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The perceived educational barriers of foster youth: Social workers' perspectives

Barbara Marruth Castro

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THE PERCEIVED EDUCATIONAL BARRIERS OF FOSTER

YOUTH: SOCIAL WORKERS' PERSPECTIVES

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A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

_____

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Social Work

_____

by

Barbara Marruth Castro

Nancy Ramirez

June 2007

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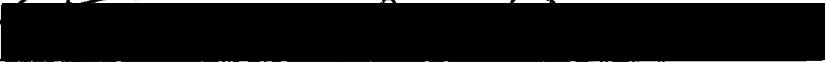Nancy Ramirez

June 2007

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ABSTRACT

When children enter the foster care system, their environmental stability changes and education is no longer their primary concern. Research indicates that a large portion of foster youth continue to do poorly academically. Education seems to be a protective factor that improves foster youth outcomes; therefore, special attention needs to be focused on improving their academic attainment.

Through the use of two focus groups, this study explored the perceptions of social workers' to discover what they perceived to be the academic barriers that limit foster youth education. The study found that social workers in Riverside County felt that the major barrier to foster youth education is the lack of a caring constant object. Social workers in San Bernardino County felt that the major barrier to foster youth education is the internalization of stigma that foster youth often experience. Thus, it was found that youth factors created strong barriers that limit foster youths' academic attainment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the support and motivation that Dr. Martha Bragin has given us throughout our study. Thank you for the countless hours that you sat down with us and guided us through the world of qualitative research. We would also like to thank the child welfare agencies in Riverside and San Bernardino counties' that provided us the opportunity to conduct our research by allowing us to invite their social workers to our study. Without their support this study would not have been possible.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my family and best friends, but especially to my sister Farinia Castro who is going into the education field. I hope that this project influences you to become a great teacher to those students that will need your mentoring support.

-Barbara M. Castro

I would like to dedicate this project to my friends and family who have supported me through my journey in graduate school. I would like to thank the following individuals for being influential in my education and a crucial contribution to my success in this project. To my little sister Karina and brother Miguel thank you for giving me your love and support. To my sister Diana, I would like to thank you for being my best friend, confidant, good role model, and a strong influence in my education. A mi mama, gracias por creer en mi y luchar por darme una vida mejor. Gracias por tu gran esfuerzo y por ser una madre ejemplar. A mi papa Ramon, gracias por todo el apoyo que le has brindado a mi educacion y por compartir tu gran inteligencia conmigo.

-Nancy Ramirez

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Foster youth face many obstacles and unique

challenges that hinder their learning process. Youth in

foster care have greater educational needs than

non-foster care youth, and often these needs go

unacknowledged (Jones & Lansdverk, 2005). When children

enter the foster care system, their environmental

stability changes and education is no longer the primary

concern. Various factors seem to negatively affect foster

youths' ability to absorb the information given to them

at school. Education is important in the life of foster

youth because it has been shown to be a protective factor

that helps them adjust successfully into adulthood

(Reilly, 2003). Thus, much importance lies in the

relationship between foster youth and the quality of

education they receive.

It is estimated that annually 20,000 to 25,000 youth

emancipate from foster care (Georgiades, 2005). Research

indicates that a large proportion of emancipating foster

youth are not receiving the appropriate educational

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foundation they need (Pottick, Warner, & Yoder, 2005).

This is producing a large number of foster youth that are

unprepared to continue on to pursue higher education

(Reilly, 2003). Many youth in care just give up on the

education system and drop-out of high school. Reilly

(2003) surveyed one-hundred foster youth, and fifty

percent of this population sample had dropped out of high

school. Something is contributing to this staggering

trend in foster youth and something needs to be done in

order to ameliorate this education situation for this

population.

Many factors have been associated as being barriers

that challenge foster youth education. Foster youth tend

to be placed in multiple homes and often lack an adult

willing to monitor their school progress (Berrick &

D'Andrade, 2006). Moving constantly from placement to

placement can cause foster youth to go through many

schools which interrupts their learning process (Berrick

& D'Andrade, 2006). The inefficiency of record transfer

between old schools and new schools when a child moves

causes educational impairments (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm,

2004). However, attention should not be deviated from the

fact that foster youth have also experienced loss, and

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this too causes traumatic emotions that if unresolved can impair the learning process (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006).

Lack of studies and empirical data on these issues is minimal. Literature findings tend to be inconsistent and scarce as they relate to foster youth and education. There is a need to expand the body of literature that exists in order to improve child welfare practices affecting this issue. It is in the best interest of social workers to be able understand the barriers that threaten foster youth education, in order to prescribe the most appropriate resources to improve academic outcomes for these youth.

Government officials have taken action to improve the education outcomes of youth in foster care. Due to the severe statistics demonstrating educational failure among this population, legislation has been created to address the need for services. At the Federal level, legislation has been enacted to assist foster youth to continue their education after emancipation, in the form of grants to pay for tuition (Reid & Ross, 2005). The 1999 Foster Care Independence Act established the John F. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, which was

designed to focus on foster youth education (Reid & Ross, 2005). The Chafee Foster Care Independence Program enables the distribution of state funding to assist foster youth in completing high school, college, obtaining employment, and attaining necessary independent living skills needed to exit the care system successfully.

Recent statutes have also been enacted at the State level to improve the quality of education services provided to children and youth while in foster care. California has made radical progress in modifying its state legislation in the last several years to improve the education outcomes of foster youth (Berrick & D'Andrade, 2006). Unfortunately, these programs and monetary opportunities are still not helping to improve the continuing body of emancipating foster youth because a large number of them still do not pursue higher education (Berrick & D'Andrade, 2006). The contributing factors associated with this trend seem to be complex.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to assess social worker perspectives on the challenges that foster youth

encounter in attaining adequate educations. Social workers need to be able to identify the best services and resources that will help this population continue their educational advancement. Although much attention has been devoted to understanding children in foster care and their outcomes, only a limited number of studies have focused specifically on their academic risk factors. The risk factors seem convoluted and the literature inconsistent as iterated before.

The research available highlights that foster youth are educationally disadvantaged, and this leaves them highly susceptible to fail academically (Zetlin et al., 2006). With this in mind, it is imperative that social workers understand and be able to identify the barriers that put foster youth in danger of failing academically. Social workers are the direct practitioners that provide foster youth with services aimed to enhance their outcomes as emerging young adults. Thus, social workers must provide the best practice possible to increase the likelihood of academic success in each foster youth.

Having conducted an exploratory study enhanced the possibilities of identifying risk factors associated with academic barriers among foster youth. It was believed

that through a qualitative design, social workers would have an opportunity to participate in a more in-depth investigation of identifying the educational barriers among foster youth. A qualitative design is known to allow room for the creative brainstorming of ideas (Zetlin et al., 2006). Further, focus groups provide a forum where social workers can engage in the exchange of ideas concerning one specific issue (Zetlin et al., 2006)

For this study, two focused groups were used to collect data. Each focus group consisted of five to eight county social workers, for a total of thirteen social workers from San Bernardino and Riverside Counties. A convenience sample was utilized to select participants. Agency supervisors were contacted and asked to identify potential social workers, willing to take part in this study that worked directly with foster youth. The selection of participants was determined by choosing the first ten social workers in each county who confirmed participation.

