Coming to Terms with No Child Left Behind: Learning to Teach the Invisible Children

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ABSTRACT

It is critical that teachers and administrators seek out and serve the invisible children in their classrooms and schools. When they acknowledge the condition of homeless and foster children, they can begin to address their unique learning needs and close their learning gaps. Based on definitions provided by the McKinney-Vento Act, some schools were unaware they had homeless children enrolled in their schools. They discovered that ten percent of their students would be considered homeless. This article challenges educators to be knowledgeable about homeless and foster children and their unique learning needs.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to examine the needs of homeless and foster children in light of the ongoing national education crisis addressed by the No Child Left Behind legislation. Schools have been seeking ways to close learning gaps among different groups of children without examining the special needs of the most invisible children—homeless and foster children. Statewide and national databases examine learning gaps between ethnic groups, gender groups, and students of differential socioeconomic status, but there is not a category related to homeless and foster children.

The need to look at them is underscored by the fact that twelve months after leaving foster care, one third of them will have an encounter with the law. More than 50% will be unemployed, 40% will be homeless, and approximately 40% of the young women will become pregnant. The cost of neglecting their education needs is immeasurable.

A closer look at their learning needs is imperative because their learning needs are so different from the typical student. NCLB mandates, requirements to provide a free and appropriate public education, and scrutiny faced by schools to close achievement gaps and reduce dropouts are well known to school administrators. Most schools in 2006 still do not have specific plans or strategies for addressing the needs of these vulnerable learners. Teachers and school administrators should be aware of the following:

1. The highly mobile lives of foster children lead to much uncertainty, delays, and inefficiencies in their educational development (Sanderson, 2003; Ayasse, 1995, October).

2. Foster children tend to have greater need for encouragement than the typical student. Many are traumatized in a variety of ways, frightened by the uncertainty of each successive placement, embarrassed at the circumstances that set them apart from their peers, and unable to trust those trying to help them. They must cope with loss and sadness in every circumstance they face. Their brains take longer to process the academic learning requirements once they have come to understand the need to master academic learning objectives (Chichon, 2004).

3. In addition to the physical and emotional deprivation and abuse many foster and homeless children encounter, their school experiences have often been filled with discrimination, hostility, apathy toward their needs, and rejection. They tend not to seek help when it is desperately needed because they have learned not to trust people (Altshuler, 1997, April; Ayasse, 1995, October).

4. Foster children need to be actively engaged in making decisions about their own lives. They need to see helping behavior modeled by caring and trustworthy adults. Foster children need social skill development in areas such as how to take the perspective of others, how to resolve conflicts peacefully and equitably, and

how to confront injustice in a way that brings about their own protection and that of others (Carisson-Paig & Lantieri, 2005, summer).

5. Everything seems unfamiliar and strange. Foster children feel like unwanted guests in someone else's home where everything they do, including simply existing in that setting, feels wrong. They miss their families, old neighborhoods, and friends no matter how bad their previous abusive situations may have been. They feel stigmatized as homeless people when they enter new schools (Nunez, 1994; Dupper, 1994; Chicon, 2004).

6. Their motivation to cooperate and learn is not linear because they have learned to perceive and experience reality differently. Their motivation to learn is not consistent from week to week, day to day, or even hour to hour. Homeless and foster children may become more aggressive, demanding, immature, or attention seeking than their peers. They also are more withdrawn, anxious, or over-compliant (Altshuler, 1997, April; McNeil, Herschell, Gurwitch & Clemens-Mowrer, 2005, May).

7. These behaviors and feelings experienced by homeless and foster children call for specialized intervention. Most educators are not sufficiently knowledgeable or sensitive to this fact. Instead teachers engage disciplinary referral processes with consequences designed to move students out of the regular classroom into Disciplinary Alternative Educational Placement (DAEP) or In-School Suspension (ISS) placements that are either unrelated to or detrimental to the learning needs of homeless and foster children.

8. Teachers and foster parents may not realize they are dealing with a learning disability due to prior records, including assessments and placements, not arriving or students not being assessed from the previous school. It could be that the results of the assessments were not being communicated to teachers and foster parents. In some cases, despite ongoing professional development, teachers may not fulfill their legal and ethical obligation to address special learning needs of all students (Ayasse, 1995, October).

