An exploratory study of the academic performance of foster children in a residential group home environment

Kimberly R. Mindingall
CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

SOCIAL WORK

MINDINGALL, KIMBERLY RUTH B.A. AUBURN UNIVERSITY, 1994

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF FOSTER CHILDREN IN A RESIDENTIAL GROUP HOME ENVIRONMENT

Advisor: Dr. Gale Horton
Thesis dated May, 1997

The education of children who are looked after by local authorities is now rightly a national issue, and among the many disadvantages suffered by children looked after by local authorities, low educational achievement probably has the most serious consequences for their future life chances. This paper examines the importance of education and reasons why foster children do poorly in the educational arena.

Secondary data was used in collecting data needed for the study. The academic records from case files of Brantwood Children’s Home were the source of gathering the appropriate information.

The researcher found that the academic performance is influenced by the length of time a child is in the program. The findings also suggest other factors such as past histories, health, physical and emotional abuse are causes for low educational attainment and the length of stay has no affect on these variables.
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF FOSTER CHILDREN IN A RESIDENTIAL GROUP HOME ENVIRONMENT

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

BY
KIMBERLY RUTH MINDINGALL

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
MAY 1997
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I acknowledge God as my father and give him thanks first and foremost in guiding my life and giving me the courage and wisdom to accomplish all things. I also give special thanks to my mother and family for their encouragement, support and most of all their love during the stressful times in my life. I would like to give special thanks to my thesis advisor, Dr. Gale Horton, for having the patience and guidance needed during the completion of my thesis.

I have been very blessed to have a host of wonderful family members and friends in my life. They all have been very supportive and all deserve a special thanks. I cannot forget Ed, the love of my life that offered his advice, intelligence, and overwhelming support during this important time in my life. Thanks.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Foster children are considered among the population of children that are "at risk". Foster children are usually moved frequently and suffer from stability. Due to the frequency of moves, children of foster care have to endure, they suffer greatly in the educational arena. They suffer educational support such as tutoring services, school supplies and belonging to a steady school program.

It has been an issue that the instability of foster children has lead to poor grades among the children and because of this they suffer overall academically. Most children in residential and foster care are seriously educationally disadvantaged, with 75% of children leaving school with no qualification. This is a powerful statistic and it appears that as a social worker assuming the advocate role in a child’s life, education should be taken more seriously. Foster children that have been taken from their parents or do not even know their parents have already started life at a disadvantage. Meaning they are lacking the support one receives in a natural home environment.

From the beginning of the profession, the mission of social work has been to improve the transactions and interactions between persons and their natural environment. However, foster children that have been taken from their parents or do not know the whereabouts of their parents have already started life at a disadvantage.

Adolescents who require treatment through separation from their families are among the most troubled children in any community. Out of compassion for their plight and concern for their future, the social work profession along with communities have developed various forms of substitute care, one variety being small group residential treatment.

Due to social workers being responsible for the placement of the majority of children, it is of importance to know as much about the placements being used. Institutions are coming under stringent examination in various parts of the country. There is a considerable question about their cost and the relationship of the service to other child welfare services, and as a host of other questions and issues. It is believed that the quality of services currently offered varies from extremely

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questionable to excellent. Some observers of the field estimate that perhaps as many as a third of the children are receiving care which is of poor quality or actually unsuitable for their developmental needs. As a result, children going into foster care are moved from school to school or are out of school for prolonged periods. A child faced with such life experience, he/she is put at an even greater disadvantage. Knowing that the child will have to develop independent living skills, education should be strictly enforced or the children's future will look very dim. Without a long-term plan for their support, they cannot make a successful transition from being looked after to looking after themselves.

Schools produce huge benefits for America; for society as a whole, school foster the productivity improvements that drive economic growth. Disappointing student performance, in turn, contributes to disappointing economic growth, stagnating living standards and widening gaps among the incomes of different social and ethnic

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*Ibid., 11-12.
groups. Education opens up so many avenues and should be taken advantage of if the opportunity presents itself. Once children enter the group home setting, education is the focal point of the program. Education can empower children with the ability to make a change in their life so they may successfully care for themselves. Since foster children are known to have more foster children, education should be used as a tool for breaking the cycle.

**Statement of Problem**

Foster children overall are suffering greatly in the educational arena and run a high risk of becoming dropouts or students with grades that are not worthy of a diploma. The problem of this research is one of importance, in that, education is considered one of the most critical avenues for success in life. Without obtaining a high school diploma or the equivalent, certain jobs or careers are off limits. In trying to find avenues for improving school performance, the question being explored is whether a stable environment upon entering a residential group home improves the academic performance of foster children.

**Significance and Purpose of Study**

Education is extremely important in one’s future accomplishment. The main theoretical rationale for support

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and education programs is found in the notion of parents as the primary influence on the developing infant and young child. However, once a child has been taken from home, they usually end up in a long term foster care program and these children will have to survive without their parents. Children are removed for a number of problems ranging from physical abuse, emotional abuse or neglect as well as abandonment or drug use by the parent, just to name a few. Other children do not have living parents or no appropriate relative placement.

