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THEORETICAL ARTICLE

A Framework for Addressing Foster Care Trauma in the Public Education System: Perceptions and Implications

VALERIE A. STOREY, PhD^a  ROSCHANDA FLETCHER MPH^b

ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: It is estimated that approximately 90% of children in foster care have experienced a traumatic event, with nearly half reporting exposure to 4 or more types of traumatic events. Educators must remain alert to indicators suggesting a history of trauma and understand the difficulties foster youth may face regulating their emotions and behavior while in school.

METHODS: A framework for foster youth trauma in the public education system identifies the interplay between macro-level forces, such as federal and state policy, and school and teacher micro-level forces.

RESULTS: The framework highlights the inadequacy of educators in identifying the manifestations of trauma, specifically in foster youth, and how the current implemented policy leads to misinterpretation of the outward behavioral displays of trauma as other behavioral issues.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL HEALTH POLICY, PRACTICE, AND EQUITY: Federal and state policies, school districts, teacher and principal practices, teacher and school administrator preparation programs must incorporate knowledge about trauma pervasiveness and the consequences of trauma on foster youth attitude and behavior in the classroom.

CONCLUSION: The framework guides change efforts toward improving school climate and culture through preparing school professionals to meet the diverse needs of foster youth and tackling those policies and behaviors that exclude foster youth from schooling.

Keywords: foster youth; policy; practice; school; trauma.

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Foster youth represent one of the most vulnerable groups in K-12 education. Currently, there are 423,996 children in foster care¹ of which nearly 270,000 children are school-aged.² More than 250,000 children and adolescents are removed from their biological homes annually and enter the foster care system nationwide.³ Initially, 32% of removed children may be fostered with a relative, 46% of children will be placed in a foster family home, 4% in a group home, and the remaining 18% will move between placements such as institutions, preadoptive homes, independent living facilities, and trial home visits.⁴ Foster youth are the only group of Americans who are involuntarily separated from their families through government intervention.⁵

In some cases, children may change foster care placements multiple times. Each placement brings a

new community, a different culture, and possibly a new school, requiring navigation.⁶ Family disruption, sibling separation, and school/school district displacement compound already existing emotional trauma due to neglect (53%), physical abuse (16%), sexual abuse (4.4%), and parental substance abuse.⁷ Accumulative trauma frequently manifests in the classroom through disruptive behaviors which impair learning, that is, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, increased aggression, mood disorder, anxiety, substance abuse, attachment difficulties, reactive attachment disorder, academic underachievement, and conduct disorders.⁸ Foster youth are diagnosed with behavioral health issues 5 times as often as adolescents not in care and are at 2.5 times heightened risk of developing mental health disorders than adolescents not involved in the child welfare

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system. A coordinated effort by education and child welfare agencies is necessary to improve foster care students' educational outcomes.⁹

The lack of empirical evaluation of whole-school approaches and interventions for foster youth calls for a more rigorous evaluation of practices and policies that take a whole-school approach and can be implemented by educators.¹⁰ Currently, there is a paucity of research that has explored the barriers to, or strategies for, successful school experiences from the perspective of foster youth and teachers.¹¹ There are no specific models for the trauma experienced by foster youth in the public school system (as referenced and referred to as foster youth trauma).

In this study, we offer a framework for understanding foster youth trauma and illustrate the interplay between macro- and micro-level forces and how the prevalence of trauma is detrimental to the health of foster youth in the public education system. We draw from several bodies of literature in education, social sciences, and public health to discuss the extent of macro- and micro-encounters with aggressive and irrational behavior on foster youth health and academic achievement. We revisit the framework to guide a discussion on how schools and advocates can intervene in the lives of foster youth. An evaluation of teacher preparation, administrator preparation, federal and state policies, school policies, and practices is required to increase educator awareness leading to an equitable educational experience for foster youth.