Data collection consisted of audio-taping and transcribing the group discussion in response to the research questions asked. The two focus groups were asked to give clear and concise explanations as to what they

perceived to be the barriers to the educational attainment of foster youth. Social workers were encouraged to engage in a group discussion to further explore the different perceptions each social worker had regarding this matter.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

This study explored what social workers perceived to be academic barriers among the foster youth population. The findings may serve as awareness for social workers to spend more time assessing the educational needs and demands that children inherit as they enter the foster care system. In terms of policy, the findings of this study may encourage social workers to advocate for policy change within their agency to enhance educational success for foster youth.

In terms of practice, the findings of this study may help bridge gaps between the school systems and social service agencies. It is believed that an effective exploratory study may provide the context that will both enhance the body of knowledge and promote the development of new or existing protective factors that will influence academic attainment in foster youth. This study may

benefit child welfare agencies specifically, because social workers have high caseloads and have limited time to assess the educational needs of each case, particularly those that are complex and time consuming (Zetlin et al, 2006).

It is intended through this study, to bring awareness of the risk factors associated with academic failure among foster youth. The findings may serve as a tool for social workers to better evaluate the specific resources and services that foster youth need to succeed in school. Child welfare agencies need to understand that if education is not given importance, the resulting outcomes will be detrimental to youths' transitional period into adulthood. Thus, this study explored the perceived educational barriers of foster youth through social worker perspectives.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter compiles information of various studies that have focused on the topic of foster youth education. Literature discussed will be centered on the educational factors that tend to limit or enhance the educational opportunities of foster youth.

Factors Influencing Educational Attainment

It is critical to prepare youth to exit the care system properly. The review of the literature emphasizes the significance of teaching foster youth skills and resources necessary to exit the care system, preparing them to transition into adulthood. One study indicates that a focus on education during foster placement tends to increase a positive transition out of care for foster youth (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). Education is among the strongest protective factors associated with a successful move out of the care system for foster youth; unfortunately, this population is not getting the proper education they need before they exit out. This staggering fact makes foster youth an

educationally fragile population (Merdinger et al., 2005; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2003).

A study conducted by Merdinger, Zetlin, and Weinberg (2005) found that youth in foster care did not receive appropriate educations while in system. The study was conducted through self-administered questionnaires that were sent out to 216 former foster youth who were attending four-year universities (Merdinger et al., 2005). Participants were asked a series of questions aimed at identifying the factors they perceived influenced them to continue on to higher education. The study found that participants' ability to deal with negative internal and external experiences during their out of home placements was a factor that influenced their pursuit of higher education (Merdinger et al., 2005). Resiliency in these foster youth allowed them to use their difficult experiences and turn them into empowerment tools that motivated them to continue on to succeed despite their negative experiences in the care system (Merdinger et al., 2005).

Another study aimed at identifying factors that contribute to educational attainment in foster youth was a study done by Shin (2003). This study used the database

of the Department of Family and Children's Services in Illinois to establish a list of potential foster youth participants. A random sample of 152 foster youth participants was established, and these youth were mailed a questionnaire survey in regards to their individual experiences in care.

Shin's (2003) study found that if foster youth had educational goals, were placed in kin care, and had a mentor in their lives, that it would strengthen the likelihood of them furthering their education. The findings of this study suggested that foster youth who tended to be placed with relatives experienced less negative effects from the initial removal from their home of origin. Relatives seemed to help create a familial atmosphere that placed foster youth in environments where someone often was available and willing to monitor their school progress, ensuring that their academic needs were being met.

Another factor associated with academic success in Shin's (2003) study, was the involvement in school extracurricular activities. Foster youth who participated in extracurricular activities felt like they belonged to a peer group and this helped with the development of a

positive self-image. Positive self-image allowed foster youth to strengthen their self-worth, which gave them the motivation to be academically successful.

Although there are a good number of foster youth who go on to attain higher education, there is still a larger number of foster youth who do not graduate from high school (Merdinger et al., 2005; Shin, 2003). One reason for this trend is that foster youth are not receiving adequate academic curriculum designed to meet their special needs during their foundation years in grades K-12 (Merdinger et al., 2005).

Risk Factors Inhibiting Educational Attainment

Research emphasis needs to be placed on identifying the risk factors that inhibit educational attainment in foster youth. By knowing what impairs and inhibits foster youths' ability to thrive academically, people in direct contact with this population can link and help maximize their possibilities of succeeding academically (Zetlin et al., 2006). As emerging young adults foster youth need to feel that they can shape their environments positively, and education can be the tool to help them achieve this (Zetlin et al., 2006).

A secondary analysis of a high school survey conducted by Blome (1997) compared responses from foster youth and non-foster youth. This survey found that youth in foster care experienced more discipline problems and learning disruptions when they were at school than when they were at home. The participants in this study were not placed in relative care. This was perceived by Blome (1997) as a contributor to their poor schooling. Participants in non-relative placements felt that their living environments were not conducive to their learning progress. The study further found that a good portion of the participants lacked an adult figure that was willing to monitor their academic success. Foster youth in addition reported having spent less time doing homework than non-foster youth, which impacted their school performance.

The study went on to compare the two groups in relation to college preparatory courses taken in high school. Results pointed to a disproportion of foster youth enrolled in college preparatory classes (Blome, 1997). One factor behind this finding was attributed to the fact that foster youth on average change schools 3 to 4 times during their upper grades (Blome, 1997). This

school mobility was found to contribute to foster youths' lack of a basic educational foundation that enables them to perform well in their classes (Blome, 1997). Another reason behind this was attributed to the fact that foster youth, more often than non-foster youth, opted for taking vocational training courses that prepared them for the work force after high school, rather than college preparatory courses (Blome, 1997; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). The findings in Blome's (1997) study, implicate that foster youth may be set up for academic failure the moment they enter the foster care system.

Another study that conceptualized the risk factors affecting the proper education of foster youth was the study conducted by Zetlin, Weinberg, and Shea (2006). Through the use of focus groups, qualitative data was collected from educators, social workers, and former foster youth on the issue of the barriers perceived to be the risk factors in education for foster youth. Transcription of the focus group data led to six emerging themes found to be the factors impeding fosters youths' academic success. The themes identified were: 1. placement instability; 2. the need for treatment/education programs; 3. proper record transfer,

academic accountability/monitoring; 4. outcomes,

education advocacy; 5. confidentiality; and

6. interagency collaboration.

