

**No Child Left Behind Unless You're a Foster Child?: The
Impact of Frequent School Placements on Children in Foster
Care**

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Abstract

This paper delves into the complex interplay between frequent school placements and the well-being of children within the foster care system. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, we explore the multifaceted challenges faced by these vulnerable youths as they navigate through a series of educational transitions. Highlighting the academic, social, and emotional ramifications of instability in school placements, we uncover the detrimental effects on their educational outcomes and overall development. Moreover, we analyze the contributing factors that perpetuate this instability, ranging from switches in placements to systemic barriers within the educational system. By synthesizing findings from diverse disciplines, including interviews with stakeholders, we elucidate potential interventions including mindfulness-based and play-based strategies aimed at mitigating the adverse effects of frequent school changes on foster youth. Our analysis underscores the urgent need for targeted policies and collaborative efforts to provide stability and enhance the educational experiences of children in foster care, ultimately fostering their long-term success and well-being.

Keywords: Foster care, school placement, mindfulness

Sam has been in out-of-home care since he was 2 years, 11 months, and 9 days old. Now, at 10 years old, he enters a new foster placement with a traumatic brain injury, severe emotional trauma, and an IEP that is 62 pages long, primarily pertaining to behavioral problems. Sam is in a class for students with exceptional behavior disabilities. However, few of Sam's academic needs are being addressed. Nobody seems to care if he does his work, they just want him to behave. So, he begins the process of being placed in an inclusive classroom, but he has huge gaps in his education due to years of a lack of attention to his academic needs; this now turns him into a pariah for the other students. After some time, it is evident that Sam is not going to receive the support he so desperately needs and deserves— not help from the school district and not friendship from his peers. Rejected by a suburban school due to his behavioral issues and background in foster care, he finds himself shuffled from one educational institution to another, each transition further hindering his academic progress and social integration. He is moved to a third school. Luckily, this school could be a fantastic setting for Sam. However, he requires so much academic support due to the holes in his education that his behavioral problems start shining through once again. Consequently, the school then switches his placement once again. Within six short months, Sam endures four school changes, yet he remains unable to perform basic arithmetic or compose a coherent paragraph. His social, academic, and overall developmental growth are stunted by a system ill-equipped to address his needs. While Sam's story is fictional, he is certainly not an atypical foster care tale. This vignette illustrates the harsh educational and school realities faced by so many children in the foster care system.

Introduction

Navigating the intricate maze of the foster care system, children encounter a plethora of challenges, experiences, and profound loss. As of 2021, there are almost 400,000 children in

foster care in the United States. Among them, 80% have significant mental health issues (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Against the backdrop of the physical, emotional, and psychological challenges of these children, is the often overshadowed yet significant challenge of education, and specifically, frequent school placements. The impact of unstable educational environments on the overall well-being of these children is of increasing concern for educators, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. 49% of youth in care earn a high school diploma compared to 86% of youth not in foster care receiving a high school diploma (*2021: NY State - Graduation Rate Data: NYSED Data Site*). This frightening statistic highlights one of the outcomes for these children.

Compared to other children, children in the foster care system continue to fall behind in school achievement and are performing more poorly in school (Jackson, 1994; Berlin, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2011). Various factors often converge to contribute to and cause this significant problem. Firstly, findings show that children in foster care are not as engaged in school as their peers (Zima, et al., 2000). This lack of engagement can present as not showing up for class, not completing assignments, not engaging in social interactions or making friends, and getting into trouble at school. This can be due to the significant trauma, neglect, and abuse these children often face. This maltreatment can lead to psychosocial difficulties for children entering school as well as problems with engagement. In addition to maltreatment, children in foster care are found to have higher anxiety and depression levels which can also negatively impact school performance (Barnes et al., 2003). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2002) states a potential third factor that “the majority of foster care children also reside in large urban areas, where school systems are often overcrowded and poorly funded”. Therefore, children in

foster care often end up in poor-quality schools. There are clearly numerous challenges that affect children's academic performance in school.

However, a commonly overlooked problem, the frequent school placements of children in foster care, requires significant attention. This paper seeks to explore the basis of the problem, the effects it has on children, and potential interventions for helping these youths. To outline this problem and potential solutions, this paper seeks to answer the following questions. Firstly, how does foster care impact a child's school performance? After addressing this question, the impact of frequent school placement changes on a child's academic performance will be explored. Next, what can be done to minimize this negative impact? After outlining the problem, this paper will explore potential solutions and seek to answer the following questions: how can schools, teachers, professionals, and society at large best support children in foster care?; how can play-based techniques and mindfulness be used to support the emotional and social needs and development of children in foster care?