Practitioners need to pay more attention to environmental conditions that place children and adolescents at risk of poor functioning. Emotionally sick children are often found in sick environments. By practitioners paying closer attention, the profession may be able to combat the system failing many different kinds of children in different ways. Signs of distress would not be missed in the early stages and problems would be prevented from escalating, resulting in the removal of children. 

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CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A major part of the life of any child over the age of five years is spent attending school. Within the context of the educational system, each child is expected to progress at a pace defined by a norm that allows little accommodation for such roadblocks as a chronic illness, an emotionally disturbing home life, language handicap, or other such factors that can have a deleterious effect on the ability to learn. The expected level of performance and progress of a child in school presumes good health and a supportive home environment that minimizes both the physical and emotional impediments to learning. The environment might also aid in the learning process by reinforcement and motivation.

Given the demands of the school situation, one might wonder how children fare when their home lives have been disrupted by placement in long term foster care. Having experienced the turmoil of a problematic family situation that has culminated in separation, foster children can reasonably be seen as being vulnerable to impaired performance in school. They obviously carry burdens that do not afflict their classmates who have been reared in their own homes.¹

Within the foster care system, adolescents receive less one to one parenting than do their younger counterparts, often being relegated to residential group homes because of "unmanageability," past placements instability, or the frequent unwillingness of foster parents to accept older children. These settings are usually staffed by shifts of childcare workers, the least formally trained direct care providers. Thus, there is an enormous disparity between the actual "care" given in fostering these at-risk youth and the parenting necessary for their success. Without the filter of good parenting, the immediate environment (poor schools) exert their destructive influences unchallenged. Among the many disadvantages suffered by children looked after by local authorities, low educational achievement probably has the most serious consequences for their future life chances.

When a child welfare agency takes a youth in to care, it takes on the responsibility of parenting the youth. One of the tasks of parents is to prepare their children to be self-sufficient, an arduous task that is not a single event but a series of events that occur along a continuum of time. Child welfare agencies face serving an increasing proportion

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of adolescents in substitute care, with the expectation of providing service to meet their transition needs before discharge from care: the ability to obtain adequate housing, complete high school, procure and maintain employment, achieve positive social relationships, perform daily living skills, and live independently of the child welfare system.

The combination of low self-esteem, low motivation and low expectations leaves too many dependent on the benefits system. Social services, school and caretakers do not plan effectively for the education of care levers and are often unclear about their respective roles. Those responsible for their day to day care do not value education highly enough, while school and career service often have low expectations of these young people. The importance of education is taken for granted by most parents and local authorities, for they are not aware that it is the key to success in adult life. There are so many people in and out of their lives that nobody keeps a handle on where they are going or what they are doing. While in care it is about


making children feel good about themselves. Children are more likely to do well if they feel comfortable about who they are."

Educational opportunities are limited by the low expectations of social workers and caretakers. Whatever the child's level of ability or past school record, it is simply assumed that he or she will leave at the first opportunity and if lucky, find a job. There is rarely any questions of career planning or vocational advice. " From one perspective, that the issue of the education careers of disadvantaged young people is given low priority and even total lack of attention, might appear surprising, particularly to those who believe in the inherent value of education and its empowering nature. Records of the educational careers of individual children were also generally non-existent in any coherent, accessible form. Where the records that were available, were by way of standard school reports and review forms (in some cases, educational psychologist reports) in case files."

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"Felicity Fletcher-Campbell and Christopher Hall, "the Education of Children in Care," Educational Research 32, no. 3 (Winter 1990): 186-192."
The early evidence strongly indicated that children and young people for whom local authorities have a clearly defined parental responsibility are far more likely to be educationally disadvantaged than other children.¹⁰ Due to the poor attention given to education, under the Children Act of 1989, local authorities must prepare young people for leaving care and advise them after they have gone.¹¹ As several contributors to this issue show the good intentions of the Children Act in urging, and even requiring, collaboration between education and social services, have been largely negated by the erosion of the role of local education authorities and the introduction of market principles which makes avoidance of expenditure a top priority.¹²

Although government agencies at the national, state and local levels spend billions of dollars annually on foster care, no precise data are available to describe the population of children in foster care in the United States. However, it is estimated the number in foster care in the United States increased by 6% between 1982 and 1992. As a


¹¹Frances Meegan, "Corporate Parents Who Fail Children in Their Care," The Times Educational Supplement (July/August 1996): 11-12.

result, the proportion of all children in foster care increased from four per thousand in 1982 to six per thousand in 1992.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Group Homes}

In taking a look at group homes, it falls to the group home to counteract such negative influences and to help its residents adapt to life at school.\textsuperscript{14} After residents have been enrolled in school, group homes must help them adapt to the structured school environment and meet academic standards. The youths face the task of making new friends and finding a place in the life of the school. Some may lack adequate motivation to attend school regularly and to break away from patterns of negative behavior. Without assistance, such residents are likely to fail in both the school and the group home’s program.\textsuperscript{15}

At first thought, this function of a group home seems simple. The home merely enrolls each new resident in the local public school which is required to provide adequate education for all youngsters living in the area. In some localities, however, group homes must be prepared for serious obstacles. The quality of local schools may be

\textsuperscript{13}Eugene M. Lewit, "Children in Foster Care," The Future of Children 3, no. 3 (Winter 1993), 192-200.


