

Forgotten and Overlooked: A Personal Reflection of Foster Parenting and School

Seth J. Lickteig and Amanda D. Lickteig

At the beginning of a new school year, teacher days are filled with professional development opportunities covering pedagogy, curriculum design, and school safety. In our former school district, one morning was traditionally reserved to cover new legislation and its potential impacts on public school. One of the primary developments of *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* was a focus on addressing individual student needs, especially those found in struggling students. However, struggling was often only defined as those who had a paper trail of 504s and IEPs. One segment of the student population—foster youth—was largely overlooked, neglected, and consequently under addressed. Although we both graduated from an excellent teacher preparation program and had been hired to a progressive and supportive district, training and professional development on how to support this growing group of at-risk students was minimal, at best. Recent studies have demonstrated that children in protective custody are among the most at-risk learners. In fact, studies have shown foster children perform below grade level, ranging from 34 to 41% compared to the U.S. average of 20% (Burley & Halpern, 2001, p. 5). So as the number of students in the foster system grows and, consequently, the urgency for classroom teachers to understand the needs of these students, this essay serves to explore current research on students in foster care and feature some of our experiences as a foster family with school-age children.

Foster Care Background

The foster care system in the United States is designed to promote the health, safety, and wellbeing of children through court-ordered removal from their birth family. Most causes for removal from the home include neglect, physical or emotional abuse, parental substance abuse, and caretaker's inability to provide or cope. The ultimate goal of the system is to support potential reunification with birth parents or alternative permanency arrangements such as adoption, kinship placement, or guardianship (Szilagyi, Rosen, Rubin, & Zlotnik, 2015). Upon turning age 18, students are emancipated from the foster care system and legally identified as adults. The state-issued independence is often bittersweet; an escape from a system of group homes and strife often results in homelessness and despair. One student's account reveals the complicated feelings surrounding such an event:

On the day of my so-called emancipation, I didn't have a high school diploma, a place to live, a job, nothing . . . The day I emancipated—it was a happy day for me. But I didn't know what was in store. Now that I'm on the streets, I honestly feel I would have been better off in an abusive home with a father who beat me; at least he would have taught me how to get a job and pay the bills. (Calvin, 2010, p. 1)

Across the United States, the number of children in the foster care system has increased. After peaking in 2007 at 492,618, the number of children in the foster care system has steadily increased from 2012 to 2016 when 437,465 children were in the foster care system nationally

(The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). As of August of 2017, the State of Kansas had 7,192 children in the foster care system and a total of 2,755 licensed foster homes (Kansas Department for Children and Families, 2017). The average length of stay in foster care was nine months for children reunited with family or 36 months for those adopted.

Teacher Involvement

Recent statistics illustrate the critical need for teacher involvement with students in foster care. In *The Invisible Achievement Gap* (Barrat & Berliner, 2013), researchers compared students in foster care in California to other educational subgroups. Their findings suggest a unique demographic subgroup, comparatively different from low socioeconomic students or English Language Learners (ELLs). Students in foster care were:

1. More likely to be classified with a disability--at a rate double the comparison groups. Students in foster care were more than five times as likely to be labeled with an emotional disturbance than other students.
2. Experiencing higher rates of mobility or changing of schools compared to peers. Students in foster care were also more likely to be enrolled in non-traditional settings and in the lowest performing schools.
3. Performing poorly on standardized tests. "Test results for students in foster care fell into the two lowest performance levels for English language arts and mathematics—below basic and far below basic—at twice the rate of those for the statewide student population" (Barrat & Berliner, 2013, p. iv).
4. The highest dropout rate and lowest graduation rate compared to other comparison groups. In California, students in foster care dropped out of high school at a rate of 8%, compared to a statewide average of 3%. Graduation rates for all students statewide was 84%, whereas for students in foster care high school graduation rate was a mere 58%.

