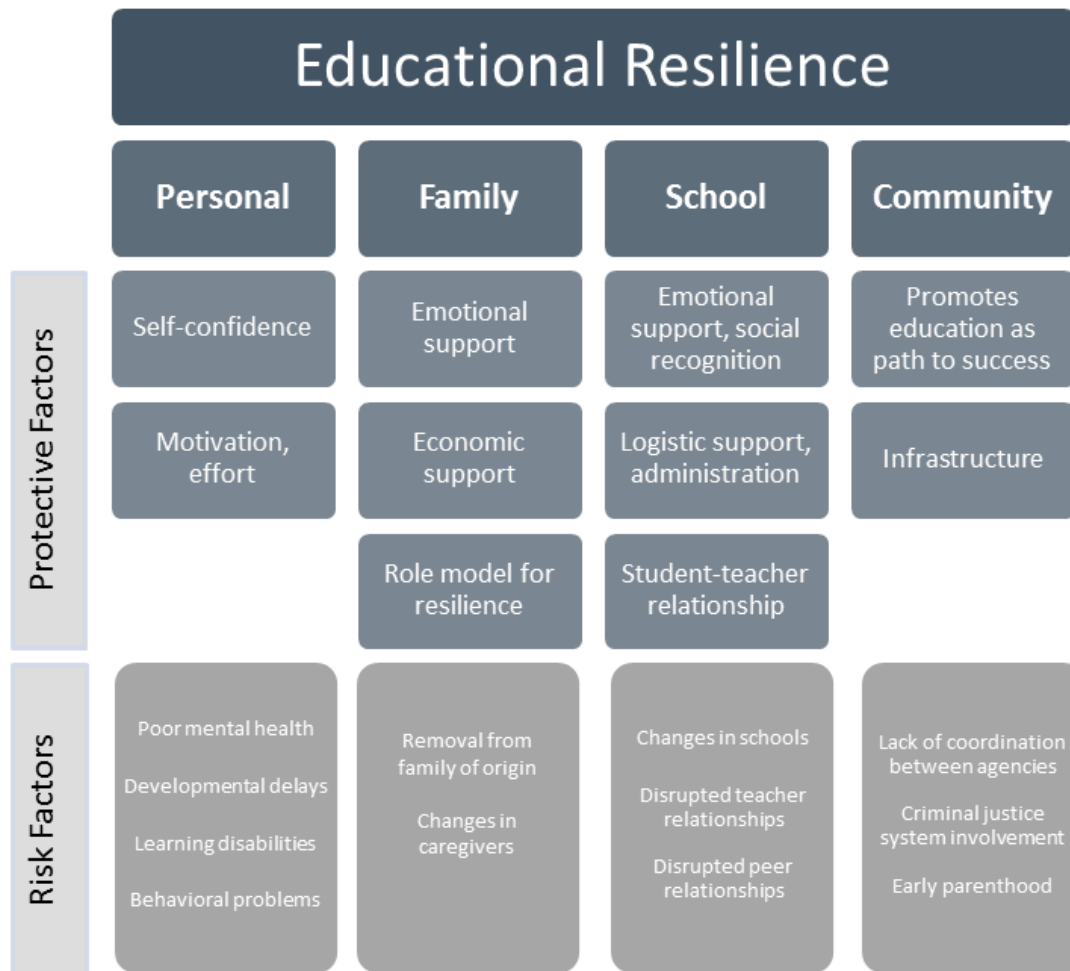
Essentially, all of these models of resilience focus on increasing protective factors and decreasing risk factors, emphasizing positive outcomes and strengths of children, families, and communities

(Luthar, 1991; Cicchetti & Toth, 1998). Several authors (Rolf & Johnson, 1999; Cicchetti & Toth, 1998) describe resilience as a dynamic process, giving clients and professionals the potential to continuously construct and increase resilience in children and their families.

Educational resilience is simply an off-shoot of resilience that specifically focuses on building academic success in those students who are most vulnerable. Educational resilience can be particularly useful when intervening with foster youth, given the intersectionality between personal, family, school and community factors that can influence their outcomes—both in school and in life. Based on the risk factors discussed in the previous section, the following model of educational resilience provides a conceptual framework for programs and policies to support success of foster youth rather than to simply identify achievement gaps.

