Educational Needs of Maltreated Children in Foster Care in the U.S.:
Developing collaboration between educational and child welfare systems

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Introduction

Child maltreatment continues to be a serious social problem in the United States. According to a report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2004), approximately 896,000 children were found to be victims of maltreatment in 2002. In that year, an estimated 532,000 children were in foster care. Although no accurate data are available regarding the reasons for foster care entrance, many studies have reported that the majority of children in foster care have experienced child maltreatment (e.g., Conger, Rebeck, & Vera Institute of Justice, 2001; Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994). For example, a study in New York City found that 65 percent of the school age children who entered foster care between 1995 and 1999 entered care because of abuse or neglect (Conger et al., 2001).

Maltreated children in the U.S., especially those who must be removed from their parents’ custody and placed in foster care, are at risk of school failure (Altshuler, 1997; Gustavsson, 1991; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, and Thompson, 2003; Rosenfeld & Richman, 2003; Zetlin, Weinberg & Kimm, 2003). Difficult schooling experiences in turn are strong predictors of later difficulties in maltreated children’s adolescence and adulthood, such as school dropout, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, unemployment and increasing needs for welfare assistance (Dodge, Pettit, & Bathe, 1994; Kronick & Gargis, 1998; Parker & Asher, 1987; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002).

Despite the fact that most children living in foster care attend public schools, few mechanisms exist to support successful collaboration between public child welfare systems and public educational systems (Altshuler, 2003). Although the necessity of collaboration between professionals in implementing social work practice has long been addressed and school social workers’ potential roles as service coordinators are well documented (e.g., Altshuler, 1997; Franklin & Allen-Meares, 1997; Freeman & Pennekamp, 1988; Graham & Barter, 1999; Gustavsson, 1991; Lynn, McKay & Atkins, 2002; Rittner & Sacks, 1997), research has repeatedly revealed difficulties in collaboration between professionals in the educational and child welfare systems (e.g., Altshuler, 2003; Conger et al., 2001; Zetlin et al., 2003).

This paper addresses the educational needs of children in foster care in the United States. The author (1) reviews previous literature on the school performance of maltreated children who are placed in foster care as well as collaboration problems between educational and child welfare systems, (2) presents new data on recent governmental attempts to meet these children’s educational needs, and (3) develops recommendations on how governments can better assist future cross-system collaboration efforts to improve the educational performance of maltreated children in foster care.

School Performance of Maltreated Children Placed in Foster Care

Maltreated children placed in foster care face serious difficulties at school for multiple reasons. Two major reasons for their difficulties are their maltreatment history and foster care status.

*Key words: maltreated children in foster care, education, child welfare
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Maltreatment History

The effects of child maltreatment are profound (e.g., Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993; Leiter & Johnsen, 1994; Staudt, 2001). Maltreated children suffer from cognitive, behavioral, and emotional problems (Conger et al., 2001). They are more likely to demonstrate poor academic performance and repeat a grade. They tend to exhibit problematic peer interactions, and have discipline referrals and suspensions (Eckenrode et al., 1993). Problematic peer interactions tend to cause rejection by peers, which exacerbate their feelings of loneliness and decrease motivation for success in school (Fantuzzo & McWayne, 2002; Howe & Parke, 2001). In addition, maltreated children tend to be at increased risk for psychiatric problems, such as depression, low self esteem, and sad affects (Gustavsson, 1991), which also interfere with maltreated children’s success in school. Further, maltreated children are, in general, socially and economically disenfranchised, making it more difficult for them to gain access to school and community resources (Rittner & Sacks, 1995).

There are many possibilities to explain these problems. Child development theorists would suggest that neglected children suffer from cognitive deficits acquired during the developmental stages of life and that these deficits contribute to later academic failure (Conger et al., 2001). That is, learning opportunities lost at one age retard or limit later cognitive development. The consequences may be most readily seen in poor performance in reading and language achievement tests (Leiter & Johnsen, 1994).

