

Running Head: FOSTER CARE STUDENTS' BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS

Addressing Foster Care Students' Behavioral Interventions:

A National Survey of Teachers' Opinions

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**Abstract**

Each year thousands of our nation's youth experience abuse and neglect severe enough to warrant their placement into states' foster care systems. The reasons for their entry into foster care include experiences or potential risk for physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse, in addition to parental/caregiver neglect and maltreatment. The literature reports a correlation between foster care and special education. The purpose of the present study was to design and administer a survey to a national sample of teachers about their opinions of foster care youth, providers, and services, a pursuit that has otherwise not appeared in the literature. In doing so, the overarching aim was to collect descriptive statistics necessary for this first-time contribution. A follow-up goal was to determine areas of statistical significance throughout the survey and analyze them to note correlations. Analyses discussed in this article pertain to questions relative to behaviors. Implications about missed opportunities for behavioral interventions on behalf of this vulnerable population are identified and discussed.

**Key words:** caseworkers, court systems, court personnel, school administrators, caregivers

At any given time, at least 500,000 children reside in state foster care systems throughout the country (Children's Rights Organization, 2009). Federal laws governing these systems purport to provide safe havens (e.g., foster homes) for children and adolescents the courts have identified as having sustained neglect and/or abuse while in their care of their parents or guardians. Related laws, policies, and practices aim to reunify the youth with their caregivers once reasonable standards of safety have been met. Allen and Bissell's (2004) analysis of foster care policy explained:

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) (1997) specified that appropriate permanent options [for a ward of the state] should include placements with a fit and willing relative, a legal guardian, or in another permanent living arrangement, in addition to a safe return home or adoption. Subsequent ASFA regulations underscored the importance of stature requirements for permanency options beyond long-term foster care. (p. 54)

Efforts towards this end include federal and state policies that (a) identify reasonable efforts for family reunification, (b) establish stable out-of-home placements, and (c) encourage adoptions for non-reunification situations.

An assumption can be made that the *intent* of foster care is to provide a stable out-of-home placement with concurrent efforts of reunifications. The literature reports an alternative reality. Most troublesome are the failed reunifications that perpetuate the need for foster care services as children reenter the system. In a special issue of *The Future of Children*, Bass, Shields, and Beherman (2004) reported in the issue's introduction: "In 2000, nearly 10% of children reunified with parents returned to foster care within one year" (p. 18). Of equal concern are the disruptions in placements that occur while in foster care. For example, Webster, Barth, and Needell (2000) followed 5,557 children who entered one state's foster care system and

reported that 50% of the population had experienced three or more foster care placements.

Geroski and Knauss (2000) provided a similar statistic: "Foster children change placements on the average of three times during their time in care" (p. 154).

### *Foster Care & Behavioral Implications*

Discussions in the literature suggest that a relationship exists between turnovers in foster care placements and youth's behavior. Edelstein, Burge, and Waterman (2001) provided recommendations for foster parents and cautioned them to understand that children placed in their care and who have had prior placement instability will display negative behaviors as a result: "Children who have experienced multiple placements, losses, and traumas often exhibit a basic lack of trust in their caregivers and interact in a superficial and ingratiating way" (p. 11). Kolko and Cupit-Swenson (2002) proved the prediction to be correlated with youth's prior endurance of physical abuse: "Our findings suggest that unstable placements during and unstable exists from child welfare foster care associate strongly with subsequent placement into probation foster care" (p. 354). Likewise, Newton, Litrowink, and Landsverk (2000) found a similar correlation through their analysis of 415 youth in San Diego's foster care system. The authors determined if a relationship existed between change in foster home placements and problem behaviors among the sample during one-year. They concluded: "Volatile placement histories contribute negatively to both internalizing and externalizing behavior" (p. 1371). The authors admitted a limitation of their research design was the impossible task of determining if internalizing and externalizing behaviors are a cause or consequence of multiple placements. An unanswered question remains: At what point during a child's placement into foster care is the onset of behavior problems?