Methods

Literature Search

A systematic literature search was conducted to identify relevant studies and papers exploring the impact of frequent school placements on children in the foster care system. In addition, a literature search was conducted to explore mindfulness and play-based interventions for youth in care. Electronic databases including, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar were searched using a combination of keywords including "foster care," "school placement," and "mindfulness". The search focused primarily on peer-reviewed research articles, literature reviews, and empirical studies.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to a literature review, semi-structured interviews were conducted with various stakeholders for children in foster care and their academic success. Interviewees were approached via a Facebook post asking for volunteers connected to the foster care system. Variations of the same questions were asked of all the volunteers. First, interviewees introduced themselves and their connection to the foster care system. Next, the volunteers were interviewed about their experience with foster care impacting children's school performance, and the problem of frequent school placements. Each of them were asked about potential solutions to the problems they described. Lastly, mindfulness and play-based techniques were introduced and the volunteers gave their opinions on the potential efficacy of these programs, including potential barriers to their implementation. These were informal interviews and personal communications used to enhance my understanding of the topic. Verbal consent was provided for direct quotations and names of interviewees to be included in this paper.

The literature review and conversations were combined into one comprehensive report for the sake of outlining the problem, solutions, and anecdotes and remarks from stakeholders.

Frequent School Placements

Many children in foster care switch home placements often, causing these children also to switch schools. With a school change comes making new friends, transferring paperwork and credit, meeting new teachers, and adjusting to a new world. This change is in addition to the home change where the child must adjust to new foster parents, home and family dynamics, and process the constant instability. Specifically, children in foster care have a high rate of changing

schools mid-year which comes with an increased list of challenges (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). When these children move foster homes (and essentially schools) they are experiencing moves and adjustments into new homes and families, and are often leaving siblings behind (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). As a result, highly mobile students are more likely to experience academic, social, and emotional problems compared to students with low mobility (Allen & Vacca, 2010). Pears et al. (2015, p. 2), define school mobility as “moving from one school to another when this is not dictated by a typical transition point (i.e. change from elementary to middle school”. It is important to understand the nature of the problem, and the effects it has on children’s academic, social, and emotional wellbeing, to better support these children.

M. Gurton was a child born into foster care and aged out of the system. Since 2011, she has been a foster parent for over 30 children and even adopted children of her own. She is extremely familiar with the problem of frequent school placements as the children that go through her home constantly move around or get kicked out of schools. Although the county she is from is especially known to try and maintain school placements for children, they still move around often, nonetheless (M. Gurton, personal communication, March 1, 2024). As a foster parent, she is all too familiar with this problem. Often, by the time an 11 year old child comes to her home, they may have been placed in 10, 12, or 15 schools by that point.

The statistics on school moves are both alarming and troubling. An already sensitive population such as foster children requires extra attention in caring for their needs and additional protection from increased trauma and harm. Between 1995 and 1999, 57% of children in foster care experienced a school change for non-academic reasons (Conger & Rebeck, 2001). Although this was a long time ago, minimal improvement has occurred since then. In addition, 15-33% of children in foster care’s low academic achievement was due to high rates of school transfer and

residential moves (Eckenrode, Rowe, Laird, & Brathwaite, 1995; Conger & Finkelstein, 2003). Although much research has been done on other causes of low academic achievement for children in foster care, 15-33% of the problem has not been addressed! Finally, Blome (1997) and Powers & Stotland (2002) looked at foster care children's average school moves. Blome (1997) looked at children from the longitudinal study, "High School and Beyond" and found that high school foster youth were more than twice as likely to move schools 3+ times since 5th grade compared to other children. And similarly, Power & Stotland (2002), found that 50% of foster children change school 4+ times after starting school. This means that these students are more likely to miss more school and have problems with adjustment (Weinberg & Luderer, 2004). These numbers are alarming and it is vital to understand the root causes of this detrimental problem.

Why Do People Move Schools?

The number one cause of children in foster care switching schools is children moving to a new foster care placement (Conger & Rebeck, 2001). A major problem with this is that most school transfers were found to take place within a 3-mile radius of the previous school (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003). Many school and state-wide policies state that children who switch residences need to switch to a school within that district, even if it is within driving distance from the previous school. For example, when Sam, from the opening story, switched placements, his foster parents, although in the same district as his previous placement, had to fight for his ability to remain in the same school. Not only are these children moving around from school to school, but when they switch schools, they are delayed in joining the classroom because they need to register, transfer documents, and after they join the classroom they need to make new friends and relationships (Allen & Vacca, 2010). This further enhances the difficulty of the move, which

often takes place in the middle of the year, for these children who now need to adjust to new teachers and peers and deal with missed or repeated lessons (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003).

From the teacher or administrative point of view, some caseworkers and foster parents don't tell school staff about the custodial status of children because they don't want the child to be treated differently or labeled (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003). While foster children should certainly be included in the classroom and have fair treatment, teachers need to have specific information about the children they are teaching that might impact the way they teach. Moreover, even if they have information about the child's status, most school professionals don't know much about the foster care system and how it works. Children in foster care who are switching home placements and schools don't have a consistent person in their lives to vouch for and advocate for their well-being and academic journey (Allen & Vacca, 2010). Child welfare and school professionals **often** don't coordinate to help the child. A cause of this problem is the fact that the primary concern for the child is to be in a safe home, and only after the fact are the educational needs of the child. Although this makes sense, it is important to place increased concern and efforts in helping children with their academic needs on a similar level! Why can't we focus on both or do more things at once? Proper education ensures a child's successful transition to adulthood and these children are already some of the most at-risk youth in America (Allen & Vacca, 2010). Often, children in foster care are given unfair opportunities and are discouraged from seeking further education (Allen & Vacca, 2010). To effectively help children, we need to understand the problems and circumstances they face on a holistic level. Further, it is important to understand the academic, emotional, and psychosocial problems that these school changes cause.