Research findings indicate that maltreated children exhibit both more aggressive and more withdrawal behaviors when compared to children who were not maltreated (Parker & Herrera, 1996; Staudt, 2001). Some may attribute these problems to young children’s insecure emotional bonds, or attachment, with significant caregivers. An infant learns a prototype of interpersonal relationships through interaction with a primary caregiver, usually the mother (Dodge et al., 1994). Secure attachments in infancy have been associated with positive adaptive capacities when the child is 3 to 5 years old. In contrast, infants who have a disorganized attachment tend to become very hostile, aggressive preschoolers. Insecurely attached children also tend to become very withdrawn, because they become mistrusting and reason in defensive and impoverished ways about social situations (Newman & Newman, 1999; Parker & Herrera, 1996).

Social learning theory suggests that aggressive behavior develops through imitating the aggressive and coercive behaviors by the abusing adult, direct operant reinforcement for aggressive acts, and vicarious reinforcement through observational learning (Coie & Dodge, 1998). Maltreated children’s withdrawal tendencies can also be explained by this theory. Punishment for social approach is a common occurrence in abusive families and is likely to discourage abused children from approaching peers, and to contribute to feelings of social anxiousness in peer groups (Parker & Herrera, 1996). Conditioned fear of anxiety results in later generalized social avoidance.

Sexual abuse has other hypothesized consequences. For example, Finkelhor’s traumagenic approach will explain well sexually abused children’s difficulties. These children experience traumatic sexualization, stigmatization, betrayal and powerlessness, which lead them to low self-esteem, diminished self-efficacy, problems in managing anger, and mistrust of adults. Sexual abuse may not predict cognitive deficits, but may cause unsuccessful integration into the institution, raising dropout and absenteeism rates and increasing difficulties in children relating to teachers as adults in authority (Leiter & Johnsen, 1994).

An ecological perspective helps us to understand the broader environment in which child maltreatment occurs (Cicchetti & Toth, 1993; Coie & Dodge, 1998). Although child abuse occurs in families from any socioeconomic status, poverty is a significant risk factor of child abuse, and poverty in the inner cities has a profoundly negative impact on children’s educational success (Dupper & Poertner, 1997).

Foster Care Status

In addition to the effects of maltreatment, their alternative living status can seriously compromise the effort of maltreated children to succeed at school. The living arrangements of children placed in foster care tend to be unstable and unsure. Foster children may change placements frequently, thereby experiencing more disruptions of peer relations and losses of community supports (Altshuler, 1997; Rittner
Changes in placement often require changes in schools (Christian, 2003). Children consequently often struggle to adjust to new educational curricula, changes in teaching styles and expectations, and variations in the pace at which material is presented (Ayasse, 1995; Christian, 2003). In addition, school disruptions often result in lost credits, delayed academic progress, repetition of grades, and delays in enrollment and transfer of student records. Under such conditions, schools fail to play their essential role: to offer a measure of protection for maltreated children from the disruption and uncertainty associated with out-of-home placement (Christian, 2003).

In addition to experiencing maltreatment and family separation, children in foster care may also experience adversity from little foster parent engagement in their schooling. Parental involvement in children’s education is known to be a key for children’s success at school. Various studies have shown that parental involvement improves students’ academic achievement, behavior, motivation, school attendance, and attitudes toward homework, and also is associated with lower dropout rates (Outland-Mitchell & Anderson, 1992). Foster parental involvement, however, often is limited. For example, they are less likely to check up on homework assignments (Blome, 1997; Rosenfeld et al., 2003). Experiencing financial constraints, children may also have to give up attaining higher education, because both child welfare agencies and foster parents are reluctant or unable to invest in foster children’s college education (Conger, et al., 2001).