Compounding the challenge of answering the question is the fact that discussions in the literature fall short of providing additional analysis about the intervention of the inherent behavioral problems that result from placement into and, as indicted, placement changes throughout foster care. The problem is illuminated, but not contextualized. In response to the shortcoming, Taussig (2002) designed a longitudinal study about factors associated with risk behaviors among maltreated youth:

Despite the increase in systemic research, especially longitudinal studies on maltreated foster care populations, has been lacking. What is known about maltreated children entering foster care is that they manifest a host of emotional, behavioral, social, and developmental problems, and are in need of many specialized services. (p. 1180)

The research community has not been silent about its frustration to overcome the deficiency of its scholarship. The tumultuous nature of foster care hinders research design and execution. Examples of noted challenges have included: (a) inconsistent foster placements (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001), (b) access to only non-generalized regional samples (Cuddleback & Orme, 2002), (c) retrospective accounts of childhood experiences that may not be robust (Cuddleback & Orme, 2002), (d) cost of and blocked access to confidential court records (Blome, 1997), and (e) inabilities to controllable variables (Taussig, 2002).

#### *Teachers' Responses to Foster Care Youth's Behavioral Needs*

Of particular concern to the present study was the dearth of literature about the role of teachers in addressing the behavioral challenges among this population. The absence of this stakeholder's voice further perpetuates the lack of breadth and depth necessary for foster care research to benefit youth, families, providers, and policy makers. Literature that does exist paints a portrayal of teachers as unaware and unengaged in the lives of their foster care students.

Conger and Finkelstein (2003) addressed the relationship between changes in foster placements to changes in school placements, an additional instability in the lives of foster care youth. They suggested that perhaps caseworkers and foster parents purposefully withhold the identities of foster care youth to reduce a self-fulfilling stigmatization. Yet, the knowledge of a youth's foster care status does not equate with intervention: "Even when they are aware of a child's foster care status, guidance counselors and teachers often have little knowledge of foster care system and different legal and custodial responsibilities of biological parents, foster parents, and caseworkers" (p. 97). Emerson and Lovitt (2003) delineated what should constitute teachers' intervention on behalf of foster care students, and included such actions as (a) assisting youth in their development of adequate social skills, (b) alerting youth to a variety of after-school programming, and (c) coordinating services with social workers.

The purpose of the present study was to design and administer a survey to a national sample of teachers about their opinions of foster care youth, providers, and services, a pursuit that has otherwise not appeared in the literature. In doing so, the overarching aim was to collect descriptive statistics necessary for this first-time contribution. A follow-up goal was to determine areas of statistical significance throughout the survey and analyze them to note correlations. Analyses discussed in this article pertain to questions relative to behaviors, a justification for which the discussion above supports. Educational placements may offer the one consistent entity in the lives of foster care youth. Ignoring teachers' insights limits the scope of advocacy and hinders the design of effective policies that could counter deleterious behavioral outcomes.

## Method

### *Survey Design*

Discussions in the literature about specific systemic issues foster care populations encounter constituted the questions for which teachers were asked to share their opinions. The goal was to ascertain teachers' overall sense of issues, rather than comment about specific cases. The soliciting of opinions was in response to concerns that teacher-respondents would not have access to documentation/student records to support their claims, a barrier other scholars had noted in their execution of foster care studies. Examples of topics for which opinions were sought included foster care students: (a) criminal engagement (Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2003), (b) high dropout rates (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm (2004), (c) substance abuse and dependency (Massinga & Pecora, 2004), (d) suicidal ideation (Taussig, 2002), and (e) emotional-behavior disabilities or related tendencies (Sullivan & Knutson, 2000). Teachers provided a response on a Likert scale and indicated their agreement with the literature's reported prevalence of these issues among foster care populations. "In my opinion, foster care students display aggressive behaviors."