Problems Caused By Frequent School Placements

On Academic Achievement

After switching schools, children in the foster care system need to adjust to their new environment. It takes a child 4 to 6 months to catch up academically from changing schools (Calvin, 2001). However, this does not account for the psychological, emotional, and social adjustments that must happen as well, and often take significantly more time. Sam, from the opening anecdote, switched schools multiple times during this 4 to 6 month adjustment period. How can a child like Sam be expected to learn? Even after the child catches up academically, there are still gaps in his/her education that can last through adulthood. This is due to the fact that students who frequently change schools, often don't have credits moved with them, leading to a lack of education and further delays (Zetlin et al., 2004). This problem comes before the child is actually in school and needs to do the hard work of catching up on missed school. Before the child has to worry about missed school and catching up, he/she faces challenges in entering the classroom and enrolling due to administrative delays.

M. Gurton strongly believes that there should be laws to keep children as stable as possible and they should not be allowed to be kicked out. These school switches cause tremendous gaps in education based on missed school, or difference in curriculums between schools (M. Gurton, personal communication, March 1, 2024). A problem that she often sees arise from this, is not just the educational gaps, but children end up dropping out of school because of this!

Students experiencing these changes have a significant lack of control over the quality of their education and this extends to the subconscious treatment of teachers towards these students. Since foster children move around often, teachers may not find it necessary to help these students knowing that they may switch schools again. Although Sam, from the opening anecdote, is

eventually placed in a productive environment for his learning, his teachers did not believe in him and he was labeled as a bad student due to his behavioral issues. Teachers won't invest in these students' success as often (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). This is yet another factor that leads to the diminished quality of education that children in the foster care system receive as a result of their school changes.

S. Raabe is a current foster parent as well as the principal of a school that has a majority black and indigenous population with many children in foster care. She noticed in her school that support, meetings, and stable home placements help children attain better access to education. However, these children in care are already behind academically (S. Raabe, personal communication, February 21, 2024).

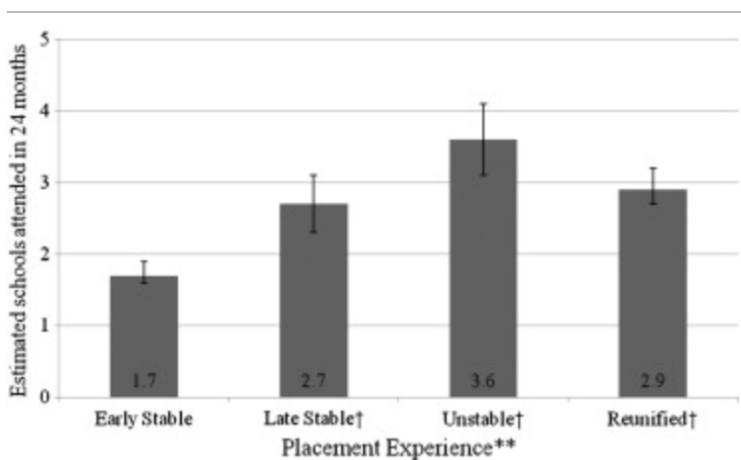
A less spoken-about problem is the fact that different families value education differently. If the child switches placements and thereby schools, they may be living with a family that does not care about the academic success of the child (Allen & Vacca, 2010). This leads to a further decrease in opportunity for the child. Welfare workers say that they experience this lack of investment on the part of teachers and foster parents due to frequent school placements (Stone et al., 2006). How can a student be expected to excel academically when her teachers don't believe in her? How can a student learn in school if there are delays in transferring records and credits thereby prohibiting the student from showing up?

M. Hess-Brier is a social worker who began her career working in a foster care agency for HIV positive children and their families. Because she worked with such a unique group of children, their health was of utmost importance and prioritized over other issues. However, foster parents taking on children who were HIV positive were generally doing it for very emotional and caring reasons and were very devoted foster parents. For example, many of the parents lost a

family member to HIV, or had HIV themselves. This leads to the common problem of some foster parents valuing education less and potentially being less devoted to their foster children.