Academically, students who are part of the foster system perform behind their peers comparatively. Burley and Halpern (2001) noted from their study of foster care students in Washington that students in foster care are twice as likely to repeat a grade, change schools during the year, or be enrolled in special education services. They also posit the length of stay in foster care does not impact educational attainment. That is, short-term and long-term children in foster care had on average similar educational struggles (p. 1).

While only half of children raised in foster care graduate from high school in the United States (National Foster Youth Institute, n. d.), concerns with academic achievement persist even after high school. A longitudinal study done in the Midwest found less than 3% of former foster youth graduate from a four-year college (Courtney et al., 2011). Qualitative research by Morton (2015) explored the difficulties of former foster youth experience while attending college, revealing deeper issues of anger, abuse, and disempowerment. The result was high mobility, IEPs for behavior and emotional needs, and struggles with the transition from foster care to independence.

Trauma of Children in Foster Care

After spending more than 10 years in education, we decided to expand our family through foster care. Like many families, we had a general impression of what foster care was but lacked an understanding of all it entailed—for children, their birth families, the foster families, or social work services. With this incomplete picture of the foster care system, we underwent the tenuous foster licensure process in the fall of 2017. Our path to becoming a foster family was delayed from the beginning due to what we now understand to be expected frequent worker turnover, so it took roughly a full year to complete the process and become licensed. Those months were filled with a series of background checks, parenting courses, home inspections, and medical appointments. From the outset, our background in teaching at the middle school level engendered the shared expectation that we would prefer taking on older children. Most of these kids had been in the system for a while, often times bouncing around the state in a series of homes and schools. “Everyone wants babies and small kids,” our worker remarked as we filled out a demographic checklist of children we would possibly take. Would we be comfortable housing kids with histories of fire-setting, sexual abuse, or substance addiction? The realities of the backgrounds of foster children began to set in. These seemed like the issues college students and adults faced, not twelve-year old kids. An overwhelming feeling of dread came upon us; how could we ever satisfy the needs of these kids? We were torn to say no and found ourselves wondering if any family ever marked yes. How many kids were left behind by the screening? Who took care of those kids?

The initial trauma experienced by children in foster care occurs prior to and during separation from birth parents. Physical, sexual, and emotional trauma often stem from parental neglect. Abuse can occur over a period of time or in a single instance. Recently, the opioid crisis has caused a spike in the number children in the American foster care system (Simon, 2017). These children in the foster care system can exhibit permanent effects of fetal alcoholism and drug addiction. We have received phone calls in the middle of the night, asking us to provide police protective custody for children needing immediate removal from a situation. In our short time as a licensed foster family, we have been approached with the opportunity to foster two newborns with addiction to methamphetamines.

The event of separation itself often can be traumatic for children, e.g., police officers banging on doors demanding to enter, children huddled in a closet crying, and the potential for domestic violence. Even months later, young children may role play the event as a method of coping—an attempt to make sense of the traumatic event they witnessed. “I’m the police! You’re mommy, now put your hands behind your back!” four-year old DeShawn (pseudonym) demanded of his three-year old sister, both who had been in our care (only to be moved after three months to a kinship placement and then a few months later removed from that environment and placed in another foster home). The effects of the separation and abuse often produce Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in foster children, resulting in mental health problems such as depression, social phobia, or panic syndrome (Plotkin, 2005). Providing mental health services for foster children can be challenging because of mobility issues. Arranging counseling and therapy appointments—not to mention vision, dental, and physical appointments—in one town months in advance may be impossible to actually attend if the child moves across the state, or even to a new placement.

Layered on top of the emotional, social, and sometimes physical trauma is the high mobility factor children in foster care experience. International studies have revealed that:

the number of times a child moves to a new foster family is a strong predictor for later psychological and behavioral problems, irrespective of the level of behavioral issues that exist at the beginning of the placement with the first foster family. (Maaskant, van Rooij, Bos, & Hermanns, 2016, p. 391)

This is one reason why children in the foster care system ideally are kept in their same communities—which helps maintain familiarity with and close proximity to the birth family. However, when a local foster home is unavailable, the placement agency attempts to find homes as close as possible. Sometimes this can be hours away from home, parents, and siblings. The cultural atmosphere of the home can also be vividly different. One child who was from an urban setting describes how he was placed in a home with no internet and a small, rural school with no other African American students.