Lack of involvement in foster children’s education, however, is not necessarily the personal fault of foster parents. Christian (2003) argues that foster parents typically are the most familiar with the needs of children in their care, but they often are unprepared to negotiate the complexities of the special education system, in which many foster children are placed. Foster parents and kinship caregivers historically have not been invited to participate in the educational system. They are often ignored or only superficially included in multidisciplinary and special education planning meetings, school functions, and parent-teacher associations. The isolation is exacerbated if the foster parents are ethnically or culturally different from the majority culture of the school (Altshuler, 1997). Further, frequent placement changes disrupt the authority of foster parents to represent children’s educational interests (Christian, 2003).

Stereotyping and low expectations from teachers also seem to have a negative influence on foster children’s success in education. It often is assumed that children in residential or foster care are there because of personal deficits of character or behavior, when most come into care as a result of family circumstances and through no fault of their own. Foster children are often unfairly labeled as disruptive or of low intelligence (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Schools tend not to maintain high academic expectations for these children, and not provide sufficient assistance for their adequate academic achievements (Altshuler, 2003).

Collaboration Problems between Educational and Child Welfare System

Many of the difficulties that maltreated children in foster care experience at school can be worsened because of the inadequate collaboration between the educational and child welfare systems. For example, schools, child welfare agencies and other service providers typically do not coordinate their efforts or share information about the children in their systems. Child welfare agencies often lack information about children’s academic performance and achievement. Therefore, foster children’s educational needs often go unrecognized and unattended (Christian, 2003; Zetlin et al., 2003). Zetlin et al. (2003) found that even when required to track children’s current information on attendance and academic performance, most caseworkers failed to do so. The failure to monitor educational progress has led to some children being placed in inappropriate school programs or excluded from attending school (Zetlin et al. 2003). Incomparable data systems and confidentiality rules seem to compound these problems (Christian, 2003).

One might think that teachers do not have to know about children’s foster care status, because such awareness may harm children by stigmatizing them. However, teachers need to be informed of children’s foster care experiences and pay special attention to their unique needs (Conger, et al., 2001). Even though...
foster children want to be treated just like other children, they do need extra support and attention from
teachers (Altshuler, 2003; Martin & Jackson, 2002).

Despite these needs, most schools do not record foster care or maltreatment status. Even when teachers
are aware of children’s status, they vary in the ability to work with these children, and in the degree to
which they provide challenging and interesting educational opportunities (McMilen, et al., 2003). Many
teachers also are not confident in dealing with the personal issues foster children commonly bring to
school (Karp, 2002). They have little understanding of the foster care system and the differing legal and
custodial responsibilities of biological parents, foster parents, and caseworkers (Conger, et al., 2001).
Schools and child welfare professionals lack mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities, which
creates barriers to interdisciplinary collaboration.

School personnel and child welfare professionals often face interdisciplinary conflicts such as different
professional identities and boundary issues, and difficulty in developing trusting relationships and in
finding common ground (Mitchener & Field, 1998). Schools are run by educators whose ideologies may be
strikingly different from those of social workers. Fast (2003) argues that although social workers cherish
values such as empowerment, self-actualization, and confidentiality, teachers often emphasize self-
discipline, obedience, hard work, attentiveness and other values that are conventionally thought to
contribute to a successful education. Disparate ideologies between education systems and social services
systems lead to divergent goals and objectives. Forced interdependence, scarcity of resources, differential
power and status, and lack of communication can also cause conflicts between professionals.

Although school social workers and child welfare workers share nearly identical objectives for children,
adversarial situations between them occur under some circumstances. Conflicts often arise in the area of
child protection, where differences in perceptions regarding a child’s need for state protection emerge,
which makes collaboration difficult (Altshuler, 1997).

Interdisciplinary training would help to decrease such conflicts between systems. In one study,
participant caseworkers addressed the necessity of individual as well as cross-agency training for better
collaboration. Interdisciplinary training would serve as a strategy to increase knowledge and information
about respective systems, and to develop reciprocal respect, communication, and empathy between the
professionals working in the two systems (Altshuler, 2003). However, if caseloads remain large and
professionals have little administrative support and little time and space for collaborative efforts (Bronstein,
2002), such interdisciplinary training will rarely occur. Further, without clear, consistent guidelines,
individual professionals cannot decide to what extent they could share confidential information with
professionals in other systems (Altshuler, 2003).