In a study done by Zorc et al. (2013), 209 5-8 year old foster children who recently entered the foster system were tracked longitudinally for 2 years. A majority of this sample was African American. These children were categorized into groups by stability of placement. Children categorized as Early Stable remained in one placement throughout the study and were placed in less than 45 days. Children categorized as late stable found a permanent placement within 45 days to 9 months. Lastly, children were categorized as having an unstable placement if the child moved around from placement to placement throughout the study. Zorc et al. (2013) looked at days absent and schools attended for these children in addition to giving behavior surveys to caregivers within 2 weeks of entering the placement. Not surprisingly, the findings showed that as placements were increasingly less stable, student absenteeism increased and school placements increased ($X=3.6$ schools). To contextualize the situation, this study was only 2 years long and the average number of schools attended by these children was 3.6. In addition, 13% of the absent days were due to the child not being enrolled in school. When a child switches schools, as mentioned previously, there is administrative work and processing that is often delayed causing these children who are about to face the challenges of a new school, to have even more missed school and learning. More, 20% of participants, meaning more than 40 of the 209 children in the study, had 4 school changes in 24 months. Figure 1 highlights the number of schools attended by each of the groups within the 24 months. The number of school changes was correlated with placement stability with the highest number of school changes being for children who were in unstable placements.

Figure 1

Estimated Schools Attended Based on Placement Experience

Note. This table was printed in the Zorc et al. (2013) study. From Zorc, C.S., O'Reilly, A.L.R., Matone, M., Long, J., Watts, C.L., & Rubin, D. (2013). The relationship of placement experience to school absenteeism and changing schools in young, school-aged children in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(5), 826-833.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.02.006>.

This is the sad reality for children in the foster care system who are already facing a myriad of challenges. The goal of this study was to highlight the importance of stability for children in the foster care system. It is important to note that this study does have limitations. There was no control group in this study. Also, the sample was taken from one school district thereby limiting the generalizability of the sample. However, the implications are certainly profound and consistent with the rest of the literature. Children need to have increased stability at their foster care placement. In addition, being in school and staying in school is extremely important for a child's development.

Social Skills

In addition to academic problems, frequent school placements have a detrimental effect on children's social skills and development. Frequent school placements make it harder for children to get involved in extracurricular activities and clubs (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). This is an extremely vital part of development, and more, it helps children stay in school. Learning social skills, making friends, and having a sense of belonging and community are crucial for the development of these children.

In a study conducted in 2015, Pears et al. looked at the school moves for 86 children, ages 3-6 years old from the start of the study. In the general population, school mobility harms children, and more school moves are correlated with less socioemotional competence. As the research stands, it is not known if there is a causation between the 2 variables or if there is possibly a third variable involved. The goal of Pears et al. (2015) was to categorize school placements by type. For example, if it occurs together with a placement change, the timing of the school moves (during the years or between two school years), and the distance (within or between school districts). They then compared the number and distance of the moves to children not in the foster care system. They also wanted to see if school placements mediated the effects of foster care on later elementary outcomes. In line with the research discussed throughout this paper, they hypothesized that for children in the foster care system, school placements co-occurred with home placement change, occurred more commonly during the year and to different districts, and had more school moves than their peers. They found that the total number of school placements was 132, with the foster children (FC) group having 78 more school moves than the control group (CC). They found that "the odds that children in the FC group would experience more than 2 school changes were 6.23 times greater than those for the CC children" (Pears et al., 2015). They also found that the majority of school moves happened simultaneously

with placement moves and children in FC were 4.49 times as likely to switch schools during the school year and were 4.08 more times as likely to switch districts when moving schools. On top of this, "being in the FC group was negatively associated with early learning skills in kindergarten and academic and social-emotional competence in Grades 3 through 5" (Pears et al., 2015). Being in the FC group was also positively correlated with behavioral problems. This study highlights the intricacies and diverse consequences that school mobility for children in the foster care system can cause.

Behavior Problems

Frequent school placements create a challenge for foster children, exacerbating existing behavioral problems. Sam of the opening tale has a traumatic brain injury and significant behavioral issues that are heightened by his frequent school placements. After switching between schools, Sam becomes an outcast among his peers, which only makes him act out even more. This cycle constantly repeats itself with and between every school move. Children in foster care have frequent instability in their home lives, and the instability inherent in changing schools, further disrupts the establishment of stable routines and relationships which are crucial for fostering a sense of belonging. Frequent school placement changes can magnify existing behavior and psycho-social issues foster students might have (Bernedo et al., 2012). These moves can cause heightened anxiety and defiance which can manifest in disruptive behavior in and out of the classroom. This causes a continuous cycle that foster parents may not be able to adequately assist these children with (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). These behavior problems may cause children to get kicked out of school or the classroom which causes a need to miss more school or switch schools, only adding fuel to the fire.

Minimizing The Effects of Frequent School Placements

A person's academic achievement is positively correlated with a child's overall physical circumstances. By limiting adverse life conditions and experiences, we can help foster children gain more in school, and increase stability and a sense of control for these youth. We can address this problem with structural, attitudinal, and practical approaches (Jackson, 1994).

Although there is limited research on the topic of frequent school placements, New York City started tracking school placements and academic achievement for children in foster care. This highlights a recognition of the problem and an effort to make steps towards improvement. However, this took place years ago and, yet, while we acknowledge these efforts, change is still slow (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003). In 2008 there was an act titled the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* that acknowledged the educational/academic deficiency that foster children have. This was a huge awareness by Congress to see the struggles that foster children have in school and the inherent disadvantage placed against them. *Fostering Connections* gave states more requirements regarding the academic stability of children in foster care with a primary goal of *Fostering Connections* being to improve school stability.