CONCEPTUALIZING A FRAMEWORK FOR FOSTER YOUTH TRAUMA

Although there is evidence of increased awareness of youth trauma within the child welfare system, implemented informed practices have not been

successful,¹² and indeed the implications of foster youth trauma have yet to permeate into teacher and administrator preparation programs.¹³ School social workers who work alongside foster families, community services, and court appointed advocates (CASAs) continue to report that they encounter many challenges as educators frequently do not see the value of their services and that they are only called upon when a student or their foster family are already in crisis.¹⁴

Educators can work to ensure that foster youth's educational experience does not reach crisis point and result in long-term harm only through increased awareness and knowledge. For example, due to ignorance, educators may perceive that a child's transition from their biological home into foster care is the conclusion of a traumatic event rather than an exacerbation of trauma. Foster care is trauma, and while the conversation on trauma has increased due to recent events such as the COVID pandemic and nearly a dozen states passing legislation encouraging or requiring school staff training on the impacts of trauma on students.¹⁵ There remains a need to identify the most effective strategies for increasing a schools' capacity to understand the visible consequences of physical, emotional, and psychological trauma experienced by foster youth. School policies that lead to the overrepresentation of foster youth in special education programs, out-of-school suspension, and referrals into juvenile detention go unquestioned by educators when aggressive behavioral challenges are experienced in the regular classroom. Table 1 details the educational experiences and associated outcomes experienced by foster youth that inform the necessity for developing a framework to address the impact of trauma on foster youth education.

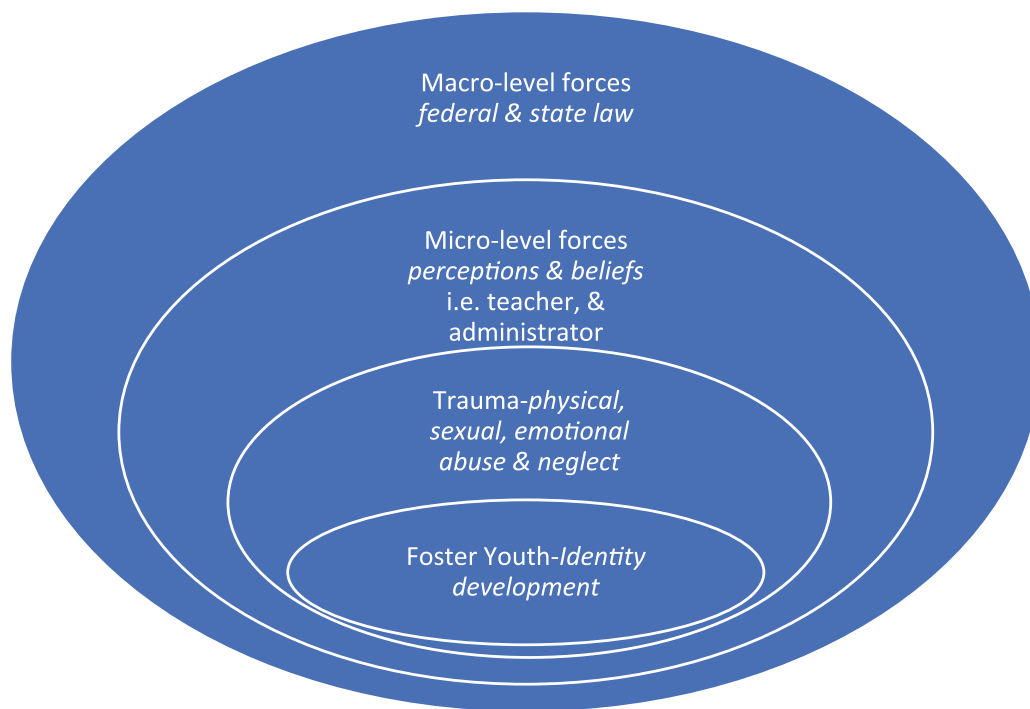
According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5, individuals can develop

Table 1. Educational Experiences and Outcomes of Youth in Foster Care

Education Experience or Outcomes		Findings National/Multistate
School stability	Percentage of youth in foster care who change schools when first entering care	32%-75%
School engagement	Percentage of 17- to 18-year-old youth in foster care having out-of-school suspensions	12%-23%
Reading attainment	Percentage of 17- to 18-year-old youth in foster care being expelled	3-4 times that of non-foster youth
Special education	Reading level of 17- to 18-year-old youth in foster care	29%-33% meet state standards
High school graduation	Percentage of youth in foster care receiving special education services	30%-50%
Postsecondary education	Percentage of youth in foster care who graduate by age 21	64% (compared to 86% among all youth ages 18-24)
	Percentage of youth in foster care who enroll in postsecondary education	13%-38% (compared to 2015 national college enrollment rate of 69.2%)
	Percentage of foster care alums who attain a bachelor's degree	2%-10.8% (compared to the national college completion rate of 32.5%)