\textsuperscript{15}Ibid.
inadequate. They may have low standards, unappealing curricula, limited extracurricular activities, and standards of discipline that are either too permissive or too rigid. Special education classes may be absent or inadequate. The student body may include a relatively high proportion of tough or streetwise youths who devalue education while drawing prestige from violent and/or illegal behavior.

Getting their residents to attend school regularly is a difficult task for group homes. Truancy reflects not only the attitudes of the resident but the quality of the school. There are still children homes throughout the country where eighty percent are not attending school at one time.

The actual performance of group homes has proved uneven. They have definitely filled a need by providing an increased number of slots where troubled kids may go. However, group homes have received considerable adverse publicity in drugs and sex scandals, resulting in decreased community support (especially in areas where group homes have attempted to locate) and raising serious questions

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about proper screening of personnel. Without homes being established in areas served by high quality schools capable of assimilating their residents and meeting their educational needs, group homes will continue to carry negative stigmas such as these.

Delays in enrolling residents are not uncommon. If the family of a new resident live in the local area, a group home usually has no difficulty in enrolling the youth in the local school. Problems can arise, however, when a group home admits a youth from a different geographic area. Due to the number of problems already faced by group homes, they can supplement the education of their residents by helping them become achievers at school and improving their social and economic opportunities after graduation. Homes can help to offset the cultural deprivation experienced by many of their residents while stimulating new interest that divert youthful energy from negative behavior.

Schools

In recent years states and localities have enacted laws to clarify the responsibility of public school for the


20Ibid.
education of children in residential care. Generally, new rules have facilitated school enrollments for group home youngsters. However, even the most precise laws cannot overcome the resistance of uncooperative school officials. It is the school itself that determines what will be taught and how. The school may be chaotic or regimented, stimulating or monotonous, sensitive or indifferent to individual needs and there is not much the home can do about it. In fact, school officials may blame the group home for their own deficiencies, attributing all truancy, inattentiveness, and lack of progress to inadequate discipline or service in the home. The schools also must accept responsibility for combating the youngsters alienation from formal education. Because most group home residents continue to attend public schools after admission, the home depends on the school to identify their learning handicaps, offer supportive services, provide stimulating and relevant courses and maintain a positive social environment. There is not much a group home can do to overcome the learning handicaps and negative attitudes of its residents if the local school is of poor quality.  

Prejudice presents still another problem. By the time youngsters have been enrolled, evaluated and where necessary, placed in special education classes, their status as inhabitants of a group home may become widely known in

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21Ibid., 159-174.
the school. Their frequent meetings with school counselors and the special attendance forms that some homes ask teachers to fill out also help to label them as "different" from other students. Unless school personnel are sensitive to that problem, the young people may become victims of prejudice that interferes with their adaptation at school. Prejudice can make school an unpleasant or forbidding place and dissolve a youth's motivation for learning and behaving in a positive manner.  

Some children may not want to go to school because of the perceived stigma of being in the care system, and they fear failure at yet another school and often refuse to go, feeling let down by an education system which can seem uncaring and even cruel.  

As one residential worker quoted by Carlen (1992) said, "a number of schools are prejudiced against children in care and respond to even the slightest misdemeanor by asking the care staff to remove them from school." Some of these children are made to feel so unwanted by the schools they are supposed to attend, that exclusion may initially be welcomed, but they soon find that they are not wanted in the residential unit either and that care staff adopt a punitive attitude towards them. Boredom is likely to lead to minor delinquencies or running away and get them off on a

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22Ibid.

deteriorating spiral of behaviors, and once admitted to school, the younger may be suspended or expelled on the slightest pretext, such as a minor disciplinary incident.\textsuperscript{24}

There are residential units in parts of the country where none of the residents are attending school. Research on truancy by Carlen (1992) found that a significant cause of non-attendance by children in residential or foster care was stigmatizing and humiliating treatment by teachers and bullying and name calling by other pupils which was ignored by teachers.\textsuperscript{25} The teachers generally had rather low expectations of our children’s educational attainment, and teacher expectations have often been suggested as an important factor in pupil progress.\textsuperscript{26}

Along with the emotional trauma of repeated separations from caretakers, this instability has a powerful effect on the school adjustment of foster children. Frequent foster home changes can mean frequent changes in schools and adjustments to new friends, teachers, and group norms both in and outside of the classroom. Foster children also often need to adjust to new educational expectations


\textsuperscript{25}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{26}Matthew Colton, Anthony Heath and Jane Aldgate, "Factors Which Influence the Educational Attainment of Children in Foster Family Care," \textit{Community Alternatives} 7, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 15-36.
and curricula that vary from school to school and changes in the pace at which material is taught. These changes can be bewildering and discouraging to a child. Teachers and foster parents may not be able to recognize learning disabilities or other problems that were not fully assessed at the last school or that may have been assessed and not communicated to the new school or group home. Many group home youths did poorly at school prior to their placement. Low grades, bad conduct, truancy, and dropouts are common problems. To a large extent, difficulties at school may have reflected psychological disturbance, physical and cultural deprivation, and the devaluation of education by the peer group.