Figure 1.

Model of Education Resilience Applied to Youth in Foster Care



In this model, personal strengths such as self-confidence and motivation can counteract risk factors such as poor mental health, developmental delays, learning disabilities and behavioral problems. Family risk factors that include removal from family of origin and changes in caregivers can be limited by strong emotional support. That support can come from a current caregiver, advocate or other caring adult. Material and economic support is needed to ensure that a child is ready to attend school and focus on learning. Additionally, a family member or role model who can serve as an example of resilience can be a protective factor for youth.

Because school changes occur frequently, teacher and peer relationships are disrupted. Strong, supportive relationships with adults and peers in an academic setting can allow youth to explore different areas in which they might excel. Additionally, schools provide a source of support via important relationships with peers, coaches, counselors and teachers (Sandoval-Hernandez & Cortes, 2012; Neal, 2015). Thus, it is important to limit changes in schools and promote seamless integration into new schools should a move be necessary.

Finally, at a community level, infrastructure needs to be in place for foster youth to succeed. Coordination between educators and child welfare workers due to lack of communication is noted as a barrier in seamless school transfers (Zetlin et al., 2004). Unfortunately, much of this research has focused on barriers that foster youth encounter on their paths to academic success, with little research highlighting protective factors and what works. Additionally, resilience can be promoted when youth see academic learning as an opportunity for future economic success. If communities promote education as a pathway to success and support education, youth have more opportunities.

Promoting resilience on national and state levels

Several states have taken steps to implement programs designed to lessen the achievement gap between foster youth and their peers. Additionally, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was passed in 2008 (P.L. 110-135), providing educational provisions to increase educational stability for foster youth. As a result of this Act, states now must include the child's educational needs in every case plan. Furthermore, several national NGOs have developed guidelines for better practices to increase foster youth's academic achievement, including increasing support for school transitions at all levels.

At the state-level, several states have begun to employ Educational Liaisons for foster youth. Some states have also started training child welfare workers on the educational needs of children in care. While most states have implemented some form of training and/or program to accompany youth in care throughout their educational journey, few have conducted program evaluations to determine their effectiveness.

Massachusetts implemented a School and Community Support Project in 2003, with the goal of improving educational outcomes of foster youth, through consultation and interventions for teachers, foster parents and school staff (Spence & Driscoll, 2003). An initial evaluation of the program showed an increase in placement stability of children (n = 40); however, given the small-scale of the program, it is necessary to

expand its coverage and re-evaluate.

California has also implemented several projects over the last several years, including implementing the California Foster Youth Education Task Force (FYETF), Foster Youth Services (FYS) and an annual California Foster Youth Education Summit, to address issues in educational attainment for foster youth. FYS has advocated for programs integrating the coordination of services, guidance, counseling and tutoring for foster youth. Early evaluations of these practices have found that these programs have been effective in helping youth successfully graduate high school (Ayasse, 1995).

In Texas, there is currently an effort to redesign its foster care system. One of the key goals of the redesign is to keep children in their home communities, as a means of maintaining meaningful relationships they may have with peers, teachers and coaches. While the project does not specifically mention educational attainment as one of its goals, the presence and continuation of positive role models and positive peer relationships has been shown to improve academic success for children (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). As a first step, Texas passed Senate Bill 6 in 2005, requiring an education portfolio to be created for every child in foster care in the State. In order to address the educational needs of foster youth, the Supreme Court of Texas signed the *Order Establishing Education Committee of Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth and Families* (Children's Commission). The Education Committee of the Children's Commission began to bring stakeholders together in 2010, recognizing the need to make family visits, legal processes and therapy more compatible with school schedules and promote academic success for foster children. During 18 months, over 100 professionals met to discuss reform, resulting in over 100 recommendations for courts, child welfare professionals, and schools.