**Governmental Attempts to Improve Collaboration**

Problems around collaboration between educational and child welfare systems in advocating for
children in foster care cannot be solved without governmental supports. Without adequate policies and
guidelines, individual professional or agency efforts can rarely produce much success: even if possible,
they will be inefficient or limited in scope.

Recently, the federal government, in partnership with state governments, has initiated assessments to
systematically accumulate knowledge about each state’s current situation in and strategies for meeting the
educational needs of children in foster care (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration
for Children & Families [U.S. DHHS, ACF], January 2003). This section examines data from the federal
Child and Family Services Review reports, focusing on some of the issues that the previous sections have
identified as critical in improving collaborative efforts between educational and child welfare systems.

**The Federal Child and Family Services Reviews**

The federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) are regulated by the Administration for Children
and Families (ACF) and authorized by the Social Security Act Amendments of 1994. The CFSR process is a
results-based system of federal oversight of state child welfare systems, which is intended to hold states accountable for achieving seven outcomes in the broad domains of child safety, permanency and well-being. The second of three well-being outcomes, referred to as Outcome WB 2, is whether “children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs” (U.S. DHHS, ACF, January 2003).

The CFSRs are composed of two stages. The first stage is completed by the State in consultation with ACF Regional and Central Office staff and with State representatives external to the State child welfare agency. The second stage of the review process is an onsite review, conducted by a team of State and Federal representatives, peer reviewers, and external reviewers. The determination of a state’s performance on Outcome WB 2 is based on a review of records from 50 cases. States are assessed as having substantially achieved Outcome WB 2 if state performance is rated adequate in 90% or more of the cases reviewed. States are required to submit a Program Improvement Plan if found out of conformance on Outcome WB 2 or on other outcomes or systemic factors subject to review (Christian, 2003; U.S. DHHS, ACF, June 2004).

The CFSRs began in fiscal year 2001 and final reports have been issued and are available for 48 states to date. Each state has reported on the levels of compliance with the requirement, as well as both strengths and areas needing improvement (U.S. DHHS, ACF, June 2004). The author retrieved all the available reports on Outcome WB 2 from ACF’s website, and reviewed each state’s outcomes.

Among the 48 states, only 13 states achieved the 90% requirement of Outcome WB 2. Therefore, 73% of the states have not substantially achieved the outcome. States vary in the level of compliance with the requirement from 64.7% (New Jersey) to 100% (Utah). Table 1 indicates the level of compliance determined for each state.

<table>
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<th>States Above 90%</th>
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The author’s review of all the available reports identified both specific education related problems and strategies for addressing them. Based on this review, five principal issues will be addressed in the following section, with the intent both to identify promising strategies being implemented in selected states and to point to other areas in which service development is needed. These include (1) multiple school transfers, (2) monitoring academic records, (3) involvement of foster parents in foster children’s education, (4) providing appropriate educational services, and (5) school-child welfare agency relationships.
Multiple school transfers. In dealing with multiple school transfers, localities in some states have established an agreement that children can remain in their home school even if they are placed in foster care in another school district (e.g., New Jersey and Iowa). However, even with this agreement in place, transportation to the home school often is a barrier to attendance (New Jersey). If children are placed far from the original home/placement, providing transportation is necessary for children to remain in the same school. In one county in Iowa, schools provide transportation to support the effort to maintain children in the same school. In addition, transportation services are effective only when children are placed within commutable distance from the original home/placement. Therefore, attempting to arrange placements within reasonable distance of current schools is desirable when placement changes are needed, while also providing transportation services to allow children to remain in their school if that is considered in their best interests. Further, as Texas addressed, since lack of foster homes in a community is one of the major reasons that children have to change placements and move between schools, expanding the availability of foster homes in communities should also be considered a priority.