Social Workers Role in Foster Youths' Lives

Up to this point the review of the literature seems

to find that foster youth require a wraparound of

services that will address the various areas that

predisposition them to fail academically. Literature

seems to stress that in order to be able to address the

educational risk factors that affect foster youth, there

is a need to have clear and supportive communication

between the education and the child welfare system (Ryan,

Garnier, Zyphur & Zhai, 2006; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm

2004).

Communication between the education and child

welfare systems is essential to collaborate as a team and

find foster youth a stable placement, while ensuring that

their educational needs are being met. Social workers can

play a crucial role in the outcomes of foster youth.

Findings from the analysis of the Department of Children

and Family Services in Illinois found that there was a

correlation between the quality of case management that a

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social worker implemented and outcomes of a child in care (Ryan et al., 2006). The study done by Ryan et al. (2006) suggests that if social workers provide the best practice possible to their clients, it may alter the outcome of the child's life either positively or negatively depending on the quality of case work that a social worker provides.

One critique to Ryan et al.'s (2006) study is that the concept of best practice is a relative term that can mean different things to different people. What one social worker may deem as the best practice approach may not necessarily be seen as adequate practice by another social worker.

In order to provide the best services to foster youth, there is a need to be able to identify the risk factors that impair them from getting the best possible education they can get. Social workers need to be able to identify these risks and address them in order to alleviate the effects that these risks pose on foster youth. However, often times social workers are seen as distant entities that operate through policy and procedure protocol, and overlook education in the life of foster youth (Altshuler, 2006).

A study composed of a focus group of social workers and educators found that social workers were perceived as not caring about the educational outcomes of foster youth (Altshuler, 2006). Teachers further perceived social workers as a barrier to the adequate educational attainment of foster youth (Altshuler, 2006). Social workers response to these statements was that the education system was trying to shift the burden on to the child welfare system because educators did not want to be accountable for the lack of services that they failed to provide foster youth (Altshuler, 2006).

The focus should not be a blame game, but instead collaboration between those that are actively involved in the lives of foster youth to better coordinate services that will remedy the risk factors associated with poor academic outcomes (Altshuler, 2006; Zetlin et al., 2004). These implications are of special importance for social workers since they are the main support system once children are removed from their home and enter care.

There is little literature available on the educational barriers that foster youth experience. Importance needs to be given to the academic tracks that foster youth are involved with, in order to ensure that

they are getting the services that will maximize and
enhance their abilities to continue on to higher
education.

There is a need to explore the perceived barriers
that social workers' believe to be primary factors
associated with academic failures amongst foster youth.
The goal of this study is to identify the factors that
social workers feel hinder foster youth education, in
hopes to establish these factors as barriers, and find
ways to mitigate the effects of these barriers on foster
youth education.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

In order to better understand the reasons why foster
youth fail academically there is a need to review social
constructionist theory. The theory postulates that people
have perceptions of their worlds and their lives as a
result of their environments, cultures, and specific
unique personal experiences (Furman, Jackson, Downey, &
Shears, 2003). These factors create and mold the worlds
and realities of each person, and each reality is
different from person to person, and to understand a
person there is a need to comprehend their social

construct (Furman et al., 2003). This is the foundation of social constructionist theory.

This theory is appropriate in understanding foster youth because it validates the importance of external forces that often influence the lives of youth. Foster youth often have emerged from abusive and neglectful environments and been subjected to life in foster care. These life events have been embedded in the personal experiences of foster youth as negative experiences that give foster youth the perception that their lives are destined for failure (Furman et al., 2003). These beliefs are then translated to behaviors and thinking patterns in foster youth that inhibit their ability to overcome negative circumstances (Furman et al., 2003). These personal beliefs are termed as personal fables, or views that foster youth have about themselves that are usually unreal and exaggerated (Furman et al., 2003).

Foster youth often see themselves as individuals who are plagued with obstacles. They tend to dwell in their past experiences and allow their mental perceptions to sabotage their success, and this can be applied to school success (Furman et al., 2003). Foster Youth tend to not place much importance to school because they have not

been successful with it and the people around them have not inculcated a strong academic value in them. The importance of education needs to be a social construct with which foster youth have been instilled with throughout their lives in order for it to mean something to them. There is no literature about the relationship between education and social constructionist theory, and much less as it relates to foster youth. However the implications of this theory can facilitate the understanding of foster youth and their educational outcomes.

Social workers have an important role in the shaping and influencing the social constructs of foster youth because they tend to be involved in their lives until the youth emancipates from the care system. It is for this reason that social workers play a crucial role in the social construction of foster youths' perceptions of education (Furman et al., 2003). With this in mind social workers must be the people in the lives of foster youth that will construct the value and importance of education in their lives, so that they see the intrinsic benefit in education (Furman et al., 2003). Typically, foster youth do not have a strong value towards education and this is

because the people around them tend to ignore this element as a crucial factor in the successful adaptation of foster youth. Social workers need to be aware of this in order to know the specific needs of this population by looking at their backgrounds, cultural norms, and personal experiences, to better understand foster youths' mental framework, and better serve their needs (Furman et al., 2003).

Summary

This chapter reviewed available literature that addressed the risk factors of academic attainment in foster youth. There is a need to expand and add to the body of knowledge concerning academic attainment as it relates to foster youth. More importantly this chapter concludes by highlighting the importance of this study to help guide child welfare practices into further exploration of the educational risks associated with foster youth.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

In this section the methods utilized in the study
will be presented. This chapter will address the study
design, sampling, data collection, instruments used to
conduct the focus groups, procedures, and how human
subjects were protected throughout the study. This
chapter will end with how the qualitative data was
analyzed.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore social
workers' perceptions of educational barriers amongst the
foster youth population. Research has suggested that a
good academic education is the foundation for positive
outcomes once youth exit the care system. Most research
acknowledges that foster youth fail to attain adequate
educations while in the foster care system. However,
these studies fail to consistently identify the barriers
associated with poor academic attainment within the
foster youth population. There are a few studies that do
explore these barriers, and their findings tend to be

inconsistent with one another. Therefore, this study aimed towards identifying the barriers that inhibit foster youth in attaining proper academic educations. The findings of this study will add to and expand the literature already available regarding this topic.

This study used a qualitative design that consisted of two focus groups. Each focus group involved a minimum of five social workers employed in Riverside and San Bernardino counties' child welfare agencies. In an attempt to explore and identify social workers' perceptions in regard to academic barriers amongst foster youth, an open forum was believed to be the most practical means in attaining this information. In addition, focus groups allow room for brainstorming on topics not well defined by previous literature (Zetlin et al., 2006).

This study was not intended to be representative of all child welfare social workers' views on academic barriers due to the small number of participants. Another limitation of this study was the fact that the data obtained were perceptions and opinions of social workers, which may not be reflective of the real issues affecting foster youths' education. Social worker perspectives may

reflect more on agency policy related topics, versus the direct deficits of foster youth education.