It is not uncommon for children in foster care to move through a number of such placements each located within different education authorities. At times, little attempt is made to synchronize care and education time tables, with the result that placement changes involving changes of school were made without references to school terms or natural dividing points. Children were given

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little help in adjusting to new timetables, rules or curriculum content and might even miss an important examination as a result of a social work decision.\textsuperscript{30}

At times, education is seen exclusively as a matter of entitlement, opportunity and attainment and therefore, outside the remit and jurisdiction of social service authorities. In this way the education of children within the local authority care system remains structurally marginal and dependent on cooperation and communication patterns between departments rather than on direct service provision. The education system itself needs to be supported and enhanced if it is to develop its own potential to meet the diverse needs of its children.\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{Reasons for Being in Foster Care}

Children looked after by local authorities suffer discrimination at every level, reflecting and compounding other forms of discrimination which many of them also experience because of their color, membership of minority ethnic groups, disabilities, health status or sexual orientation. This discrimination has a very negative impact on their schooling, which is in turn reflected in their


emotional adjustment and behavior. Among the many reasons for potential academic problems in this population are: difficulty to concentrate, an increased number of behavioral problems and a possibility of depression.

Difficulty concentrating in school is one of the behavioral indicators of child abuse. According to Seith L. Goldstein (1987), the causes for these problems of paying attention stem from "the emotions or bad feelings that come from the abuse, afraid of the consequences of his actions at home, wracked by guilt, afraid of what will happen. . . . " This preoccupation leads to difficulties concentrating on tasks and children might exhibit short attention spans. Although these students may be physically present at school, psychologically they are not involved in learning and consequently school performance suffers.

Depression is another problem stemming from abuse and affects children's academic performance negatively. This can lead to sleep disturbances, such as nightmares, waking up during the night, inability to sleep, or excessive sleep. Signs of depression are many and may include feeling unusually tired, being physically ill, denying feelings, or

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refusing to eat. Again, learning problems are likely to occur in children suffering from depression.\textsuperscript{33}

The traumas of being taken into care or other aspects of the children’s histories, may take considerable time before the children recover.\textsuperscript{34} The social and emotional problems that stem from being abused and neglected, combined with a transient home life in the foster care system, have a powerful effect on many foster children’s ability to learn. These problems became very apparent in school settings when they are not addressed in a comprehensive manner by either the social services or school systems.\textsuperscript{35} The abuse and neglect associated with cognitive delays have been persistent findings of previous research with younger children. In the study summarized in this article, academic failure emerged as the single most dramatic and consistent risk factor for school age adolescent neglected children, whose depressed test scores, low teacher assessments of academic performance, and high rates of absence set them

\textsuperscript{33}Hanna Colombey, "Maintaining Basic Skills Through Summer Thematic Tutoring with Exceptional Students in Residential Foster Care" (M.A. thesis, Nova Southeastern University, 1995), 89.


strikingly apart from their non-maltreated peers.\textsuperscript{36} Foster children have special needs that stem from being neglected and abused that can result in burnout in foster care providers and in multiple placements.\textsuperscript{37}

Behavioral problems are often demonstrated by abused children. They can range from overly complaint behavior to acting-out, aggressive behavior. Both types of behavior patterns are used by the children to cope with the abuse and are likely to have a negative effect on academic learning. Overly compliant children may not indicate to the teacher when they need help and acting out students may frequently be in conflict with school rules and suffering the consequences.\textsuperscript{38} Another possible explanation for the children's lack of progress may be low expectations, either on the part of the caregivers or the children's teachers. It has often been suggested that low expectations may become

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\textsuperscript{38}Hanna Colombey, "Maintaining Basic Skills Through Summer Thematic Tutoring with Exceptional Students in Residential Foster Care" (M.A. thesis, Nova Southeastern University, 1995), 89.
\end{flushright}
a self-fulfilling prophecy which reinforces lack of achievement.\textsuperscript{39}

As a consequence, the specific educational help and support that they may require within the context of their personal circumstances can usually be accessed only through the special education sector within most local authorities. This creates a tendency for children within the care system to become categorized as having emotional and behavioral difficulties as a necessary precondition to receiving help; they may in fact only need it on a temporary basis, perhaps as a result of severe stress caused by family circumstances or separation.\textsuperscript{40}

There is, however, considerable uncertainty about the causes of the low educational attainment of children in care. Several studies suggest that children in care have a poor start and that this is the major variable influencing their school performance. Finally, it has been suggested that the impermanence of many foster placements and the


sense of failure consequently felt by the children, may adversely affect educational progress.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{Strengths and Disadvantages of Foster Care}