Promote Stability

To help foster youth, we need stability, continuity, and permanence (Clausen et al., 2012). There is evidence that providing foster children with stability in a given area of their lives can benefit the child's learning in school (Happer et al., 2006). Further, in interviews done with foster children, children said it was extremely important that they remain in the same home/placement. This helps with the continuity of relationships and puts stability into their lives (Mitchell et al., 2010). Continuity is a very important factor for foster children's development (Sullivan et al., 2010). They need to know that they can invest in their relationships and that the people in their lives are not running away. This is not the case when students are changing schools often. They

don't feel like they have continuity and school changes interfere with social relationships and long-term mentors in school.

There is little continuity of care in these children's lives, and there is no continuity in the school system (M. Gurton, personal communication, March 1, 2024). To help these children, we need to increase stability in their lives. One way to promote continuity for children is by attempting to keep children in the same district when moving placements. Some efforts are being made to keep students in the same community when they are moved so they will stay in the same school (Zetlin et al., 2004). Child welfare systems and school agencies should be responsible for trying to prevent a school transfer (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003). If remaining in the same school district or community is not an option, school districts should help provide transportation if the child wants to remain in the previous school. If we attempt to also reduce the number of times children switch placements, the number of school switches will be reduced. If foster parents receive adequate training to deal with foster children and behavioral issues, foster children will switch placements less often. Many placement changes stem from fights, disagreements, or the difficulty of the foster parents to handle and support a child.

In a study by Weinberg and Luderer (2004), it took between 3-8 months to obtain the records of students switching schools in the foster care system and social workers and case files sometimes had incorrect information about the student's school information. The result of frequent school placements is worsened academic achievement. This is because big chunks of the school year are missed due to problems moving credits, transferring records, and missing transcripts. Often, the child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) will not be immediately implemented when the child switches schools. These changes can take weeks or even months to occur (Weinberg & Luderer, 2004). In this study, they found that 1/4 of foster children's

necessary records were not easily found or even findable! Other problems included the social or caseworker not even knowing what school the student previously attended. Social workers who are the "parent figure" in these children's lives need to give more care and attention to their foster children's academic success (Jackson, 1994). Moreover, the system must give social workers access to providing this care. Before diving into interventions or solutions for the student, first and foremost we must constantly and routinely update student records so if the child moves schools, all records are available and ready. This will help the child have a swift transition.

In addition to social workers and schools; teachers, professionals, and society at large can implement a few strategies to best support youth in foster care. Children in foster care often don't have adequate support systems (Brinser & Wissel, 2020). The United States can learn from Germany's foster care system. In Germany, there is a program called *Kinderhaus* (Allen & Vacca, 2010). In this program, all children receive 1:1 support, there are social workers and teachers specifically assigned to the well-being of these children, and they also work with parents to help with parenting skills. It is vital that all children have people who can advocate for them and ensure they are receiving proper care. School counselors should emphasize and advocate for their students in foster care. This can be done by promoting a positive school climate. For example, counselors can empower students, help the child make friends, and build relationships (Brinser & Wissel, 2020).

School Culture

On behalf of the entire school, administrators and educators can foster a school culture that promotes empathy, kindness, and compassion (Brinser & Wissel, 2020). We need to give foster children the experience of a loving warm home and supportive environment which they may not have otherwise in their lives (Allen & Vacca, 2010). Students and teachers have

preconceived notions in school about different groups of students and there must be shared expectations and beliefs regarding foster children throughout the school. By promoting inclusivity in school, the school atmosphere will be more stabilizing and warm for this child, further helping the child build relationships and focus on his/her education.

Many students in S. Raabe's school come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, generational poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, and many of the children in foster care are often separated from their siblings. The school understands that they must prioritize their students' mental and physical health. One solution is having breakfast served every morning in the conference room to allow children to eat breakfast with their siblings (S. Raabe, personal communication, February 21, 2024). It is important to address these needs before education can be addressed or focused on. This school understands this need and makes sure to never restrict food. In the school there is a free school necessity store where children can take whatever they may need including fresh fruits and vegetables, and in addition, over 100 children in the school get sent home with food for the weekend.

As mentioned previously, frequent school placements make it difficult for foster students to want to involve themselves in clubs at school. Students in foster care should be given extra encouragement to join extracurricular activities that promote engagement in school (Brinser & Wissel, 2020). Research shows that children in the foster care system benefit from in-school support, both academically and regarding socio-emotional groups (Mannisto & Prittimaa, 2018).

Training

M. Gurton suggests a 2-pronged solution for these problems outlined. Firstly, we need to shorten the time a child is in out-of-home care. Specifically, foster children will often age out of the system and remain in the system for a majority of their lives by the time they turn 18. Either,

we need to rehabilitate home life to get the child home, or we need to try and get these children adopted. Her next suggestion helps break the cycle. School districts need to be more educated about this process and how it affects children. Districts need to understand that not every child in their school will have “2 parents living in this cute little house, and had a baby the way they wanted to...and then the baby grew up and went to their school. Not every kid has that privilege” (M. Gurton, personal communication, March 1, 2024).