Sampling

The sample size was relatively small, consisting of thirteen social workers total. All social workers were asked to give informed consent in order to participate in the study (Appendix A). A convenience sample was used to select participants. Researchers conducted two focus groups consisting of five to eight social workers per focus group. One focus group was conducted in Riverside County and the other in San Bernardino County. Agency supervisors were contacted and asked to identify potential social workers both willing to take part in this study, and who worked directly with foster youth. Supervisors participated by providing the researchers with a list of names and email addresses of social workers. The selection of participants was established by choosing the first ten social workers who responded. The small sample size was chosen for the purpose of making it more reasonable for researchers to manage and engage all participants in a group discussion.

Data Collection and Instruments

This study collected data by conducting focus groups that were audio taped. Participants were asked to give consent to be audio taped. The interviewers asked open-ended questions addressing the issue of academic barriers amongst foster youth (Appendix B for Focus Group Interview Guide). First, social workers were asked to answer demographic questions. Then, social workers were asked to discuss questions related to the barriers associated with foster youth education. Lastly, the focus groups were asked to make recommendations for reducing the educational barriers perceived to be the inhibitors to foster youth education. To guide the group discussion, one of the researchers served as a facilitator during the focus group session to ensure that questions were answered in-depth by the group.

Procedures

For the purposes of this study, five county child welfare social workers made up one focus group, and eight social workers made up the other. Agency supervisors were contacted and asked to provide a list of social workers who worked with foster youth in their caseloads. Social

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workers were invited to participate in the study through invitations via email. Social workers were asked to confirm participation in the study by replying to the email.

Researchers set up a time frame of approximately sixty to ninety minutes to discuss and analyze the questions on the interview guide. Both group discussions took place within one week, and discussions were held in the agencies' conference rooms to ensure the satisfaction and convenience of participants. Before each study began participants were asked to sign the informed consent form. Once informed consent was given by participants they engaged in the focus group discussion. After the study was completed the social workers who participated in the focus group were given a debriefing statement to clarify the study (Appendix C). As part of compensation for participating in the study, social workers received a $5 coffee gift card.

Protection of Human Subjects

The identities of social workers who participated in this study remained confidential and anonymous. Throughout the course of the focus group discussions, no

names were connected with the data provided. Participants

were given an informed consent form, and were asked to

sign an X mark in order to protect their names and

identities. In addition, participants were advised not to

say their names or those of their colleagues during the

focus group discussion. This safeguard ensured that no

participant in the study was identified. The focus group

discussion was audio taped. The audiotapes were stored

and kept in a locked drawer. Only the two researchers

involved in the study had access to the taped

information. Every effort was made to protect the

identities of the participants in this study, since they

were currently employed social workers. Once this study

was completed, the audiotapes were destroyed in order to

guarantee that the participants in this study were never

identified.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis techniques were employed

in order to describe the information gathered in the two

focus groups. To begin, audio taped data was transcribed

verbatim. Once the information was created into

transcript form, the next step of analysis was to keep a

journal. The journal served as a log to help organize ideas, questions, and thoughts regarding the transcribed information. The journal's observations helped to shape the rationale for the decisions taken to code transcribed information. In this way the journal notes served as analytical memos to guide code conceptualization.

In order to properly code the transcribed data, two levels of coding were used. The first level of coding served to identify categories and assign codes to these categories. For example, during the focus group, social workers suggested that foster youth who experience multiple placements are at high risk of attending various schools for a short period of time, thus resulting in poor academic experiences that yield educational failure. This information was categorized, or coded as placement instability. Once all codes had been identified, the information was then moved to the second level of coding.

The second level of coding for categories was conducted to identify similarities and differences between the categories, and any relationships between the major themes or patterns that emerged from the data set. This second level of code analysis arranged the information to address the study's question of what

social workers' perceive to be the barriers to academic

attainment in foster youth. All categories were separated

and placed in tables that represented the findings in the

study. All efforts were made to prevent researcher bias

in all levels of data analysis.

Summary

This chapter delineates the procedures that were

used to interpret the data gathered in the focus groups.

Information regarding the study design, sampling, data

collection and instrument, procedures, protection of

human subjects, and data analysis were explored in this

section of the study. To view the informed consent refer

to Appendix A. To view the focus group interview guide

refer to Appendix B, and to view the debriefing statement

refer to Appendix C.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

Transcriptions of the two focus groups in Riverside and San Bernardino Counties' was created and analyzed by both researchers in the study. The content was analyzed to find patterns, themes, and relationships that addressed social workers' perceptions in the matter of educational barriers amongst foster youth. The two researchers independently reviewed each set of data transcriptions and categorized the responses according to emerging themes. Researchers then, agreed on codes and determined the most appropriate code for each category. Four themes emerged from the frequency of codes occurring in the data. The four themes are; 1: Youth Factors, 2: Caregiver Factors, 3: Agency Factors, and 4: Material Factors. Each theme was then further broken down to find more specific factors from the themed categories that emerged.

The researchers also analyzed the demographic data and correlated that data to the various codes to

determine whether any demographic data related to the
participants perceptions.

Presentation of Findings

Demographics

The demographics of the two focus groups are broken
down by number of respondents, education, years of social
welfare experience, unit specialization, and caseload.
The tables below describe the demographics of the two
focus groups.

Table 1. Number of Respondents

# of Respondents	Riverside CPS	San Bernardino CPS	Total
Male	1	2	3
Female	7	3	10
Total	8	5	13

Table 2. Level of Education of Respondents

Education	Riverside CPS	San Bernardino CPS	Total
BA	7	1	8
MSW	0	4	4
MA	1	0	1
Total	8	5	13

Table 3. Length of Time of Respondents in Child Welfare

Length of Time	Riverside CPS	San Bernardino CPS	
1 year	3	0	
2 years	2	2	
3 years	0	1	
4 years	0	1	
5 years	1	0	
12 years	1	1	
20 years	1	0	Total
Total	8	5	13

The respondents were also sorted by job classification and responsibility. Independent Living Program (ILP) workers, as well as carrier and intake social workers compiled the focus groups of this study. An ILP worker carries the responsibility to ensure independent living services to youth ages 16-21. These services are geared towards helping foster youth emancipate appropriately out of the system and transition successfully into adulthood.

Carrier workers assist foster youth with continuous long term services while living in foster care. Carrier workers offer services that include, finding placement, school enrollment, therapy, and services that will meet youths' basic needs. In contrast, intake workers are responsible of assessing risk and safety while investigating an initial referral. They provide youth with short term services until the case is transferred to a carrier worker.

Table 4. Unit Respondents Work In

Unit	Riverside CPS	San Bernardino CPS	
ILP workers	7	0	
Intake worker	0	3	
Carrier worker	1	2	Total
Total	8	5	13

Identified Education Barriers

Four broad themes emerged from the transcribed data. A description is given below for the themes that emerged:

Youth Factors. Youth factors were identified by the focus group participants as psychological barriers that affect foster youths' school and academic performance. According to the social workers, these factors are social constructs created by society and/or inherent in youth. Foster youth internalize these things cognitively, which affects their psychological development and has a negative impact on their educational attainment. Youth factors include: lack of a caring constant object, lack of motivation, fear of school environment, fear of entering adulthood, rebelling, abuse and neglect trauma, internalization of stigma, special needs, anger, and a feeling of teacher apathy.