The research is saturated with negative findings and a very few positive findings, regarding foster children and education; however, the research is very limited in this area of study. In 1990, a survey by the Children's Services Division of the state of Oregon assessed the educational performance of children in long-term foster care. This study found that children who had multiple foster placements during the school year were less likely to be above grade level or to be involved in extracurricular activities than children who had a sustained period of time in one school. The children who had experienced multiple placement and who were identified as needing special education were also less likely to be receiving those services than children with more stable placements.\textsuperscript{12} Nationally, the percentage of children in need of special education ranged from 11\% to 12\%.\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{13}D. Murphy, "The Prevalence of Handicapping Conditions Among Juvenile Delinquents," \textit{Remedial and Special Education} \textbf{7}, no. 3 (1986): 7-17.
Earlier studies focused on youth’s educational needs and have found that the youth, especially foster children, have educational problems. The 1990 Westate study estimated that only 44% of the 18-year-olds discharged from foster care between January 1987 and January 1988 had completed high school at the time of discharge. Barth’s 1988 follow-up study of 55 youth who had been discharged within the last 10 years from the California Child Welfare System found that only 45% had graduated high school when they left foster care. A study conducted by the Citizens Committee for Children of New York found that foster youth had serious deficits in reading levels. The youth experience a general absence of stability: 58% had three or more different living arrangements prior to discharge.4

Children who have experienced disturbance and disruption are likely to be already educationally disadvantaged. It is even more important, therefore, that educational deficits are identified and made the special focus of attention. It has been clearly demonstrated that children living in the most favorable care placements, that is within stable and long term foster homes continue to perform well below average at school, even compared with

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their peers who remained in disadvantaged families.\textsuperscript{45} Several recent studies focusing on the adolescents' educational needs in group homes have found that only 34% to 39% complete high school by time of discharge.\textsuperscript{46}

However, our findings suggest that children's early histories before entry to care may have a profound effect on their educational attainment (and, indeed, behavior) in middle childhood. Children who can be presumed to have experienced poor parenting, and had been removed compulsorily from their parents did not appear to recover educationally as easily as those whose care had been necessitated by parental illness or by crisis related to economic hardship.\textsuperscript{47} Also, evidence collected which suggests that children's early histories before entry into care may have a profound effect on their educational attainment in middle childhood and this may well account for the unexpectedly low attainment of the foster children.\textsuperscript{48}


\textsuperscript{47}Matthew Colton, Anthony Heath and Jane Aldgate, "Factors Which Influences the Educational Attainment of Children in Foster Family Care," Community Alternatives 7, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 15-36.

Abused children placed in a residential foster care situation are educationally at risk. Eckenrode (1993) stated that, following a study of the problem, these students performed lower on standardized academic tests, received lower grades, and had more discipline referrals. It is now well established that children in care do not achieve well within the educational system and perform below national norms for their age groups. This raises important questions about the operation of care and its benefits for the children involved.

Yet evidence is growing that the state is failing children for whom it stands in "loco parentis," those separated from their parents and looked after by local authorities. All these problems affect academic learning negatively and promote an educationally at risk situation.

The positive findings of this research were found with similar results in the 1990 Westate study, were indicated for youth who had been in care longer and left care older (19 years vs. 18 years) 62% of the 19 year olds

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"Hanna Colombey, "Maintaining Basic Skills Through Summer Thematic Tutoring with Exceptional Students in Residential Foster Care" (M.A. thesis, Nova Southeastern University, 1995), 89.


had completed high school at discharge.\footnote{Ronne J. Cook, "Are We Helping Foster Care Youth Prepare for Their Future?," \textit{Children and Youth Services Review} 16, no. 3/4 (1994): 213-229.} A review of the literature indicated that tutoring is an effective method to remediate and maintain students basic academic skills. One on one tutoring is one of the most effective strategies to prevent early academic failure, and it is believed that all forms of tutoring programs that use certified teachers as tutors are beneficial. Concluding from these studies tutoring is documented to be an effective method to remedial or maintain basic skills. One to one tutoring is preferable, but whenever this is not possible, small group tutoring can also be beneficial. The frequency of the tutoring appears to be more effective than no tutoring.\footnote{Hanna Colombey, "Maintaining Basic Skills Through Summer Thematic Tutoring With Exceptional Students in Residential Foster Care" (M.A. thesis, Nova Southeastern University, 1995), 89.}

\textbf{Literature Gap}

The education of children in care attracted remarkably little interest from childcare writers and researchers until quite recently. A literature survey carried out in 1983 found that at that time, no book on the subject had been published in Britain or the United States and it rated no more than a passing mention in the standard child welfare texts. Some indeed ignored this dimension of the child's life altogether, not ever listing school or
education in the index. Evidence on social work decision making suggested that the neglect of education in the literature was reflected in practice. This lack of concern for education within the care system is paralleled by a similar lack of awareness of the special position of children in care within the education system. The education of children in care used to be defined (and often still is) as referring those taught in onsite facilities attached to community homes, not to the much larger number attending neighborhood schools. Children in care as a category are entirely left out of the extensive literature on inequality and disadvantage in education, nor do they appear in research on children with disabilities or special needs.\textsuperscript{54}