Additional sections of the survey probed for the teachers' opinions about the effectiveness of fellow teachers, school administrators, foster care caseworkers, and foster parents in response to the issues. For example, one question probed: "In my opinion, foster care caseworkers/social workers have typically offered input about how best to address foster care students' behavior at school." A conclusion section asked teachers to address the special education status of their foster care students, if applicable: "In my opinion, foster care students with disabilities are over-identified as having an Emotional-Behavior Disorder (EBD)."

In sum, the survey included 117 questions categorized into six categories: (a) demographics (e.g., “How many years have you taught?”), (b) opinions about foster care students, (c) opinions about caseworkers, (d) opinions about foster parents, (e) opinions about school administrators, and (f) information about the special education status of foster care youth. The Likert Scale included five intervals that ranged from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.”

### *Sample Population*

The sample population was identified for both ease and to achieve a balanced perspective across various state foster care systems. A search of each state's department of education website revealed if free access to school directory information was obtainable. Once identified, nine states were purposefully because of free access to school administrators' names and address and the ability to mail personalized participation invites. Furthermore, the states represented different regions throughout the country and included: Indiana, Maine, Nevada, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

Next, based on the assumption that foster care youth would most likely reside in densely populated areas, schools in each state's two largest counties were identified. The principals of two high schools, two middle schools, and five elementary schools in each county received the personalized letter about the intent of the study and packets that contained the survey. They were asked to distribute the packets to teachers who most likely had experiences with foster care youth and would complete the survey. In turn, the packet contained a letter for the teachers about the project and self-addressed stamped envelope. A total of 750 packets were distributed with a return rate of 272 completed surveys within three weeks of mailing. A follow-up solicitation was not generated due to the initial robust response.

*Analysis*

The quantity of survey questions (N=117) permitted a variety of options for analyzing the collected descriptive data. For the purpose of this article, an examination of survey responses sought an understanding of respondents' opinions about the presence of behavioral issues among foster care students and related interventions. First, to begin the process of dwindling-down the survey and focusing on essential questions/responses, mean scores were used to determine the questions about behavior for which >55% of respondents' answered with "agree" or "strongly agree." Reducing the number of questions to consider for analysis permitted greater focus on issues that were the teachers' greatest concerns. Discussion of questions throughout this article are ones that met the >55% criteria.

Second, an assumption was made that certain behavioral problems are more prone to occur among older populations than younger ones (e.g., engagement in criminal activity). Thus, a posed hypothesis was that secondary teachers would agree more than elementary teachers would about the presence of behavioral problems among foster care students. The alternative hypothesis would argue no difference between the groups existed. Between groups t-tests were conducted to determine if the differences between elementary and secondary teachers existed for the behavioral questions. Since t-tests require a normal distribution and scale data, neither of which was obtained among the population that completed the survey, use of a non-parametric test ensued.

Third, an additional assumption was made that respondents would indicate that their principals (supervisors), foster care caseworkers, and foster parents are not consistent in their support of teachers' behavioral interventions for foster care populations. Discussions in the literature suggest that teachers' opinions of caseworkers and foster parents vary and are based on

how these external stakeholders effectively promote foster care students' educational programs. Overall, school administrators have a scant representation in the foster care literature, a reality that could not support the assumption made. The specific posed hypothesis was that teachers classify foster parents as more supportive of foster care students' education than caseworkers and administrators. The alternative hypothesis was that no variation in opinions existed. Paired sample t-tests were conducted to address the hypothesis.

## Results

### *Survey Design*

A test of reliability across the entire opinion (non-demographic) part of the survey was conducted and illustrated excellent reliability (Cronbach  $\alpha = .961$ ). Additional reliability tests were conducted for each section of related survey questions (See Table 1). The only areas where the reliability appeared questionable were for two sections (respondents' opinions of other teachers' dispositions towards foster care students; respondents' opinions about the implementation of foster care students' special education services), which was not a surprise because the questions in each section were less cohesive. Furthermore, since no attempts were made to "average" across the questions in the two sections, the reliability issues were not as important. Reliability for the most important questions (e.g., caseworkers, foster parents, administrators) was very strong.