Monitoring academic records. As discussed previously, monitoring the academic records of children in foster care is sometimes problematic. Development and utilization of computerized databases have the potential to facilitate the exchange of information and improve communication between the educational and child welfare systems. Several states have implemented or are developing database systems with this interest. According to the Kansas report, the database system assists with tracking foster children and providing timely and immediate information to the schools when a child enters a new school. The child welfare agency in New York City has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Board of Education, which provides the agency with access to educational performance and administrative data on the children in its care. Such information includes attendance records, tests scores and school movements. The New York's report suggests that if both sides agree on data sharing protocol and each agency has access to the data, a better understanding of the performance of children in foster care in school can be achieved and managerial tools to better serve this population can be enhanced.

Although such database systems seem promising, their effectiveness in meeting the educational needs of children in foster care will depend on the contents and the accessibility of the data, as well as the specific uses to which the data are put. Questions to be considered in developing these database systems include “Does it include all the essential information needed by both the educational and child welfare agencies?”; “Is it accessible to each caseworker or each agency supervisor as well as to educational personnel?”; and “Does the decision making for service provision consistently use the information included in the database?” This latter question requires the development of specific training and procedures for workers who use the database.

Involvement of foster parents in foster children’s education. This issue has two dimensions. One is that foster parents often do not have enough information and knowledge to advocate for foster children’s education, while the second is that agencies sometimes rely too much on foster parents to meet the educational needs of their children in care. In dealing with the first problem, agencies have to provide sufficient information and training for foster parents. At the same time, schools have to invite foster parents to school events and conferences, and to guarantee opportunities for foster parents to be involved in foster children’s education. Where there are concerted efforts with caseworkers, foster parents can act as surrogate parents to advocate and make education-related decisions for children placed in their care (New Hampshire). These practices should not be dependent upon the efforts of each agency or each individual, but rather require legislative and policy support. In fact, some states do explicate these requirements in laws and policies, which seems to be facilitating foster parents’ involvement in foster children’s education (e.g., Utah and North Dakota).

The second problem emanates from agencies not taking responsibilities to meet the educational needs of children in foster care. Some states noted that foster parents often arrange and pay for services such as
tutors and extra school-related activities because the agency with which the child is involved does not provide funding (e.g., South Carolina and Tennessee). This points to the need for state laws and policies to clearly delineate the responsibilities of both the foster parents and the agency. The most desirable mix in this respect seems to be the provision of needed supports by the agencies, accompanied by aggressive efforts to involve foster parents in the planning and monitoring of these services.

Providing appropriate educational services. In order to provide appropriate educational services for children in foster care, educational needs first must be appropriately assessed and incorporated into case plans. However, the CFSR reports revealed that many states are having difficulties in including educational needs in their case plans. For example, case reviews in South Dakota revealed that educational needs were not included in the case plans for children in foster care who had obvious education-related problems such as being a grade level behind in school or having poor school performance. In some states, case record reviews revealed situations in which children were assessed but recommendations for education services were not pursued (e.g., Arkansas and California). In addition, caseworkers sometimes do not follow up to determine whether services have been provided (Texas). Indiana reported that follow-up was limited due to a high volume of cases and staffing shortages. Such heavy caseloads and time constraints are often barriers in implementing better practices, which suggests the critical role of administrative support in providing frontline workers with sufficient resources.

Some states reported that educational information is required to be included in all case plans, and that educational needs were assessed and addressed as appropriate for more than 90% of the reviewed cases (e.g., North Dakota, New Hampshire, and Utah). It is critical to establish policies that address agency staff’s responsibilities to incorporate educational needs in their case plans, and to have procedures to make sure that agency staff comply with such requirements and that planned services are actually provided. In addition, opportunities for post-secondary education for children in foster care should be considered. Some states provide college and vocational school tuition assistance or advocate for tuition waivers to allow youth to go to college or vocational schools (e.g., Kansas and Kentucky). Such efforts have increased in importance as the returns to post-secondary education have grown rapidly in recent years.