9. Lack of collaboration between school officials and the child welfare workers leads to territorial and adversarial actions. Foster children find themselves caught in the middle of warring factions that lead to feelings of chaos, confusion, and hurt (Altshuler, 1997, April). Some children report that "living on the streets" is less stressful for them than the systems designed to "help" them.

Acknowledging the Invisible Children

There are several responses educators should make to move homeless and foster children out of the blind spot in the rearview mirror and place them squarely at the center of the field of vision. These include:

1. Administrators must ensure that teachers and staff persons possess a fundamental understanding of the legal rights of homeless and foster children. This includes a rich understanding of the right to a free and appropriate public education (PL 94-142, IDEA, ADA), the education rights of children in homeless situations (McKinney-Vento Act), and laws related to parental rights and responsibilities. They should understand they could be participating in the denial of civil rights to children who are entitled to services or consideration by law if they are not knowledgeable of these legal rights. School administrations are required by the McKinney-Vento Act to make homeless and foster children aware of their legal rights under that Act. The McKinney-Vento Act requires schools make these rights available to children twice during the academic year (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2004).

2. Administrators should assume responsibility to ensure that all parties to the homeless or foster child's welfare and education understand the various services and processes necessary to obtain special education services for the children in their care. Case workers may need school district guidance in learning to serve effectively as a team member of admission, review and dismissal (ARD) committees. School administrators must take the lead to instill a sense of urgency and caring within all teachers and staff persons who have homeless and foster children in their classrooms or immediate area of responsibility. This urgency and caring should be conveyed in all interactions related to the children's needs.

3. Education liaisons that are knowledgeable about education placement issues and the special characteristics of homeless and foster children should be employed and empowered to advocate for the child. The child should never be caught between the local education agency (LEA) and case worker in adversarial or neglectful situations (Zetlin, Weinberg & Kimm, 2004).

4. Administrators should engage counselors to use all resources including technology to locate, obtain, or disseminate educational records to appropriate authorities, especially when the child has experienced multiple foster and school settings.

5. School staff should be prepared to provide technical assistance to social service agencies and foster care institutions that develop "education passports." Education passports will include all necessary documents that remain with the homeless or

foster child as he/she moves from one placement situation to another. This will expedite timely school enrollment and proper placement.

6. Class policies and procedures must reflect a deep acknowledgement of the delicate circumstances of homeless and foster children. Teachers must be aware when taunting or other bullying behaviors toward homeless children occurs and take action to correct and prevent it.

7. Discipline systems that are designed to process students out of classes, rather than provide guidance and support for misbehaving students, are inappropriate for children with emotional disturbances. Homeless and foster children tend to have a much higher rate of emotional disturbance than the general population. They also are less likely to receive the needed referrals for special help and are treated as behavioral concerns instead. This injustice needs to be recognized and corrected.

8. Zero-tolerance policies related to non-violent, non-drug or non-weapon concerns are inappropriate and should be abolished for foster and homeless children. Such approaches are ineffective and detrimental to the needs of children dealing with multiple emotional and academic issues, especially when alternate consequences are available to teachers.

9. The practice of giving a grade of "zero" for failure of the student to participate in a class activity or missed homework assignment is based on a psychological paradigm that is inconsistent with the motivational characteristics of children who have already given up. The linkage between a specific grade and motivation to learn is very weak. An accumulation of zeros sets up a no-win situation where no payoff exists for students who begin putting forth effort when they do begin to see a connection and a desire to move forward and cooperate. A cycle of failure is established and perpetuated. In such cases, both schools and students that need to improve test scores suffer the consequence of this inappropriate disciplinary response.

10. School administrators must facilitate the enrollment and attendance of a homeless or foster child even if previous records are not immediately available (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2004).

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, when school administrators, teachers, and school staff demonstrate urgency, intention, and consistency in meeting the needs of homeless and foster children, they can begin to make them visible so their needs can be specifically addressed. Since a large number of homeless and foster children are also categorized as African American,

Latino, or economically disadvantaged, schools may find these recommendations will do more to close the learning gaps than some of the other traditional things that they were previously doing.

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