Attachment theory, which states that children need secure relationships with at least a single caregiver, has a tremendous impact on children in the foster care system. Craven and Lee (2006) studied attachment theory with children in the foster care system and found that attachment style remains the same throughout a person’s life. It can affect subsequent relationships. Foster children often have insecure attachments which can make them less likely to build relationships with administrators, teachers, and other students (Allen & Vacca, 2010).

Another tool can be in stakeholder training. All stakeholders in the child’s education should be trained in interventions to help children in foster care and properly support their specific needs (Brinser & Wissel, 2020). This can be training on creating secure attachments or setting boundaries. No matter how positive the placement is, it is not good for a child to leave their home. S. Raabe’s school works extensively on trauma training for teachers and other staff members. Together, they build systems to be responsive to the children’s needs (S. Raabe, personal communication, February 21, 2024).

A problem with this implementation is that “trauma-informed care” is taught to schools in a single professional development day and is not enough. Schools need on-going education about what happens to children in foster care (M. Gurton, personal communication, March 1, 2024). In addition, many people don’t understand the intricacies of these childrens’ attachments.

They don't know that when a child is crying, they are not crying for their foster mother, they want their mother (M. Gurton, personal communication, March 1, 2024). These insecure attachments spill over into every aspect of these children's lives. School professionals need to be prepared to support these children. Schools and the foster system at large don't understand this problem. After taking a child away from his home, as broken and unsafe as it may have been, and away from his mother and father, "how can we place a child into a first grade classroom and say, okay little boy, let's go learn now" (M. Gurton, personal communication, March 1, 2024). These children need embrace and trauma information around them. Our fictional Sam from the opening vignette is not a bad boy because he is acting out behaviorally or because he can't do simple addition, he is going through too much to not be met with embrace.

Tutoring

For the student in foster care who faces learning gaps due to missed school or lessons, having extra tutoring or mentorship available can be extremely beneficial. Researchers such as Ayasse (1995) began initiatives to help children in foster care graduate high school despite the social, emotional, and academic problems these children face. There are also specific studies that show that school-based interventions for literacy and math skills are found to be significant in improving foster children's literacy and math skills. Flynn, et al. (2012) used home-based tutoring to help foster children improve their literacy and math skills. This study showed significant support for foster care tutoring as a strategy to help foster children improve their academic skills.

In addition to tutoring, teachers should be conscious of the delays their students may have as a result of moving around often. Before a foster student gets his/her records in order, this child can be homeschooled, or tutored to individualize the student's learning to help him/her catch up

(Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). Students should not be missing more school while administrative paperwork is being settled. Teachers can also support foster children by getting background information on the students in their classroom (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). As mentioned previously, teachers often don't know about the background of their students which can cause severe damage in the treatment of foster children. Their academic, social, emotional, and psychological needs may be overlooked. This can be done by speaking to the child's social worker when making decisions about the child's education. Teachers are trained to have a relationship with their student's parents to best support their students. This should not be ignored for foster children! The teacher should make efforts to build a relationship with foster parents, and social workers, as appropriate.

Specific Interventions

Play-Based Techniques

From a clinical perspective, there are other interventions we can employ to assist foster children in coping with the struggles caused by frequent school placements. Specifically, creative arts have been found effective for children dealing with trauma (Irwin, 2006). Play therapy is a form of therapy that helps children use their imagination to convey and work through life experiences and traumas (Hudd, 2005). Kindergartens today have extremely high academic demands. In S. Raabe's school they understand the importance of play and they incorporate play in a vital way in her kindergarten classrooms (S. Raabe, personal communication, February 21, 2024).

From the outset, it seems promising that children in the foster care system, who often have severe trauma, would benefit from play therapy. In her time working with foster families, M. Hess-Brier noticed that play is unfortunately a luxury. Parents that come from difficult

upbringings, never had the opportunity to learn how to play. Thereby, they never taught their children how to play. In order for play to occur, you need security. Children need to be physically and emotionally safe to play (M. Hess-Brier, personal communication, February 22, 2024).

In addition to dealing with trauma, play therapy has shown efficacy in increasing self-empathy in children. Children who have experienced neglect or abuse in addition to having low academic achievement generally have low self-esteem and/or negative self-worth. In addition, children in the foster care system have been found to have a lower self-worth or image compared to their peers not in the system (Hudd, 2005). Play therapy often uses stories and narratives to help children work through their experiences and learn to name and understand themselves. Sheila Hudd, an expert in play therapy, created a service for foster children that works to reduce the number of moves they have from placement to placement. This intervention is in Britain and is called *Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (2005)*. She says that

The child whose emotional and physical needs have not been met, who feels unsuccessful in efforts to gain access to main foster parents, or, worse, rejected, will build up a negative set of assumptions about himself and believe himself to be unworthy of love or respect and ashamed of who or what he is (Hudd, 2005).