My life was chaotic all the time and so was my school experience. I changed schools a lot. I made and lost friends. I didn't try in classes I knew I wouldn't finish. I got in trouble to get attention. Then after a while in high school I turned it around because I wanted a better life, and there were a few teachers who cared enough to help me pass and get a diploma. (Barrat & Berliner, 2013, p. 17)

These students rotate between homes, schools, and school districts on a regular basis. And for children who are unable to find placement, they may even travel hours every day from a shelter facility in one city to their school in another city. The sheer lack of stability in these students' lives increases their chances of being at-risk students. One of the children we fostered recently, had been in six different homes in the span of a month—not including the nights he spent in the placement office or a short-term shelter while awaiting a long-term placement. He had been suspended from his home school in the spring, where he was subsequently enrolled in an alternative half-day program. The program was focused on emotional help, providing therapeutic strategies for students who struggled with anger. Echoing the problems with scheduling medical appointments for foster students, after entering the foster care system in March, he did not attend school at any of his temporary placements because by the time he was situated in his new home and the enrollment process was started he would ultimately be moved to another placement. Effectively, he was out of traditional classrooms, including math and reading, for almost three total months of his 7th grade year. Consequently, he was not included in end-of-the-year testing.

Accompanying the high mobility and emotional strain is the continuous trauma of being separated from family. It is not unusual to have sets of siblings separated from one another, mostly due to a lack of resources. As a foster family, we have received placement calls asking us to care for five brothers and sisters, all under the age of five. Foster families like ours are unequipped to provide beds and care for such large groups of siblings, and the difficulty to care for these sibling sets is compounded when one or more of the children have physical or mental disabilities. Wide age discrepancies also exist; the oldest brother may be eighteen, but the youngest sister is just four years old. However, regulations involving restrictions on age ranges

and genders of children sharing rooms also exist; this ensures appropriate accommodations but also limits the number of children each foster home can shelter.

Additionally, children in foster care are exposed to trauma in a compounding manner. That is, traumatic events are often the trigger for their removal from biological parents, which leads to subsequent trauma children are exposed to once they are part of the foster care system. These compounding traumas demonstrate how different foster care students can be from other identified subgroups in educational settings. Whereas an ELL student may struggle with language and culture, a foster care ELL student would also experience potential cultural dissonance from being placed in homes significantly different from their native culture. While similar strategies and modifications may be successful for both subgroups, it is vital that educators, counselors, and administrators additionally recognize the uniqueness of children in foster care situations and how it impacts their schooling.

Teachers' Role

As teacher educators, it has been a natural extension for us to take our experiences as foster parents and apply what we have learned to teaching. Given all that we have learned about these children, their needs, and the system as a whole in such a short amount of time, we began focusing on the behaviors and motivators we had observed in these school age children that manifest themselves in a school setting. We feature four of these prominent behaviors here: control, loyalty, stability, and structure and routine.

Control. One of the primary desires we witnessed in a 12-year-old boy placed in our care was the need to have control. Removal from his mother, separation from his siblings, placement in various foster homes outside of his own cultural norms—all these actions signified events over which he had no control. In order to regain command over his circumstances, Pedro (pseudonym) would often refuse to comply; these behaviors could appear in response to small requests (“Would you please wipe up the juice you just spilled?” “No.”), or to expected norms (waking up and leaving for school) and appropriate behaviors (flipping over furniture in response to having video games turned off), and even to choices that would have a profound impact on his living situation (refusing to get out of the transport dropping him back off at his placement home). Although teachers already understand the value that giving students choice can have on increased interest and motivation (Dewey, 1913; Dobrow, Smith, & Posner, 2011; Schraw, Flowerday, & Lehman, 2001), this need is heightened for students in foster care. For these students, choice not only offers increased interest in the task and learning, but it also represents a moment that they can exhibit control. Providing these students with the option to manipulate their class schedule, choose their seat in the classroom, or select how they complete an assignment enables them to have control over aspects of their life in a setting that they have come to see as a safe, routine environment.