The discrepancy between the number of foster children identified as needing special education and the number actually receiving services can be partly explained by the fact that information about foster children's educational needs is not tracked by their caseworkers in any consistent fashion. Thus, when a child changes foster homes and schools, the knowledge of his or her educational needs often stays with the prior home or school. When a child is placed in group foster homes, his or her care is entrusted to a new authority and often a new school whose knowledge of that child's development may be sketchy or nonexistent. Social

workers most often assume that the task of attending to the child’s educational needs will be handled by the school or the group home. But the school system often assumes that each student is accompanied by a parent or responsible adult who is knowledgeable about the student and who can take an active part in assisting the child with school requirements and advocate for special needs. Combining these false assumptions with the trauma foster children experience before, during and sometimes after they are placed in a new home and a new school is a recipe for disaster. It is no surprise that foster children have higher rates of school failure, behavioral problems and dropping out.55 The educational attainments and post 16 destinations of young people in public care are not monitored locally or nationally. But in recent years, at least, the visibility of this “corporate” failure has increased slightly.56

Uncertainty about the precise number and characteristics of children in the foster care system, the reasons for the apparent growth in the size of the foster care population in recent years, and the consequences of increased reliance on kinship care all underscore the need for a better information management system for the nation’s


56Frances Meegan, "Corporate Parents Who Fail Children in Their Care," The Times Educational Supplement (July/August 1996): 11-12.
substitute care programs. At a minimum, such a system would contain relevant but concise placement history data on each foster child in the United States.\textsuperscript{57}

In conclusion, youngsters in child welfare are an inherently disenfranchised group characterized by experiences of abuse, neglect, rejection, loss, poverty, educational interruption and family disruption. Also, a majority of children are placed in foster care as a result of abuse and neglect. Parental homelessness and the growing impact of AIDS resulting from intravenous drug abuse are other prominent contributors to the escalating numbers of foster care placements. Nationally, of the one half million youngsters in out of home care more than 360,000 are foster youth.\textsuperscript{58} There is an estimated 60,000 children who are either in foster care or children’s homes. Many are disoriented by changing schools as often as they change their home address and may be isolated or bullied by their peers.\textsuperscript{59}

This rapid increase of children needing placement has overburdened the foster care and child welfare system and created a shortage of appropriate foster homes and group

\textsuperscript{57}\textsuperscript{Eugene M. Lewit, "Children in Foster Care," The Future of Children 3, no. 3 (Winter 1993): 192-200.}

\textsuperscript{58}\textsuperscript{Antronette K. Yancey, "Identity Formation and Social Maladaptation in Foster Adolescents," Adolescence 27, no. 108 (Winter 1992): 819-829.}

\textsuperscript{59}\textsuperscript{Sara Parker, "Home from Home," Times Educational Supplement (May 31, 1996): PSS4-6.}
homes for children in need. Nevertheless, the authors found themselves unable to reach a clear conclusion that the experience of being in care actually leads to or contributes to low attainment. They suggest that admission into care may be a symptom of family problems which have a negative effect on child development and that this then manifests itself in poor school performance. In other words, even long-term and settled placements did not seem to have overcome the educational disadvantages of early child abuse or neglect. Aftercare lifestyle data reflect the inadequacies of the foster care system in addressing these issues. While outcome reach is far from adequate, studies across the U.S. have shown that foster care graduates are vastly overrepresented.

Theoretical Framework

Within the literature review it is stated more than once that the past has a great impact along with other outside forces, on the way a child performs academically. The literature review also points out that even with stability and educational assistance a child may not

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overcome educational disadvantages due to other systems functioning in their lives.

Systems Theory is employed when examining the variation of academic performance of children coming into a residential group home setting. This theory examines the individual in constant interaction or transaction, with members of their immediate family, with other relatives, with networks of friends and acquaintances, with employment, health, welfare, and a multitude of other systems, including value systems that are shaped by the interactions, past and present, with one's family, culture and society.⁶²

A primary characteristic of any system is that all its parts are in transactions, so whatever affects one part of the system to some degree affects all parts. Adaptation is referred to as a transactional process in which people influence and shape their environment and in turn, are influenced and shaped by them.⁶³

Knowing what constitutes systems theory it is clear in examining how academic performance is affected by many factors. Although children may be taken from their homes they are usually allowed family contact whether supervised or unsupervised. As long as children are exposed to


⁶³Ibid., 28-30.
previous home environments the impact of the families is very present, and their past is still very real for them.

Children leaving dysfunctional homes or other placements have a host of emotional and health issues to deal with. These issues are distractions for children and can lead to education taking a back seat until their needs are taken care of.

A very important system that plays a crucial part in a child’s life, as stated earlier, is the value systems that are shaped by the interactions, past and present with one’s family, culture and society. Even after a child has been removed from a dysfunctional situation the value system that is instilled in them is still very powerful and often never erased. These memories are causes for distractions, making it difficult to concentrate on academics.