Sheila Hudd (2005) proposes that story stems can be extremely useful in helping foster children understand and work through their experiences. By implementing play-based therapies for these children, we can improve self-esteem, and self-worth, and help process traumatic experiences.

Mindfulness

Recently, mindfulness has gained increasing popularity as a potential tool for enhancing mental health. As an extension of this, there has been a growing field of research surrounding mindfulness in education. In a world characterized by distractions and mounting stress, as well as educators' desire to increase social-emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom, educators and researchers are increasingly turning their attention to the potential benefits of mindfulness

practices in educational settings. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003) is famed for bridging the gap between the Eastern, Buddhist practice of mindfulness, with Western psychology and medicine.

He eloquently defines mindfulness by saying that

Mindfulness is awareness that comes from paying attention in the present moment with intention and non-judgment to the unfolding of experiences. Mindfulness meditation is a technique that is used to deliberately pay attention to the present moment with acceptance, exclusive of judgment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, pg. 145).

Traditional Buddhist mindfulness techniques work to calm and clear the mind and then help cope with challenges. Specifically, it often involves meditation practices and focuses on breathwork.

Mindfulness has many benefits to the students’ learning, success, and development. Although mindfulness was originally introduced in schools to help students with overall well-being, there are changes seen in students’ mental health, social and emotional skills, and even academic performance (Sheinman & Russo-Netzer, 2021). Mindfulness has led to improved attention, anxiety reduction, less problematic behavior, enhanced well-being, improved grades, and relationship building (Garro et al., 2023). Schools should be a place where students develop into well-rounded citizens. Mindfulness helps foster this development.

Benefits of Mindfulness

There is evidence for the use of mindfulness as a stress-reduction strategy for children (Biegel et al., 2009). Rempel (2012) argues that mindfulness resources are integral to children coping with the stress of everyday living and therefore these resources must be implemented in the classroom. This can be especially important for children in foster care who have frequent stress.

In addition, mindfulness can also be beneficial in enhancing learning. Rempel (2012) found that mindfulness-based strategies for children in schools specifically enhanced learning and they found that mindfulness is a seemingly effective intervention. Children in foster care

who have frequent school placements are often missing gaps in their education. Mindfulness can help these children bridge the gap and enhance learning.

A benefit of mindfulness is the independence and autonomy it, by definition, instills. Children engaging in mindfulness practices will have the opportunity to take control of their lives and learn innate strategies to manage their emotions and actions (Rempel, 2012). This can assist children in the foster care system help themselves excel in school. Further, children in foster care lack control over their lives, and decisions are often made for them. By giving these children autonomy, we can improve their overall well-being.

Part of the attractiveness of mindfulness is the variety of forms of implementation that exist. This makes it engaging for children and allows for diverse populations to benefit from its practice. Mindfulness techniques may include yoga, art, breathwork, or body scans (Mendelson et al., 2010). Yoga and Tai Chi may be more appealing interventions for children because it involves movement. Rempel (2012) further suggests that because children are more readily open to learning, they are more likely to adopt these practices with favor. In a study done by Mendelson et al. (2010), they used tai chi and yoga as a mindfulness intervention to help mitigate stress in 4th and 5th graders and found efficacy in this intervention.

Implementation

Coholic et al., (2009) are a group of researchers that help children living in the foster care system by improving self-esteem and character through arts and holistic programs. In this study, they looked at mindfulness-based techniques for children in the foster care system. Past research has shown that creative and expressive arts have been helpful for children dealing with trauma. This study applies this research to 8-15-year-old foster children and explores how holistic approaches and spirituality can be helpful for these youth. Children in foster care often have

decreased self-esteem, face neglect and abuse, and have experienced loss, blame, and guilt. They also have poor outcomes for future long-term development, relationships, and education.

Children who have faced trauma in their lives have worse social skills, low self-esteem, and have trouble staying grounded. Researchers found that they often interrupt the leader, and other group members, and have short tempers. In this study, participation was voluntary and the researchers held 6, 2-hour sessions that were held weekly. Boys and girls were separated in this program and children were grouped by age. Simple exercises included paying attention to the present moment and engaging in a short meditation. After the short activity, participants had a discussion where the other members validated each other's feelings. In one example of an activity they participated in, children were asked to imagine themselves inside a crystal. Afterward, they drew what they were imagining. In a discussion afterward, one participant drew a picture of a wolf and said

Well I've liked wolves and I believe that you always stay here on earth to continue until you get really good ... you undo all the mistakes you did in your life. And I believe that before I was a wolf. Wolves were strong ... you know how wolves are in a pack ... well I'm really strong. I went through a lot but I've always come out stronger.

These activities help children talk about their experiences which they often would not do. Further, many children express themselves nonverbally in general, and these mindfulness and art-based programs can be useful in tapping into these non-verbal expressions. Art-based mindfulness programs act as an outlet for children to express their thoughts, bring attention to their experiences, and increase self-awareness. Afterward, most of the children described the activities as fun. In addition, children's childcare workers and foster parents reported positively about the program. One parent said: "We're so excited ... you can see the difference in them, how they were feeling about themselves and stuff like that ... a big difference from the beginning to the end."