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 Insert Table 1 about Here  
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*Demographics*

Demographic data revealed that nearly half (41%) of the survey respondents had more than 20 years of teaching experience (N=117), and the remaining respondents were evenly split between the other choices for years of experience. The requesting administrators to distribute the survey to teachers with adequate experience proved an effective means of solicitation. Additional demographics revealed that the majority (58%) of the respondents typically teach 1 to 3 foster care students during a given academic year (N=162) and somewhat evenly represented elementary (N=129) and secondary (N=107) level education. Certain respondents chose not to indicate the grades they taught.

The one area of notable skewed demographic data regarded the rate of returns from each state despite an equal distribution of survey invitations mailed to each one. The states with the highest number of respondents included North Dakota (N=58), Oklahoma (N=50), Indiana (N=38), Oregon (N=32), West Virginia (N=28), and Maine (N=26). The state with the lowest return was Nevada (N=13). No explanation existed for the distribution.

Important to the present article were the special education-behavioral demographic questions. When asked for their opinion about foster care students typically being referred to or verified as having an emotional-behavior disorder (EBD), 83% of respondents (N=163) chose "agree" to "strongly agree." The same results occurred when asked about the disability-type, attention deficit/attention deficit-hyperactive disorder (ADD-ADHD). Seventy-nine percent (N=162) chose "agree" to "strongly agree" when asked if their foster students use prescription medications for their disabilities. Follow-up ANOVAs about the EBD and ADD-ADHD questions were conducted to determine any differences between the answers based on state's

with a return rate greater than N=20. No significant differences manifested, which demonstrated uniformity across all states about these disability types.

### *Independent Samples t-Tests*

Items discussed throughout this section were selected for analysis because they relate to behavioral matters. Independent samples t-test were conducted to note if there was any difference between the groups of elementary and secondary teachers for each item. Where the t-tests showed significance, the follow-up Mann-Whitney *U* non-parametric test was used to verify the significance of the ordinal data. Significant differences prevailed. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative confirmed.

Follow-up ANOVAs for each item were conducted to determine any differences between the answers based on state's with a return rate greater than N=20. No significant differences manifested, which demonstrated uniformity across all states for the items reported in this section.

*Overall opinion of foster care students.* The survey began with 20 questions about the most common foster care-systemic issues reported in the literature (e.g., truancy). The negative connotation of each systemic barrier was written in its positive opposite. For example: "In my opinion, foster care students maintain enrollments in the same school/district despite changes in their foster home." The intent of the format was to solicit scores of "agree" and "strongly agree." In this example, then, a "strongly disagree" indicated a teacher's view of foster care youth as students who constantly change schools.

Four items for which respondents needed to give their opinions were considered for the present report because they regarded behavioral issues: foster care students' (a) non-expression of animosity towards caseworkers, (b) non-expression of animosity towards foster parents, (c) avoidance of drug use, and (d) avoidance of alcohol use. Given that caseworkers and foster

parents are the ultimate supervisors and interventionists for foster care students, it was important to know the respondents' opinions of how foster care youth interact with them. Opinions about drug use and alcohol were probed because engagement in either activity is illegal and associated with criminal engagement. A significant difference existed between the two groups for each item, and secondary teachers were inclined to report each matter as more of a problem than elementary teachers did: Mann-Whitney  $z =$  (a)  $-2.353, p < .05$  (caseworkers); (b)  $-2.310, p < .05$  (foster parents); (c)  $-2.603, p < .05$  (drug use); and (d)  $-2.994, p < .05$  (alcohol use).

*School records/documentation.* The survey included seven questions about the availability of certain information at the onset of foster care students' enrollments into the respondents' classes. The literature indicates that access to school records is a barrier among foster care students. One item regarded respondents' receipt of a "complete educational history," including behavioral reports, for each foster care student enrolled in their classes. A significant difference existed between the two groups, and secondary teachers were inclined to report the matter as more of a problem than elementary teachers: Mann-Whitney  $z =$  (a)  $-2.269, p < .05$ .