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Caregiver Factors. Social workers' perceive that foster parents and caregivers demonstrate little or no interest in foster youths' academic performance. Social workers in this study believe that some caregivers provide inadequate parenting to foster youth. Often times, while in placement there is a lack of capacity for foster parents to be supportive of youths' educational attainment. Furthermore, foster youth lack encouragement and constant follow through in their academics from their caregivers.

Agency Factors. Social workers identified agency policy and procedure protocols as barriers that hinder foster youths' academic performance. Those include: high caseload, and lack of focus on Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Social workers tend to be inattentive to the academic needs of foster youth because their main focus is placement safety, environmental risks, and ensuring that youth are fulfilling their case plan objectives. Therefore, agency policy and procedure protocols hinder social workers ability to address foster youths' educational needs.

Material Factors. Social workers defined material factors as physical barriers that foster youth encounter,

lack, or experience that hinder their ability to do well in school. Such material things include: lack of resources both in the school system and the child welfare system, placement instability, and the delay of school enrollment and/or record transfer between schools when a foster youth moves from placement.

Tables 5-7 depict the theme rankings of the data both combined and separately for each focus group.

Table 5. Broad Themes Found in Both Riverside and San Bernardino Counties'

Combined Responses	Themes	Average Times Mentioned
1st	Youth	34
2nd	Material	20.5
3rd	Caregiver	8.5
4th	Agency	4

Table 6. Riverside County Broad Themes

Riverside Ranking	Theme	Times Mentioned
1st	Youth	68
2nd	Material	29
3rd	Caregiver	8
4th	Agency	5

Table 7. San Bernardino County Broad Themes

S.B. Ranking	Theme	Times Mentioned
1st	Youth	25
2nd	Material	12
3rd	Caregiver	9
4th	Agency	3

Both counties ranked the themes identically. The themes considered to be affecting foster youth education were seen to be youth factors, material factors, caregiver factors, and agency factors in this order. The themes were then broken down into more specific factors.

Tables 8 and 9 show a breakdown of the themes and the factors that were mentioned. The tables contain the factors identified by the social workers as the most pressing factors affecting foster youth education, and ranked the factors from most serious to least serious.

Table 8. Riverside County Factor Breakdown

Riverside	# Times mentioned
Youth Factors	Lack of a Caring Constant Object 17
	Lack of Motivation 12
	Fear of School 12
	Fear of Adulthood 6
	Rebelling 5
	Abuse & Neglect Trauma 4
	Anger 1
Caregiver Factors	Inadequate Parenting 8
Material Factors	Lack of Resources 13
	Placement Instability 10
	School System 6
Agency Factors	High Caseloads 5

Table 9. San Bernardino Factor Breakdown

San Bernardino Factors	# Times Mentioned
Youth Factors	Internalization of Stigma 15
	Teacher Apathy 4
	Abuse & Neglect Trauma 2
	Lack of a Caring Constant Object 2
	Special Needs 2
Caregiver Factors	Inadequate Parenting 6
	Drug Exposed 3
Material Factors	School System 10
	Placement Instability 10
Agency	High Caseload 1
	Social Worker Apathy 1
	Poor IEP 1

When the data is seen independently for each focus group, the main factor identified as the primary barrier affecting foster youth education is different. Riverside County's focus group identified the lack of a caring constant object as the main factor that impaired the educational attainment of foster youth. For San Bernardino County's focus group the main factor identified as impairing the educational attainment of foster youth was the internalization of stigma.

Description of Factors

Abuse and Neglect Trauma

Often times foster youth come into the system with traumatic experiences that have an impact on their development. Foster care itself and the idea of living out of home contribute to the traumatic experiences that foster youth have. Such traumas may cause foster youth to fall behind academically if not provided with the proper treatment. Exposure to any type of abuse at an early age can also affect their learning abilities, which affects their academic attainment.

Anger Issues

As a result of many occurring unwanted events in foster youths' lives, they develop anger. As a result of anger their behaviors deteriorate and cause them to rebel against foster parents, teachers, peers and everyone that comes into their lives. This further exacerbates their academic advancement and increases their likelihood to fail.

Fear of School

Many times foster youth are exposed to unsafe environments on school grounds. Foster youth are often times placed in homes where local schools are filled with

troubled teens demonstrating destructive behaviors and who bully vulnerable peers, such as foster youth. These school environments are so dangerous that even social workers are afraid to visit youth at these schools. Thus, foster youth feel afraid to attend school on a regular basis because they feel unsafe in these campuses.

High Caseloads

Social workers are bombarded with high caseloads that hinder their ability to prioritize foster youths' education. Social workers have the high demand of delivering resources to children and families. As a result of the high number of cases and service demands that social workers have, their ability to address educational concerns among their cases is diminished, and education needs are neglected.

Inadequate Parenting

According to the social workers in the study, caregivers are not providing youth with the best parenting skills. Caregivers often times tend to devalue education and therefore have little or no involvement in foster youths' academics. Also, caregivers are not trained to deal adequately with foster youth trauma or

other issues that may contribute to their low academic advancement.

Lack of a Caring Constant Object

Social workers in the study believe that foster youth grow up in the system without having a caring constant object in their lives to guide and support them. Such a person is needed in foster youths' lives to provide emotional support. This permanent object in youths' lives is also needed to encourage and motivate them to succeed in their academics.

Lack of Motivation

Foster youth tend to be less motivated to achieve academically due to the fact that they believe to be failures. Youths' lack of motivation derives from many events they have encountered through their childhood while being abused or neglected. Youth face more obstacles than the non-foster youth population, which means the struggle to succeed in their education is much more difficult.

Rebelling

Foster youth often times resort to violence, running away, drugs, sex, and many other destructive behaviors as a call for attention or their way of expressing

themselves. Foster youth rebel as a way to cope with their life experiences and societal expectations that are embedded within them. According to the social workers in the study, rebelling against education is a typical behavior amongst the foster youth population.

Fear of Adulthood

Foster youth may at times fear adulthood. Many foster youth grow up in a system where they are told what to do and what steps to take next. Knowing that in the adult world they have to make decisions on their own and without any consistent guidance, may be frightening to this population. Education is most certainly not their priority when stepping into the unknown world of responsibilities.

Lack of Resources

Often schools do not offer appropriate services for foster youth. Sometimes foster youth require special education classes or staff that is properly trained to deal with their learning needs, and schools do not have such resources. The lack of school resources is considered by social workers in the study as a barrier to the education of foster youth because the resources

needed to help improve their educational needs are not available.