Loyalty. A struggle observed in both preschooler Imani (pseudonym) and adolescent Pedro was that of how to remain loyal to their birth families while beginning to feel comfortable in their foster placements. Maaskant et al. (2016) summarize a long-held belief that “as individuals [acquire] feelings of loyalty to different people, they can possibly also experience clashes of senses of loyalty” (p. 381). As children in foster care begin to find routine and feel comfortable

in their foster placement, they may feel conflicted—as if affection and trust toward a foster family may diminish their feelings toward their birth family. Although Maaskant et al.s’ 2016 study discovered that, for children in long term foster care, “a good relationship with the foster parents is essential for a foster child’s sense of wellbeing [and] if this relationship is good, the relationship and contact with parents need not compromise the child’s wellbeing” (p. 391), in the first months of a placement the child may have difficulty knowing how to navigate their feelings for both foster and birth families without devaluing. Understanding this, teachers can honor students’ feelings and situations by asking about family members.

Stability. The sheer lack of stability in their home lives makes it difficult for children in foster care to form and establish structures of stability. Students in foster care often encounter a surge in transiency after being taken into state care. School settings potentially provide the stability students in foster care are missing in their home lives. Teachers and school personnel provide positive role models of successful adults that students in foster care are typically lacking. More importantly, staff members provide foster students with the opportunity to form appropriate, lasting relationships with adults. When the 12-year-old boy in our care moved placements, a classroom teacher provided postage-paid envelopes addressed to her via the school. The boy, who typically did not write for leisure, eagerly wrote to the teacher the night before the move, informing her of where he was going. Furthermore, the boy assumed an expectation of maintaining a correspondence though attending a school in a different community.

Structure and Routine. Classroom and school routines can be effective strategies for students in foster care, providing them with familiar settings and structures. Those in foster care often seek order in an attempt to balance the chaos of their home and foster situation (Young, 2014). Even establishing simple routines with the student, such as a daily check-in or staying after on a specific day for homework help, generates something constant in the child’s life. Additionally, teachers should encourage students in foster care situations to participate in organized events and activities. By involving the student in extra curriculars, children in foster care are given additional opportunities to interact with adults and peers in an established, safe environment. Time which would otherwise be spent online or alone is instead given renewed purpose. This provides foster kids an opportunity to play sports or engage in the fine arts, which may be new experiences for them. In an attempt to get the 12-year-old boy out of the house during the summer months, we proposed he join a running club through the school’s cross country team. He doubted that he would attend regularly, and often attempted to create excuses early in the morning as to why he would not be able to practice that day. Perseverance at home paired with the positive relationship Pedro formed with the coach resulted in a successful summer. Pedro’s relationship with the coaching staff and sustained dedication in the summer provided the motivation for him to join the cross country team in the fall.

Conclusion

We are so thankful for the teachers, administrators, and other school personnel that have welcomed our foster children this past year into their buildings. The demands on the foster care system in our state have increased markedly in the past ten years, namely due to the opioid crisis. More and more students are arriving in our classrooms from foster homes. Our hope in sharing our experiences with classroom teachers is to draw attention to the emotional and social needs of

children in foster care. Students in foster care situations are unique from other subgroups, and often their situations call for additional support beyond instructional remediation. Cooperation between foster parents, social workers, and schools can assist children in foster care to overcome their current situations in achieving long-term success.

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Seth Lickteig (supah@ksu.edu) is a doctoral student in Curriculum & Instruction, College of Education, at Kansas State University in Manhattan, KS. He can be followed on Twitter at @supahksu.

Amanda Lickteig (alicktei@emporia.edu) is an assistant professor in the Department of School Leadership/Middle & Secondary Teacher Education at Emporia State University in Emporia, KS. She can be found on Twitter at @adlickteig.