Adapted from Legal Center for Foster Care and Education.¹⁶

Figure 1. A Framework for Foster Youth Trauma in the Public Education System



trauma-induced disorders when they encounter secondary trauma by witnessing or retelling the event. Specifically, for foster youth, retelling their personal experiences contributes to how they think about themselves concerning their strengths and weaknesses.¹⁷ It is especially challenging for foster youth to develop a sense of self-worth because they are unsure about who they are due to contradictory expectations and perceptions from varying interacting agencies. Three precepts critical to adolescent development have been identified¹: strengths that may be capitalized on to promote thriving²; resources in the home/school contexts that can facilitate healthy and positive development; and³ alignment of adolescent strengths with contextual resources.¹⁸ Attentiveness to these 3 precepts is more likely to lead to adolescent boys thriving. Therefore, to promote thriving in all youth, it is crucial to identify culturally and contextually relevant strengths and resources that nurture their positive development.¹⁹

The framework for foster youth trauma in the public education system illustrated in Figure 1 aims to demonstrate the interplay between macro- and micro-level forces. Micro-level forces such as supportive mentors, leaders, and trusting foster parents have aided foster youth in navigating educational experiences leading to academic achievements.²⁰ However, the model is intended to propose institutional structures which negatively impact foster youth.

METHODS

A narrative review of extant literature was conducted²¹ in order to present a comprehensive background for understanding current knowledge and highlighting the significance of new research on foster care trauma in the public education system.²² Narrative reviews can identify gaps or inconsistencies in a body of knowledge and bring practitioners up to date with specific issues and concerns.²³ The review seeks to draw connections between the macro and micro-level forces impacting academic and health outcomes for foster youth. Findings from the review will inform our discussion on how schools can undertake specific efforts to improve the well-being of their foster youth.

Abuse and Maltreatment

Trauma can be classified as any impairment to the psyche that directly results from a problematic event.²⁴ Typically, foster youth are removed from their biological home due to the welfare system's awareness that they have experienced 1 or more of the following: neglect, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.²⁵ Unfortunately, removal from the abuse does not lead to alleviating problems. Such adverse experiences may cause physical, psychological, social, or emotional hardships,^{24,26} for example, brain impairments, variations in gene expressions, issues with physical growth and development, complications

forming attachments, serious health problems, and significant mental health conditions.²⁷

Macro-Level Forces

Societal perceptions. Society expects that removing a child from an abusive home will result in placement in a safe foster care environment and trauma termination.²⁸ However, for many children, removal from an abusive home environment is only the journey's beginning.^{25,28} Research suggests that foster youth have an increased risk to have experienced abuse or neglect compared to the general population.²⁹ The effects of abuse and neglect are often exacerbated for foster care youth due to family disruption and the likelihood of multiple foster placements.²⁷

Researchers have reported that 20% of abused children in foster care experienced post-trauma symptoms versus the 11% of maltreated youth that remained in their original home.²⁷⁻²⁸ A study conducted in 2005 reported that 30% of foster youth alumni met the conditions for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), compared to less than 8 m% of the average population.²⁷ The PTSD experienced by youth while placed in foster care is linked to behaviors that perpetuate hardships impacting the educational achievements of foster youth.

Law and policy: Federal. The passage of the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* of 2008 (*Fostering Connections Act*) was a significant step towards supporting the importance of school stability for children in foster care in federal law. The legislation requires child welfare agencies to collaborate with educational agencies to keep children in foster care in the same school when living placements change if remaining in that school is in their best interest. The *Fostering Connections Act* also requires child welfare agencies to ensure that children in foster care who change schools promptly enroll in a new school with relevant records. Agencies are required to collaborate and coordinate to meet the educational stability requirements of the Act.

In January 2013, Congress passed the *Uninterrupted Scholars Act*, which amended the *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act* to permit educational agencies and institutions to disclose, without parental consent or the consent of an eligible student, education records of students in foster care to state and tribal child welfare agencies. The statute also amended the requirement that educational agencies and institutions notify parents before complying with judicial orders and subpoenas in certain situations.

In 2014, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report on how well states implemented the *Fostering Connections Act*, including the educational stability requirement. The GAO found meaningful progress had been made in many states, but significant

challenges remain. Educators, child welfare staff, and youth reported that many students were still changing schools. Thirty-seven states reported that the lack of required coordination between educational agencies and child welfare agencies posed a challenge—and in 19 states, a significant challenge—to ensuring educational stability.³⁰

In December 2015, Congress passed the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA). This federal education law includes provisions that promote school stability and requires schools to collect and report academic achievement data for children in foster care. ESSA reiterates the requirements of the *Fostering Connections Act* for state and local education authorities (LEAs) to communicate and collaborate with child welfare agencies.