Placement Instability

Foster youth often are moved from placement numerous times during their stay in care. These placement moves cause foster youth to relocate schools many times. These placement and school moves cause ruptures in the learning process of foster youth causing them to always be behind academically. Foster youth are left disoriented and confused in the process of moving around, and this poses a barrier to the adjustment of foster youth, which directly affects their education.

School Record System

When foster youth move from schools there seems to be a time lag in regards to transferring their academic records to their new schools. There seems to be inefficiency in the way that academic records are transferred, and the results can be detrimental for foster youths' education. Due to the delay of record transfer foster youth are placed in inadequate courses that are either below or above their academic ability. Foster youth find themselves repeating courses they have

already taken in previous schools, or taking classes that they have little or no knowledge of.

Internalization of Stigma

Foster youth are often treated differently because they are seen as a marginal group that has been labeled negatively by society, and as a result societal expectations for foster youth education are low. Due to foster youths' vulnerability, they tend to fulfill these labels and social constructs through negative behaviors and low academic performances. Further, social workers perceive that the internalization of stigma can manifest itself through foster youths' low self-esteem.

Special Needs

Many foster youth come into the system due to abuse and neglect trauma often caused by drug and alcohol abuse by parents. Further, prenatal drug exposure may lead to disabilities that include emotional disturbances, low social functioning, low cognition, and developmental delays.

Drug Exposed

Youth that have been exposed to drugs in utero often have developmental delays that cause learning disabilities. These learning disabilities in turn lead

foster youth to perform less well in school, impairing their academic performance. Aside from in utero drug exposure there is also the issue of drug use during adolescence for foster youth, which impairs their ability to perform well in school.

Teacher Apathy

Social workers in the study perceive that because foster youth sometimes have so many special needs it's impossible for teachers to address all these needs in a classroom setting. Focus and attention is centered on course curriculum and meeting academic standards rather than on meeting students' educational needs. This in turn is seen as detrimental to the academic progress of foster youth because the teacher fails to identify potential risks factors associated with youths' academic failure.

Social Worker Apathy

Social workers tend to focus their attention to issues of placement, resources in preparation for emancipation of youth, risk, and safety. In addition, social workers have so much to do that monitoring for school performance is not of high priority. Thus, the educational needs of foster youth are overlooked, and not really of focus for social workers.

Poor Individual Education Plans

Individual Education Plans (IEP) are created for students that need special attention in education. IEP ensure that students' educational needs are addressed through resource services or special curriculums. Often foster youth do not have IEP, and when they do have an IEP they tend to not address the real issues causing them to perform poorly in school. Social workers seem not to focus on these IEP and never really follow up to see if foster youth have one, or much less see if it is appropriate.

Other Relationships Observed Between Factors and Focus Group Demographics

Gender

Male social workers in the study tended to concentrate their responses towards youths' personality factors that in their view affected youths' decision making and behaviors. These factors were identified as rebelling and the lack of motivation. Female social workers on the other hand, addressed issues related to family and foster youths' emotional needs. Such factors were identified as the lack of caring constant object and inadequate parenting from caregivers.

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Unit

Another relationship that was found in this study is the difference between social workers' responses from the ILP unit and the Carrier unit. ILP workers focused responses mainly on external factors affecting foster youth education, while carrier workers centered their responses on the internal as well as external factors. ILP workers primarily focus on assisting foster youths' transitional services. These services include: vocational classes, budgeting, filling out forms, and ensuring that youth are on track academically to graduate from high school. Carrier workers on the other hand, work with foster youth in assisting them with their case plan objectives. These services include: placement changes, therapy, and other services that they may need referrals to.

Years of Experience

Another relationship observed among social workers was their years of experience in the child welfare field. In Table 10 the information is broken down into two categories. The first category includes social workers with one to three years of experience in the child

welfare field, and the second category includes those with four to twenty years of experience.

It was evident that social workers with the most years of child welfare experience had more in-depth responses to the questions regarding foster youth education. They tended to be the ones that responded in the focus groups more frequently, and they shared insight into the questions by giving concrete examples from their caseloads. In contrast, the social workers with one to three years of experience in the child welfare field tended not to respond as often.

Table 10. Years of Experience of Social Workers and

Responses

Factors	Years of experience 1-3 years	Years of experience 4-20 years
	# of Responses	# of Responses
Abuse & Neglect Trauma	0	6
Anger issues	0	1
Drug Exposed	0	3
Fear of Adulthood	0	6
Fear of School	0	12
High Caseloads	0	6
Inadequate parents	0	12
Internalization of Stigma	1	14
Lack of Caring Constant Object	1	2
Lack of Support	4	15
Lack of Motivation	4	8
Lack of Resources	0	13
Placement Instability	0	20
Poor IEP	0	1
Rebelling	0	5
School System	0	16
Special needs	1	2
Social Worker Apathy	0	1
Teacher Apathy	0	4
Total Responses	11	147

Education

When education is observed as a variable no real significance seems to be apparent between the different levels of education among social workers.

County

Social workers in Riverside County seemed to have the perception that the lack of a caring constant object in foster youths' lives is a major factor affecting their education. San Bernardino County social workers viewed the internalization of stigma as the major factor affecting foster youth education.

Summary

After analyzing the data for both focus groups, the themes ranked identically when combined. Participants identified Youth Factors to be the highest barrier affecting educational outcomes in foster youth followed by Material, Caregiver, and Agency factors in that order. Although participants represented different units, levels of education, and years of experience, the end results indicate no difference in responses. Participants addressed the same issues in both focus groups with the

same perceptions regarding barriers to foster youths'
academic outcomes.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes and observations of social workers to discover what they perceived to be the barriers that limit foster youths' educational attainment. The major findings of this study are explored in this chapter. This chapter will also discuss the study's significance to social work, the study's limitations, and recommendations for social work practice, policy, and further research.

Discussion

In order to gather this information, focus group discussions were organized among the child welfare staff members who worked with foster youth in the two Inland Empire counties, Riverside and San Bernardino. The findings in this study were derived from identifying the main factors found to be mentioned most frequently in each of the two focus groups. These findings have been reviewed and explained in Chapter four. We will now discuss the implications of the findings.

In Riverside County's focus group, the social

workers felt that the major barrier to the educational

achievement among foster youth was the lack of a caring

constant object in their lives. In San Bernardino

County's focus group, the social workers felt that the

major barrier to foster youths' educational achievement

was their internalization of stigma associated with the

factors that led to their need for foster care.

The Opinions of Riverside County Social Workers

Social workers in the study perceive that foster

youth often lack someone in their lives that will

continually monitor and motivate them to perform and do

well in school. When there is a lack of a caring constant

object in the lives of youth, youth tend to get

sidetracked and lost in the confusion of academics.

Foster youth have many issues that they deal with on a

daily basis, such as placement instability or the anxiety

of emancipating out of care that education is not a

principal concern for them. There is a crucial need for

foster youth to have a caring constant person involved in

the process of guiding, mentoring, and motivating them to

do well in school, in order to improve academic outcomes

and increase the number of foster youth who go on to pursue higher education.