In conveying this involvement of many other systems playing a part in the life of a child, it is important to start where the problems seem most overwhelming to them. Only then can distractions be minimized and the child can take an interest in learning.

Statement of the Hypothesis

Hypothesis: Stability provided from a long-term group home will improve academic performance. Academic performance is measured by obtaining the grade point average, first semester grades, second semester grades, age and grade the child is currently enrolled in.
The dependent variable, or variable being influenced, is the academic performance of the child once coming into the program. The independent variable, or variable that is doing the influencing, is the stable environment. Stable environment constitutes a child being in the program for a minimal of six months.
Terms and Definitions

Academic Performance is a form of measurement in the educational setting based on grade point average, daily grades and attendance.

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is a disease caused by a virus that attacks the body's immune system."\(^4\)

Educational Services are services that offer assistance in order to enhance one's learning ability through tutoring, the provision of appropriate school supplies and productive environment for daily studying.

Empower is to provide a person the knowledge and authority to make a change in their own life.

Foster Care refers to the formal out of home placement of children in alternative residential settings. Foster care has long been viewed as a temporary service pending a more desirable, permanent arrangement for the child. Research suggests that oftentimes is not a temporary service and for many children involves years of long-term care."\(^5\)


Residential Group Home is a facility that houses people temporarily or on a permanent basis with special needs that would not otherwise have a place to live.

Stable Environment constitutes a dependable facility for sheltering, aiding and affecting the growth and development of individuals.

Steady School Program refers to a child being enrolled within one school system for a minimum of two years without disruption of placement.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This is an exploratory study that is intended to explore the academic performance of children in a residential group home setting. It is intended to explore the academic performance of children living in a long-term group home and the impact that stability has on the improvement.

Sampling

The sample consisted of thirty (30) academic records of youths who were placed in a long-term residential setting. Of this sample there were fifteen (15) males and fifteen (15) females. All children are placed through the Department of Human Resources in Alabama and have been in previous foster care before coming into the care of Brantwood Children’s Home. The academic records were from females and males ranging from the ages of 12 to 16 and all were residents for a minimum of six months.

The academic records were obtained from the files of the residents and meet the criteria for age (13-21), minimum length of stay (6 months) and grade the child is enrolled in (7th to 9th grade). The data was collected by using convenience sampling. This involves taking elements readily available to the researcher.
Data Collection

The researcher received permission from the Program Manager of Brantwood Children’s Home to view the files of residents of the facility or in the facility. The researcher reviewed the academic files of 30 residents of Brantwood Children’s Home. All academic files remained confidential and the identity of the child was in no way jeopardized by the research.

After selecting the files that met the criteria for the study, the needed information was obtained from the files in order to complete the research. The information obtained included: the number of months a child has been in the program, with six months being the minimum. The number of months was compared to the grade point average of the child for one complete year of school. The number of months was also compared to the first and second semester grades for one complete year. The age and the grade of the child were also obtained to observe if it had an impact on the significance of the data.

Data Analysis

The collected data was coded and analyzed using the SPSS program. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data; this included frequency distributions, percentages, standard deviations and the mean. The tool of cross tabulations, using the statistic of chi-square was
also used to analyze the data to determine whether relationships existed between the variables.
CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS

This chapter will summarize the data collected from the files of Brantwood Children’s Home. Table 1 represents frequencies and percentages of the data related to academic performance. Table 2 represents bivariate correlations of the study’s variables. The confidence level was set at .05 to determine whether to reject or accept the study hypotheses.

There was a total of thirty files used in this study. All participants were between the ages of 12-14, with 50.0 percent being male and 50.0 percent being female. Of the files studied, 33.3 percent had been in the program between 0-12 months, 33.3 percent had been in the program between 13-25 months, 20.0 percent had been in the program between 26-38 months and 13-3 percent between 39-51 months. As far as grades the children were in, 33.0 percent were in the 7th grade, 40.0 percent in the 8th grade, and 26.7 percent in the 9th grade.

Findings from the frequency distribution indicate that the number of months in the program had a mean of 2.13. The standard deviation for this variable was 1.04. Fifty percent of the children had a grade point average between 0.0-1.99, and 50 percent of the grade point averages were between 2.0-3.99. The frequency distributions indicate a
### Table 1
**Frequency Distribution of Academic Performance**
(N = 30)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of time in program (months)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 - 12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 - 25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 - 38</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39 - 51</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.30</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade point average</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.0 - 0.99</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0 - 1.99</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>36.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0 - 2.99</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.0 - 3.99</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First semester average grade</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.0 - 0.99</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0 - 1.99</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0 - 2.99</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26.780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.0 - 3.99</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second semester average grade</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.0 - 0.99</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0 - 1.99</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0 - 2.99</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>36.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.0 - 3.99</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade child is in</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of child</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean score of 2.53 for grade point average. The standard deviation is 9.37.
Bivariate Correlations of the Study’s Variables

The hypothesis stated that stability would have a statistically significant impact on academic performance. The analysis of this relationship between stability (length of time in the program) and academic performance revealed that there was a statistical significance between the variable. However, there was no statistical significance between the other variables in the study. Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted.