Cognizant of the foster care provisions of Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA),³¹ which emphasizes the importance of collaboration and joint decision-making between child welfare agencies and educational agencies, the US Department of Education and the US Department of Health and Human Services released joint nonregulatory guidance to states, school districts, and child welfare agencies on the new provisions in ESSA for supporting children in foster care (June 23, 2016). The guidance clarifies that the educational stability of children in foster care is a joint responsibility of educational and child welfare agencies and that these entities will need to collaborate continuously to ensure educational stability for foster youth.

In addition, the HHS released regulations in 2016 requiring states to report data to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) on foster youth, including school enrollment, special education participation, school moves, and reasons for the moves.³² The AFCARS data provide a more thorough depiction of foster youth as a subgroup and trends in their educational attainment.

Law and policy: State. State agencies govern the state's child welfare system structure but must also comply with federal requirements to be eligible for federal funding. Most states manage child welfare services through a centralized system and are considered state-administered; however, some states, such as California, Colorado, New York, North Carolina, and others, are considered county-administered.²⁵ County administered states centralize child welfare services at the county level versus the state. Each county is responsible for state-level policies and practices of their state's child welfare programs. The work of child welfare begins at these state or county levels. Little attention is often paid to the organizational structure and the influence that organizational structure has on the delivery of services.³³

Foster care liaison. Most states have now passed laws on school stability for foster care children. Several states have required LEAs to appoint local foster care liaisons to support foster care students and manage the efficient exchange of information between agencies. In Florida, for example, an Interagency Agreement was developed involving 7 community agencies: Department of Children and Families, Department of Juvenile Justice, the District's School Board, CareerSource, the District's Agency for Persons with Disabilities, Early Learning Coalition, ChildNet, Inc. Florida Behavioral Health Network.³⁴ A Foster Care Liaison should be versed in current laws, regulations, policies, and guidance governing education services for youth in foster care and understand the public education system, including special education, and the foster care system, and how to access school-based resources (including transportation) for youth in foster care.

School campus. At the school campus level, a foster care liaison officer is generally charged with ensuring that school staff is informed of policies and procedures related to enrollment, student records, and file transfers. In addition, they maintain regular contact (in collaboration with teachers) with the case managers concerning the foster youths' attendance, academics, behavior, and school/senior fees. They must attend all district foster care training and submit the required documentation/reports.

An example of good practice can be found in Florida, where a *Foster Care Campus Coordinator (FC3)* is (1) responsible for encouraging foster youth's academic and social/emotional learning; and (2) is recognized as the cornerstone of trauma-informed care for foster youth students.³⁴ FC Role of the FC3:

- Facilitate gathering student information using the "School Stability Checklist for Students in Out-of-Home Care" form.
- Welcome new students in care and provide campus tours.
- Serve as a resource to school personnel as they support the academic and social/emotional learning of students in care.
- Share "Trauma-Informed Compassionate Classroom" information with the student's teacher(s).
- Complete the school's initial School-Based Team referral and follow up on progress.
- Communicate with FC3s at other schools to facilitate school-to-school transitions.
- Engage students in any extracurricular activities of interest.
- Become familiar with Florida's dependency law (F.S. § 39).

Source: Fostering Student Success, FC3, July 2019.

A review by Dorsey et al. revealed that schools were the most frequent setting for trauma-specific interventions and that trauma-specific interventions delivered in schools can be effective.²⁹ Schools need to take a whole-school approach if they intend to work towards being trauma-sensitive. It is vital for all school personnel (including the school resource officer) to recognize the causes, signs, symptoms, and consequences of trauma and to have the skills to intervene and implement effective strategies to ensure that the foster youth and classmates feel safe. Otherwise, systems that are supposed to help foster youth ultimately create barriers that interfere with the aim of education stability.³⁵

State agency or private, for-profit foster agency. According to state statutes, state agencies have the authority to license foster/adoptive families and issue certificates. Educators need to be aware that as well as public agencies run by states, there are private, for-profit foster care agencies. When a state privatizes foster care, it uses federal, state, and local funds to contract out services, such as locating and monitoring foster parents, to private agencies. In most cases, public agencies still manage foster youths' long-term outcomes, such as reunification or adoption—but more jurisdictions are shifting even that responsibility to the private sector.³⁶ It is essential that educators are aware of the state's system as this impacts the effectiveness and efficiency transference of data and agency communication.