School-child welfare agency relationships. Some states report indicated that meeting the educational needs for children in foster care can be problematic because the relationships between the child welfare agencies and the local school systems are not always positive (e.g., Alabama, Alaska, North Carolina, and South Carolina). Such negative relationships sometimes stem from lack of mutual understanding and lack of communication. To foster improvements between the two systems, some state child welfare agencies use Educational Specialists, Consultants, or Coordinators who are actively involved in school related issues and assist other agency staff in dealing with these issues of children in foster care (e.g., Connecticut). Having a liaison staff member in an agency seems very effective in facilitating communication between the two systems. For example, in Massachusetts, an Educational Coordinator in the child welfare agency is responsible for training new social workers on education-related issues.

While training for new staff is essential, it will be difficult for workers to keep up with the latest information and continuously improve their own knowledge and skills to meet children’s needs unless refresher training is routinely provided. Both agency staff and school teachers therefore should be required to attend routine training as part of their work. If they are allowed to take time to attend each other’s meeting (c.f., the Individual Education Plan meeting and child welfare agency’s case conference), a mutual respect for differential roles can be developed and their relationships will be greatly improved. According to the Utah report, child welfare workers are trained to involve teachers in agency meetings, and teachers are allowed to take time to attend these meetings.
Conclusion

Promoting the development and learning of maltreated children in foster care is too complicated, diverse, and multifaceted an endeavor for any single discipline. Only through a collaborative effort involving the knowledge and expertise of both school personnel and child welfare professionals, as well as other community members, will maltreated children in foster care receive the education they need and deserve (Mitchener & Field, 1998). In order to maximize their efforts and the optimal outcomes of children, organizational, legislative, and political support also are critical. Although recognition of educational needs of maltreated children in foster care has been increasing, the findings from the state CFSR reports presented here suggest that state efforts often are inadequate.

The federal Child and Family Services Reviews are meaningful in the respect that educational needs of children in foster care were examined nation-wide. The CFSR reports provide us with a broad picture of how states are attempting to address the educational needs of children in foster care. Developing a better understanding of the processes and strategies implemented by states that have significantly achieved the CFSR’s expectation would be helpful. However, since the state CFSR reports provide few details about specific programs and policies that are working, further investigation beyond the CFSR reports is needed to develop a more in-depth understanding of state practices.

Following the CFSR reports, 37 states have already submitted Program Improvement Plans to ACF, and the majority of them included the improvement plans for Outcome WB 2 (National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, May 2004). Therefore, following up to determine how each state improves its policies and legislation would be another meaningful area for future study. Because most states have just developed their plans or else have only limited experience with plan implementation, additional time is needed before the success of this federal effort can be more fully evaluated. However, the process, strategies and outcomes emanating from each state’s improvement plan have the potential to further delineate promising policies and interventions for facilitating educational success among maltreated children in foster care.

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Developmental and Psychopathology, 6, 45–55.


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ABSTRACT

Maltreated children in the United States, especially those who are in foster care, are at risk of school failure. Difficult schooling experiences in turn are strong predictors of later difficulties in maltreated children’s adolescence and adulthood. Despite the fact that most children living in foster care attend public schools, few mechanisms exist to support successful collaboration between public child welfare systems and public educational systems. Although the necessity of collaboration between multidisciplinary professionals in implementing social work practice has long been addressed, research has repeatedly revealed difficulties in collaboration between the educational and child welfare systems and between professionals in those two systems. This paper addresses the educational needs of maltreated children in foster care in the U.S. The author (1) reviews previous literature on the school performance of maltreated children who are placed in foster care as well as collaboration problems between educational and child welfare systems, (2) presents new data on recent governmental attempts to meet these children’s educational needs, and (3) develops recommendations on how governments can better assist future cross-system collaboration efforts to improve the educational performance of maltreated children in foster care.

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