*Foster parents.* The survey included four questions for which teachers gave their opinions about foster parents' efforts to discuss foster care students': (a) behavioral performance, (b) medications, (c) peer relationships, and (d) mental health needs. A significant difference existed between the two groups for two items, and secondary teachers were inclined to report the matters as more of a problem than elementary teachers: Mann-Whitney  $z =$  (a)  $-2.554, p < .05$  (medications) and (b)  $-2.304, p < .05$  (mental health needs).

*School administrators.* The survey included four questions for which teachers gave their opinions about school administrators' efforts to discuss foster care students': (a) behavioral performance, (b) medications, (c) peer relationships, and (d) mental health needs. A significant

difference existed between the two groups for the behavioral performance item, and secondary teachers were inclined to report the matter as more of a problem than elementary teachers:

Mann-Whitney  $z = -2.193, p < .05$ .

#### *Comparison Tests between Questions*

Items discussed in this section include ones from the above section. Comparison tests of the items occurred since they included references to different stakeholders. For example, respondents answered to the question, "In my opinion, foster care caseworkers have typically initiated contact with me to get updated behavior progress reports." The exact wording appeared in a question about foster parents' initiated contact. Paired sample t-tests ensued. The analogous Wilcoxon signed rank test was used, too, since the data was ordinal. Follow-up ANOVAs for each item were conducted to determine any differences between the answers based on state's with a return rate greater than  $N=20$ . No significant differences manifested, which demonstrated uniformity across all states for the items reported in this section.

Respondents were asked how each of these stakeholder groups (a) initiate contact with teachers to obtain updated behavior progress reports and (b) offer input about how best to address foster care students' behavior at school. The results of the t-tests revealed caseworkers having significantly higher scores of negative connotation (more toward "strongly agree"). The result for initiating contact was Wilcoxon  $z = -7.533, p < .05$ . The result for offering input was Wilcoxon  $z = -7.473, p < .05$ . To address the posed hypothesis, a similar paired samples t-test was conducted to compare these two items among foster parents and school administrators. No significance was noted ( $p < .05$ ). Thus, the null hypothesis was partially accepted: Teachers ranked foster parents significantly more responsive than caseworkers, but not administrators.

Respondents were asked to give their opinions about the extent to which the following behavioral issues are discussed and addressed: (a) behavioral performance, (b) medications, (c) peer relationships, and (d) mental health needs. Here again the results of the t-tests showed caseworkers having higher scores (more toward “strongly disagree”) for each question,  $p < .05$  on all comparisons: Wilcoxon  $z =$  (a)  $-7.229$ ,  $p < .05$  (behavioral performance), (b)  $-7.209$ ,  $p < .05$  (medications), (c)  $-6.424$ ,  $p < .05$  (peer relationships), and (d)  $-6.090$ ,  $p < .05$  (mental health needs). To address the posed hypothesis, a similar paired samples t-test was conducted to compare these four items among caseworkers and school administrators. Significance was found for each pair,  $p < .05$ . Thus, the null hypothesis was accepted: Teachers had a significant difference in their ranking of stakeholders in regards to the types of behavior issues they discuss. It is worth noting that 52% of respondents “strongly disagreed” that they receive caseworkers’ names and contact information (e.g., telephone numbers) for each of their foster care students. The unawareness explains why discussions did not occur.

#### *Means across Questions*

It was evident from the above tests that foster parents were ranked more favorably than school administrators and caseworkers, and that school administrators ranked more favorably than caseworkers did. As described, the survey was designed with sections, and included one for each of these three stakeholders. Although averaging across questions sometimes raises statistical problems, the individual groups of questions showed strong reliability (see Table 1). Of particular note is the fact that caseworkers and school administrators scored quite high (meaning several “strongly disagree” answers). The reliability allows for generalizations about each stakeholder. For example, “Overall, teachers thought caseworkers...” This conclusion is important because it rules-out any outlier classifications for the aforementioned findings. That is,

the respondents' harsh rankings of caseworkers' engagement in behavioral matters were not isolated; across the board, opinions of caseworkers were poor. The same can be said school administrators.