As a district, S. Raabe's school implements mindfulness into the classroom. All students have mindfulness moments during the day which could be after recess or during transitions. In addition, movement breaks and energizers are also utilized during the day to help students come back to the present moment (S. Raabe, personal communication, February 21, 2024). The happiness of both the students and teachers is evident in the low staff turnover rate in her school.

In a pilot study using mindfulness to reduce stress in foster youth, Jee et al. (2015) hypothesized that involving youth in foster care in formal activities with other similar youth would build social skills and decrease mental health morbidity. The participants attended 10 weekly sessions which comprised an eight-week mindfulness intervention program, and completed pre- and post-evaluation measures on the first and last sessions. There was also a control group that did not participate in the mindfulness intervention. The first hour of each session was focused on a psychologist with expertise in mindfulness skills teaching the mindfulness intervention, and following an eight-week mindfulness curriculum, which has been widely studied among adult populations. Even though this study was only a pilot study, it highlights the research that focuses attention on mindfulness as a potential stress management strategy for youth in the foster care system. Further, it shows evidence that mindfulness helps children in foster care make friends, build relationships, and improve stability; common negative results of children facing frequent school placements.

Conclusion

The goal of foster care is for children to be placed in a temporary placement until it is safe to go back to their biological home which is not always possible (Ramsay-Irving, 2015). Multiple school placements make it difficult for children to adjust and form secure attachments and can negatively contribute to children's mental health. Foster children's school experience can

not be viewed as an independent problem. On top of the detrimental impact on academic achievement, frequent school placements cause and exacerbate social problems, disrupt attachment stability, and can result in behavioral outbursts. These problems must be viewed within the context of the student's life (Mannisto & Prittmaa, 2018). By putting strength-based approaches into the everyday lives of children, stakeholders can help these children boost their self-esteem and morale, and minimize behavioral outbursts (Ramsay-Irving, 2015). By introducing mindfulness practices into the lives of children in foster care, we can boost awareness and emotion regulation to combat the negative effects caused by frequent school placements. From heightened behavioral problems to disrupted learning trajectories, the adverse effects of frequent school changes reverberate throughout every facet of these children's lives, underscoring the urgent need for targeted interventions and systemic reforms. By addressing the root causes of instability and implementing strategies to promote stability and continuity in educational environments, we can strive towards fostering a more supportive and nurturing educational landscape for foster children.

When asking M. Hess-Brier about change that has happened over the years she responded saying, “I would really like to think that things have changed over the years...I’d like to think as we get more information...the whole system changes...” (M. Hess-Brier, personal communication, February 22, 2024). The system needs to see change so that children can receive the most beneficial and supportive care. “It is a terrible way to care for kids and we need a better system because, you know, it is just a painful system” (M. Hess-Brier, personal communication, February 22, 2024). Working with children in foster care, it is evident that the system is one which needs tremendous reform. More research must be done and more grassroots efforts must be taken on to help these children.

Further research should focus on implementing more mindfulness and play-based interventions for children in the foster care system, specifically those who face frequent school placements. In addition, more research must focus and be conducted on the effects of frequent school placements on foster youth and ways to fix this problem. The foster care system has to take steps to minimize school placements for children and work to keep children in the same community and district. By minimizing school moves, children's academic performance, social life, and psychological well-being will certainly improve. This must be a priority for children in care.

Stakeholders across sectors must come together to prioritize the needs of these vulnerable youths and ensure that they have equitable access to the resources and support systems necessary for realizing their full potential. Through collective action and unwavering commitment, we can work towards building a brighter future for all children in foster care, where stability, security, and educational success are not just aspirations, but attainable realities.

Sam has been in out-of-home care since he was 2 years, 11 months, and 9 days old. Now, at 10 years old, he enters a new foster placement with a traumatic brain injury, severe emotional trauma, and an IEP that is 62 pages long, primarily pertaining to behavioral problems. His new foster parents put tremendous effort into keeping Sam in the same school where he is placed in a class for students with exceptional behavior disabilities. Although a new placement typically comes with a change in schools, they want to keep him there because of the importance of stability. Here, Sam finally finds stability and acceptance within his school community. He experiences success in the classroom and gains support from his peers, who embrace him. He transitions to an inclusive setting in the same school where he now gets appropriate academic

and behavioral support from both a special and regular education teacher who work together. These teachers are adequately trained to understand and help Sam with the unique set of problems he faces and have trauma-informed response training. Sam begins to make friends without fear of being moved to a new school and because he exhibits prosocial behaviors. He learns self-regulation through his mindfulness activities and receives extra tutoring to fill in any academic gaps he has. While he, of course, still has struggles and his life is complicated, he is not the same boy as the first vignette because the educational system has treated him differently. His social, academic, and overall developmental growth are promoted by a system adequately equipped to address his needs. While Sam's story may be fictional, it can speak to the transformative power of dedicated caregivers and a supportive educational environment. It highlights the potential for positive outcomes for a boy like Sam through the implementation of resources, support, and a nurturing environment.

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