TABLE 2

BIVARIATE CORRELATIONS OF ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND STABILITY
(N = 30)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable: Academic Performance</th>
<th>Gamma</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Chi-Square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length of time in program</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20.31*</td>
<td>.4413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First semester average grade</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16.31</td>
<td>.0607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second semester average grade</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16.14</td>
<td>.4672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade child is in</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>03.88</td>
<td>.6936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of child</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>03.88</td>
<td>.6936</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(p = .05)
*There is a significant relationship
CHAPTER FIVE
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This research was done in an attempt to explore the educational performance of children once entering a long-term, group home environment. The results confirmed previous research documenting the low educational attainment of children in care. The findings served to reinforce the message conveyed by the research found, that namely the children in public care are not well served by the educational system or by entering a stable environment. The study does in fact confirm that the existence of the problem regarding education of children in care is prevalent.

In attempting to explain the poor educational attainment and lack of relative progress of foster children, the findings suggest that children’s early histories before entry to care may have a profound effect on their educational attainment. Children in care also experience a variety of social and emotional problems that stem from their history of being abused or neglected and from the disruption of being placed in foster care.

Other reasons for low educational attainment could be explained by repeated separation from caretakers, frequent moves, poor school systems and insensitivity from the school personnel regarding the needs of the child. Health issues can also be considered as an explanation for poor academic performance. These possible reasons for why the results
occurred are the same reasons explored in previous research and have been consistent in most studies within the literature.

A child’s educational performance is affected by many stressors functioning in their lives. Systems theory deals with the many areas causing discord in a child’s life and expresses the importance of needing to know the impact the systems have in a child’s life.

Education occupies a central place in the residence program because the consequences of learning failure are dreadful. A child spends six hours or more a day in school, spends or should spend time after school on homework and apart from the defined responsibilities, has school on their mind many other hours during the day. If such a large portion of the children’s total experience is unhappy and troubled, much of their life is filled with defeat. The consequences of school failure affects the future in terms of what is possible for a person to achieve occupationally in earnings and in social status. Education is not regarded high as a priority on a child’s list when they are dealing with other life’s stressors.

Limitations of the Study

The major limitation of this study was consistent with other studies that have been previously performed. First, the data obtained from the files was secondary data and recordkeeping of the child’s educational history was
lacking. Previous school records were not often forwarded each time the child changed placements or schools. Second, the data collected was based on a child being in this placement for a minimal time frame of six months, which should have been longer, possibly a minimal time frame of one year. Findings in this study indicated that being in placement for a minimum of a year or more, showed a more positive increase in academic performance. The length also would give more time for files to be updated or created regarding the child’s educational history.

Suggested Research Directions

Suggested directions for future research should include a study of the child’s history which preceded them coming into the long-term group home. The previous research stresses the importance of a child’s history and the vital role it plays on a child’s emotional physical health. It is also important to check schools record to make sure that no child has been tested or is receiving special education classes, to ensure that educational attainment is not due to learning disabilities.

Implications for Social Work Practice

In a perfect world, children would be able to grow up in a healthy home environment with no abuse or neglect and their parents would be there to guide and support them through their educational career. This would also mean that
the social work profession would not be as needed in this society, at least in its current form. Unfortunately, this scenario is not reality and solutions for this problem has to be addressed.

It is not to imply that the only answer to the educational problems of children in care is early intervention and placements into highly qualified families that are willing to monitor the children’s educational progress. Rather, the point is that gains can be made, but they do not come easily and cheaply. Average inputs are not enough for children with above-average educational needs. Clearly, the educational needs of separated children must be given much higher priority.

A model program that has had a major impact on the population of children in foster care is the "Looking After Children Project" which is currently being promoted by the Department of Health. The project rightly seeks to focus the attention of social workers and caregivers on dimensions of children’s development that are usually neglected when the parenting role is shared between several adults and agencies. Emphasis is placed on the importance of education from the earliest years. Schedules have been developed for each group and are designed to ensure that workers have done those things which well informed parents would do to promote their children’s educational progress.
Naturally, it is important that attempts to use the schedules are supported with adequate resources, otherwise there is a danger of creating unrealistic expectations of social workers and caregivers. Further, it is vital that local authority such as social services and education departments work together to forge an interdisciplinary approach. Social workers and caregivers require a high level of support from educational psychologists and schools in assessing the special educational needs of separated children and in formulating plans that will allow such children to escape from disadvantage.\(^1\)

An increasing number of social workers are finding themselves having significant contact with children having a wide range of needs in their lives. This study is significant to social work practice because understanding the importance of education and providing early intervention so that the child can have a chance in the educational arena is vital to the future of the child. It is demonstrated in the research that education is often left off the agenda of social workers and it is also too often left up to the school alone to handle the needs of the child. This has to become an issue for everyone involved in the child’s life.

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and planning for his/her future, only then can projects such as the one mentioned become valuable in making a difference.
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