There are several studies that support the importance of a caring constant object in the lives of foster youth, as it relates to their education (Blome, 1997; Harker, Dobel-Ober, Lawrence, Berridge & Sinclair, 2003; Shin, 2003; Zetlin et al., 2006; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2006). These studies have all found that there is a positive relationship between a caring constant object in the life of foster youth, and their education. According to the above cited authors, the more consistent support from one caring person in foster youths' lives, the more likely it is that they will do well in school, and want to continue to expand their education. This means not just a mentor who is going to monitor the progress of foster youth on a superficial level, but someone who will be involved in the lives of foster youth to be a support from which they will constantly explore their academic opportunities (Blome, 1997; Harker, Dobel-Ober, Lawrence, Berridge & Sinclair, 2003; Shin, 2003; Zetlin et al., 2006; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2006).

The Opinions of San Bernardino County Social Workers

Another finding that this study has shed light on is that the internalization of stigma among foster youth can be a crucial barrier to their educational attainment. Society often has a preconceived notion that because youth come into care due to mental illness, violence, drug abuse and other serious difficulties, their educational outcomes will be poor as a result (Martin & Jackson, 2002). There is a lot of pressure from classmates, teachers, and social workers, who often without realizing it, stereotype foster youth as inferior, or as a poor academic performers because of their social condition of being in foster care, or due to the conditions that brought them into care in the first place. This internalization of stigma can have detrimental effects on foster youth that personalize these stereotypes.

People who come in contact with foster youth often treat them differently when they discover that they are foster youth, and this seems to hold true especially in school (Altshuler, 2003; Zetlin et al., 2003). Teachers tend to give different treatment to children in care, and

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this promotes barriers to acceptance between foster youth peers, which in turn make foster youth feel singled out and labeled as a result of being foster youth (Altschuler, 2003; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Zetlin et al., 2003). Foster youth internalize these stigmas forming mental schemas that they then fulfill by performing poorly in school (Martin & Jackson, 2002).

Significance of Study to Social Work

The findings in this study are important to improve social work practices in relation to foster youth and their education. Previous studies (Altschuler, 2003; Berrick et al., 2006; Blome, 1997; Furman et al., 2003; Georgiades, 2005; Jones et al., 2005; Merdinger et al., 2005; Pottick et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003; Shin, 2003; Zetlin et al., 2003; Zetlin et al., 2004) clarified that foster youth suffer from consistently poor educational outcomes, despite efforts to improve their condition. Thus, by looking into the opinions and perceptions of social workers that work closely with foster youth, as to the reasons behind these poor outcomes, it was hoped that new avenues for successful intervention could be found. The workers in this study identified factors that were

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consistent with previous literature on resilience and successful educational outcomes in the face of great risk. Therefore, taking the workers' opinions into account may enhance the capacity of the Child Welfare System in Riverside and San Bernardino Counties to improve outcomes for the youth in their care.

There were many factors identified in this study that contributed to barriers that hindered foster youths' academic advancement, however, the main barriers that social workers felt needed special attention were, the need of a caring constant object in the lives of foster youth, and a necessity to understand and mitigate the effects of the internalization of stigma. These two factors seem inhibit foster youths' performance in school psychologically. Social workers need to be aware of these barriers among the foster youth that they interact with to maximize their academic attainment and overall adult transition out of care.

If foster youth need a caring constant object in their lives to advance academically, social workers need to know this to better plan services for youth. Foster youth not only require the basic living skills training they receive, but people who will genuinely be committed

to monitoring and facilitating their academic progress throughout their stay in care, and even through multiple placements and transitions.

It is essential for social workers to address this need since research seems to consistently highlight the importance of a caring constant object in the lives of foster youth to increase their success, not only in school, but in every aspect of their lives. It seems that in the end the most important resource that can be provided for foster youth is someone whom they can build a connection with in order to rely on this caring constant object for support, guidance and consultation.

Social workers need to place special attention to the service needs of foster youth to ensure that when making recommendations for services they provide each foster youth with a person that will consistently be in their lives. In addition, social workers working directly with foster youth need to also strive to be a caring constant object in the lives of the youth as well. When there is a deficiency of a caring constant object in the lives of foster youth the only other adult available to fulfill this role is the social worker. Social workers need to check in with themselves to see if they indeed

are providing quality mentoring services to the foster youth in their caseload, and not interacting with them on a perfunctory level.

Social workers have the ability to make an impact in the lives of foster youth. It is essential that social workers be aware of how important they are in shaping and influencing the lives of foster youth. Social workers are the people who assess the life circumstances of foster youth and make service recommendations. It is pivotal that a social worker always strive to find a willing and consistent figure for foster youth, or they will be failing to provide one of the quintessential needs of foster youth.

The other barrier that social workers need to be aware of is the dangerous effect of social stigma (called "labeling" by the focus group participants). It happens everywhere a foster youth goes, and it can happen unconsciously, or it can happen with intent. It doesn't matter how it happens, it is important to know that social stigma has negative effects on the academic performance of foster youth because they internalize it.

Socially it is critical to educate those in and around foster youth to identify stigmatization. It would

be advantageous to have social workers educate those that seem to be insensitive of foster youth, in order to build awareness of the highly deleterious effect of stigmatization on the youth, particularly as it pertains to foster youths' tendency to internalize these labels and to then act them out through poor performance at school and in the world.

Limitation of the Study

There are two limitations to this study that must be acknowledged when considering the results and their interpretations. First, the sample size was relatively small and cannot provide a broad perspective. The focus groups compiled a total of 13 social workers who gave great insight on factors contributing to foster youths' educational barriers; however, generalization of the findings may be limited.

Another limitation of the study is the fact that social workers in the focus groups represented different units within the child welfare system. This implies that not all social workers have the same experiences with foster youth and therefore, perceptions pertaining to educational needs vary from worker to worker.

Recommendations for Social Workers,
Policy, Research

In order to ameliorate some of the barriers that
limit foster youths' educational achievement, policy
makers should acknowledge that the lack of a caring
constant object, in conjunction with the internalization
of stigma create barriers that limit foster youths'
ability to attain a proper education. Then, acknowledging
that these barriers do exist, policy should ensure that
social workers address these needs when making service
plans for foster youth. Based on these findings, there
should be a requirement for social workers to make all
efforts possible to link foster children with people who
will genuinely be invested in their life, growth, and
educational attainment.

With regards to the internalization of stigma among
foster youth, three remedies should be considered, on
both, a micro and macro level. First, on the micro level
to help each individual young person to cope, policy
should allow for foster children to be provided clinical
services that will help mitigate the effects of both the
internalizing and externalizing factors associated with
the stigma that results from the circumstances that led

to their placement in foster care. Second, on a broad

social level, public campaigns should be conducted that

raise awareness in society on the unique needs of this

population, in order to reduce stigmatization. Further,

the education system should review it's practices and

perceptions of foster youth to ensure that they are doing

all that they can to address the needs of foster youth,

in a way that will help maximize their capacity to make

use of the educational opportunities that are afforded to

them. This may include specialized training's for

teachers and collaborative workshops enabling social

workers who work with foster youth, teachers, and

educational policy makers to work together.