MICRO-LEVEL FORCES

Classroom Teacher

Having slightly less than half a million youth in foster care, it is highly likely that educators will find themselves instructing foster care youth at some juncture during their teaching career, often unknowingly due to a lack of information availability and transfer.³⁷ Moyer and Goldberg noted that teachers and administrators without proper training might be unable to identify manifestations of trauma and misattribute students' negative behaviors to disobedience when in reality, the behavior may be unintentional and out of the realm of the student's control.¹¹ Misperception of the causes of foster youth misbehavior can lead to escalation and confrontational situations resulting at the very least in a disruption of the education process. A study by Zetlin et al. aimed to understand the challenges for 215 beginner teachers related to instructing foster youth.³⁷ The study concluded that a lack of information, training, and preparedness for the challenges surrounding foster youth impact the teacher's ability to instruct foster youth. In a trauma-informed school, classroom teachers are more likely to understand the root causes of negative behavior and have the professional capacity

to implement positive behavior interventions and supports. This is especially important as data show higher absenteeism, discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions for children in foster care compared to peers not in care.³⁸

Although the school may have a foster care liaison officer, much depends on external and internal communication quality and whether background information filters down to the classroom teacher. For many foster youths, the school may be a safe haven.³⁹ For others, the challenge of developing a trusting relationship with both teachers and fellow students may be too great a leap; foster youth often have difficulty building healthy relationships.

Franklin et al. reviewed 49 mental and behavioral health intervention studies and found that 40% included some involvement of classroom teachers.⁴⁰ The interventions delivered by classroom teachers were just as effective as those delivered by mental health clinicians. Successful intervention at the classroom level depends on the teacher's ability to recognize non-compliant or defiant behaviors due to sustained trauma (see Table 2).

Teachers must be prepared to deal with children in foster care whose needs may vary from those of the typically developing student.¹⁴ Specifically, teachers need to be knowledgeable about the needs of all their students' experiencing trauma and specifically those children in foster care, as this knowledge guides decisions about instructional material, expectations for assignments, and discipline procedures.¹⁴ Increased teacher awareness of appropriate instructional strategies may enhance a teacher's ability to differentiate between misbehavior and signs of trauma, i.e., recognizing explosive behavior in the classroom setting, which appears to be unrelated to the stimulus and being aware that the turbulence of the foster youth's life outside of school may be causing their difficulties in school.

Table 2. Outcomes of Trauma: Observable Classroom Behavior

Outcomes of Trauma	Observable Classroom Behavior
Difficulty regulating emotions	Impulsive, extreme emotional responses
Attachment issues	Excessive anxiety, anger, longing to be cared for, unhealthy co-dependent relationships
Behavioral issues	Impulse control, aggression, self-destruction, difficulty calming themselves
Mental health issues	Depression, anxiety, eating disorder, self-harm, substance abuse
Dissociation	Intellectually and mentally separate themselves from reality
Flashbacks	Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) triggered by smells, sounds, and specific situations

Adapted from Foster Care Associates.⁴¹

In the 21st century, it is incumbent that teachers create a safe classroom experience for all students as this has the potential to counterweight abuse.² However, Moyer and Goldberg reported that teachers believe they lack trauma-sensitive training, which may hamper their ability to support the academic progress of foster youth in their classroom.¹¹ For teachers to develop such skills, they need to experience trauma-informed training during their preparation program or professional development opportunities.

Conclusion

Although foster youth make up only a small percentage of the student population, it is incumbent on educators to raise awareness of foster youth trauma so that they do not suffer egregiously in school. Although some school districts are delivering professional development focused on trauma, there is little evidence to demonstrate whether training translates into changed classroom behaviors and improved student outcomes.¹⁰ Research focused on identifying professional development strategies that can help educators acquire knowledge and skills that can translate into improved outcomes for foster youth is to be encouraged.

The framework for understanding foster youth trauma proposes causal links between macro- and micro-level forces impacting foster youth's academic and general well-being. Educators should have the professional capacity to ensure that school policies (micro-level forces) include appropriate procedures for foster youth that meet legal requirements (macro-level forces); and second, the school discipline policy does not exacerbate implicit or unconscious biases towards foster youth. Federal and state policies, school districts, teacher and principal practices, and teacher and school preparation programs must incorporate knowledge about trauma pervasiveness and the consequences of trauma on foster youth attitudes and behavior in the classroom.

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