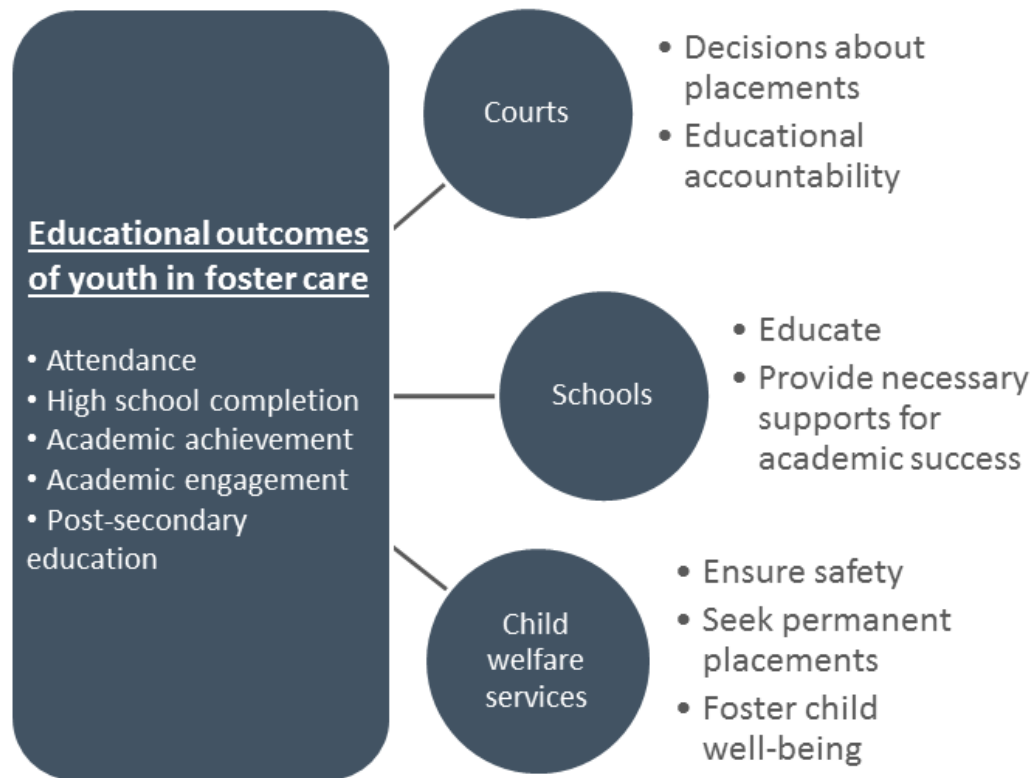
Simultaneously, the Texas Legislature passed House Bill (HB) 826 in 2011, calling for each school district to designate an employee as liaison to oversee the enrollment and transfer of foster children into their school systems. It is worth noting that school districts in Texas already had liaisons for homeless youth, developed from the McKinney-Vento Act, and the foster care liaisons will follow a similar model for implementation (Center for Public Policy Priorities,

2008).

Furthermore, the suggestions from the Education Committee have followed the model for resilience, integrating child welfare agencies, courts and educational institutions into their intervention recommendations. Figure 2 below illustrates the systemic approach to fostering resilience in children in care, as developed by the Children's Commission.

Figure 2.

Texas Trio illustration: Multiple system involvement in supporting educational resilience for youth in foster care



Gaps in Knowledge and Future Directions

The effectiveness of an educational liaison has been shown in the limited studies conducted (Zetlin, Weinberg & Kim, 2004; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006; Ayasse, 1996). However, the studies that have been published have been in other states, and show the need for larger-scale studies before confirming its validity. Nonetheless, it is a promising start of a possible model that could help reduce the achievement gap between foster youth and their peers.

Additionally, little research has been done on resilience in foster youth, especially related to educational resilience. Instead of focusing on what is working for some children in care, most published studies identify the problems and difficulties that these youth face, with little guidance for better practices and policies that could help more foster children achieve their educational goals and succeed in academic settings.

Furthermore, little has been done at the national level, with most studies focusing on specific school districts or counties, with little overall knowledge about foster youth throughout the United States. While some studies have shown promising results for different types of interventions and models for educational resilience, these are largely fragmented and it is unknown whether these models are appropriate to expand to foster youth in other parts of the country with other characteristics.

However, the evaluations that have been done thus far on models of educational resilience, particularly related to the role of the educational liaison and/or education specialist for foster youth, have shown promising results in states such as Massachusetts and California. These studies have found that a reduction in the academic achievement gap between foster youth and their peers can be achieved, giving policy makers and practitioners a model framework to change and implement the current practices to include more integral interventions, with the hope of improving the overall well-being of youth in care.

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