Future studies should look at the two main factors

that arose from social workers' perspectives in this

study and replicate the study to see if findings are

consistent. First, research should focus on the

implications of foster youth not having a caring constant

object in their lives. Then, research should focus on the

staggering fact that foster youth are constantly labeled

by their peers, teachers, and society. Future research

should also focus on compiling a larger sample size to

obtain more generalizable results from social workers

within the same units. This will require working in many more counties.

Conclusion

When the child welfare workers who were directly involved in the care of foster youth were questioned as to the consistently poor outcomes recorded by prior studies (Altschuler, 2003; Berrick et al., 2006; Blome, 1997; Furman et al., 2003; Georgiades, 2005; Jones et al., 2005; Merdinger et al., 2005; Pottick et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003; Shin, 2003; Zetlin et al., 2003; Zetlin et al., 2004) they were able to identify two factors they considered contributory. An interesting fact was that social workers in San Bernardino County and social workers from Riverside County identified a different factor as the main barrier to foster youth education. However, workers from both counties identified factors that concurred with protective factor research related to poor outcomes in at-risk youth over all.

Differences among social workers related not to their own level of education, gender or other demographic factor, but were primarily related to the years of experience in the field. This study indicates that social

workers have informed opinions on the subject and that practical measures could be taken to remedy the risks that they have identified.

It is hoped that as a result of this study the opinions of social workers will be taken into consideration in planning for services leading to improved educational outcomes for foster youth. Because most foster youth in the child welfare system have spent a substantial part of their lives in out-of-home care and originally came from families with multiple problems, foster youth rarely have access to sustain educational support provided by a caring constant object, a critical factor for educational success. Further, the same youth internalize the stigma associated with coming from families from which it was necessary to remove them from, and then externalized these schemas through poor performances in school and at home.

APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

Focus Group Interview Guide

Demographics

1. State the unit that you work for, and briefly describe what you do?

2. Years of work experience in child welfare?

3. How many foster youth do you currently see?

4. What is the age group of the foster youth you work with?

5. What is your level of education?

Barriers to Education among Foster Youth

Clarifying Statement:

We have received permission from your supervisor for your participation. All of the material that you disclose to us will be disguised when reported, in such a way that no individual response will be identifiable. Therefore we hope that you will speak freely so that your opinions can be included in any ongoing study of barriers to the educational attainment among foster youth.

It is estimated that annually 20,000 to 25,000 youth emancipate from foster care (Georgiades, 2005). Research indicates that a large proportion of emancipating foster youth are not receiving the appropriate educational foundation they need (Pottick, Warner & Yoder 2005). This is producing a large number of foster youth that feel unprepared to continue to pursue higher education (Reilly, 2003). Many foster youth just give up on the education system and dropout of high school. Reilly (2003) surveyed one-hundred foster youth, and fifty percent of this population sample had dropped out of high school. Something is contributing to this staggering trend in foster youth and something needs to be done in order to ameliorate this education situation for these youth.

1. In your experience, what are some of the factors that limit foster youths' access to education?

2. Can you explain the issues behind some of these factors?

3. Rank the factors you listed from least to most problematic and limiting the educations of foster youth.

Recommendations for Practice

In your opinion what can be to reduce the risk of school failure among foster youth?

Pretend that you have magic powers…You wave a wand and make anything that choose different.

How should policy be changed?

How should "the system" be changed?

What could foster parents do differently?

What could youth themselves do differently?

Is there anything that social workers themselves can do differently?

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to explore the barriers that foster youth encounter in attaining an appropriate academic education, as perceived by social workers. This study is being conducted by Barbara Marruth Castro and Nancy Ramirez under the supervision of Dr. Martha Bragin, Assistant Professor in the Social Work Department. This study has been approved by the Social Work Department Institutional Review Board Subcommittee, California State University, San Bernardino.

In this study you will be asked to participate in a focus group. This focus group discussion will ask you to address various questions related to the perceived factors that inhibit foster youth in attaining an adequate academic education. The focus group discussion should last about 60 to 90 minutes. The focus group discussion will be audio taped. All of your responses will be held strictly confidential. The researchers will be the only ones who will have access to the information gathered. Your name will not be reported with your responses. All data will be reported in group form only. You may obtain the group discussion results of this study upon completion on September 2007 at the Pfau Library located at California State University, San Bernardino.

Your participation in this study is totally voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions and opt to withdraw at any time during this study without penalty. When the focus group discussion is complete you will receive a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail. In order to ensure the validity of the study, we ask you to not discuss this study with other participants. Your participation is appreciated, and will help to identify the barriers that affect foster youth in the care system. One benefit of this study is that it will provide social workers with best practice recommendations to help find solutions to the educational barriers that foster youth face. One caution of this study is that the group discussion may become emotionally charged when differing points of views emerge among the participants.

If you have any concerns about the study, please feel free to contact Dr. Martha Bragin at (909) 537-3775.

By Placing an X on the line below I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and that I understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate in the study. By placing an X on the line below I also consent to be audio taped. I also acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

Mark an X on this line: _____   Today's Date: _____

APPENDIX C

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Debriefing Statement

The study that you participated in was designed to elicit the perceptions, which in your experience as a social worker, affect foster youth education outcomes. The researchers were interested to find out the barriers that tend to limit foster youths' academic attainment. It is hoped that the data collected today will provide findings that will help social workers identify the barriers that tend to impair the quality of education that foster youth receive while in care. It is further hoped that recommendations can be made to ameliorate this trend among this population. This study intends to add and expand the existing body of knowledge available for this topic.

Thank you for your participation and for not discussing the group discussion material with other people. If you have any questions regarding this study please contact Dr. Martha Bragin at (909) 537-3775. If for some reason you wish to further discuss the issues raised by this study distressed please call *The Wylie Center* in Riverside County at (951) 683-5193 or *Catholic Charities* in San Bernardino County at (909) 370-1293.

If you would like to get a copy of the findings of this study, they will be available at John M. Pfau Library at (909) 537-5090 after September 2007.

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES PAGE

This was a two-person project where authors collaborated throughout. However, for each phase of the project, certain authors took primary responsibility. These responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. Data Collection:

   Team Effort: Barbara Castro &

                       Nancy Ramirez

2. Data Entry and Analysis:

   Team Effort: Barbara Castro &
                       Nancy Ramirez

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:

   a. Introduction and Literature

      Team Effort: Barbara Castro &
                      Nancy Ramirez

   b. Methods

      Team Effort: Barbara Castro &
                      Nancy Ramirez

   c. Results

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                      Nancy Ramirez

   d. Discussion

      Team Effort: Barbara Castro &
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