### Discussion & Implications

Although the survey achieved favorable validity and reliability, an overall limitation existed and must be acknowledged. Despite the justification for the survey design, the respondents' opinions may have lacked accuracy. For example, the shortcoming was noted in teachers' responses about foster care students' use and abuse of alcohol and drugs at rates higher than non-foster care student populations. The claim is a substantial one given the legal and physical wellbeing of youth's engagement in drug and alcohol use. Yet, the survey's design did not allow for further clarity that could have revealed the basis of the teachers' opinions for this and other issues. That is, were the responses based on knowledge of factual information or a self-fulfilling prophecy imposed on foster care students?

The fact that inter-reliability occurred across all questions suggests that respondents independently answered each question; they did not simply score "strongly disagree" for each question in a given section. Three noted areas of missed behavioral interventions are apparent with this assumption and based on the reported findings. First and foremost, teachers' opinions revealed their collaborative breakdowns, especially with birth parents and caseworkers. All collaborations require leadership and the respondents' borderline favorable opinions of administrators suggest that school principals, designated leaders of school environments, do not fulfill this role. Renowned leadership authorities Heifetz and Linsky (2002) argued that leaders need to "orchestrate conflict" when opposing views of fellow collaborators and/or issues at-hand exist: "No one learns only by staring in the mirror. We all learn—and are sometimes

transformed—by encountering differences that challenge our own experience and assumptions (p. 101). Principals may need to exert purposeful leadership for foster care situations aimed to engage teachers' collaborations with birth parents and caseworkers for the resolution of behavior problems, albeit negative perceptions of these stakeholders.

Second, the respondents reported the lack of information they receive for foster care students enrolled in their programs. Specific gaps included documentation about court reports and court mandated intervention plans for youth and their families. The lack of awareness about courts' efforts towards behavioral resolutions (e.g., court mandated and funded mental health counseling) may assist teachers with behavioral interventions in school. Caseworkers who fail to provide this information likewise do not receive updates from teachers about the effectiveness of school-based interventions. No give-and-take of information may result in each party providing services that overlap or contradict. The potential missed opportunities and financial implications further support the aforementioned need for administrative-collaborative leadership.

Third, the fissure between school and court-based personnel exposed in the present study implies that court personnel may lack complete data about behavioral safeguards for family reunification. The ultimate and legislative goal for foster care is reunification with birth parents/caregivers whenever they achieve court-identified basic standards of safety and wellbeing for their children. Youth with behavioral intervention needs may pose challenges that place their safety at risk if reunified with caregivers yet prepared to provide necessary home-based interventions. Teachers have a significant amount of daily contact with these youth and should have a means to express their opinions through and to court personnel about the severity of behavioral interventions. Their absent voice further perpetuates the neglect for which foster care strives to overcome.

**Table 1***Reliability across Question Groups*

Question Group Description	N of Items	Cronbach $\alpha$
Respondents' Opinions of Foster Care Students' Overall Well-Being	20	.879
Availability of Foster Care Students' Case & Educational Documents	7	.827
Respondents' Opinions of Other Teachers' Dispositions towards Foster Care Students	4	.597
Respondents' Opinions of Caseworkers Dispositions towards Foster Care Students	20	.973
Respondents' Opinions of Foster Parents Dispositions towards Foster Care Students	19	.972
Respondents' Opinions of Administrators Dispositions towards Foster Care Students	17	.966
Respondents' Reports of Foster Care Students' Referrals to Special Education	5	.859
Respondents' Opinions about the Components of Foster Care Students' Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs)	10	.774
Respondents' Opinions of Colleagues' Awareness of Foster Care Student IEPs	9	.890
Respondents' Opinions about the Implementation of Foster Care Students' Special Education Services	6	.590

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