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What Are the Best Practices in Foster Care?

Literature Review

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### **Statement of the Problem**

There are currently over three hundred thousand children living without permanent families in the United States. Children within the foster care system face crippling obstacles on a daily basis, as they are essentially taken away from everything they know and immediately placed in new environments where they are expected to function normally. Unsurprisingly, many of these children deal with severe behavioral and emotional issues for which little assistance, if any, is offered. In this particular study, research will be focused on foster children approaching the age of eighteen and the best practices to ensure they succeed as they age out of the foster care system.

More than thirty thousand children age out of the foster system each year. Many will end up on the street or in prison, contributing to the growing and racially unjust prison population in this country. In order to stop the vicious cycle of prison overpopulation and the fate of children within the foster care system, it is imperative that changes be made and that new, effective foster care practices be implemented.

Despite the alarming statistics regarding children who age out of foster care, very few changes are being made to fix what is a significant, widespread problem. According to Benbenishty, Siegel, and Astor (2018), only half of adolescents who are currently in foster care will receive their high school diploma (Benbenishty, 2018, p.261). In addition, by the age of twenty-five only 11.8% receive a bachelor's degree, contrary to 28% of their non-foster peers (Benbenishty, 2018, p.261).

There are many factors contributing to these statistics. Tens of thousands of children in the foster care system were taken away from their parents after extreme abuse. The homes in which they end up are not always equipped to effectively care for a child who has experienced

such trauma throughout their lives. This inadequacy on behalf of the foster care system leaves the child often feeling helpless, alone, and afraid. More often than not, these emotions are reflected in deviant behavior that, without appropriate intervention, will only increase. Despite being promised a safe environment with a family they can call their own, over thirty percent of children placed in foster care will age out of the system with nowhere to turn.

As reflected above, aging out of the system has devastating effects on children in foster care. According to Manuel et al. (2018), "transition-age youth and young adults aging out of public systems of care experience significant mental health and other social and functional challenges that impede the transition into adulthood" (Manuel et al. , 2018, p. 258). The issues associated with aging out of foster care are not limited to the children aging out but also affect the communities in which they live. Many adolescents in foster care have experienced physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, which leads to the increased chance of foster care youth becoming homeless, establishing poor relationships, and substance abuse (Manuel et al., 2018, p.258). As is true for most social justice issues, there is a prominent role for society to play to assure that aging out youth have the chance to flourish.

Though I have not been impacted directly by this issue, I have seen the impact it has on the children affected firsthand through volunteering with Court-Appointed Special Advocates for children. I represented many children within the foster care system who were months away from aging out, many of who had been in the foster care system for the majority of their life. Despite their troubling history, they were never offered help in dealing with the issues stemming from their past. They were never encouraged or pointed toward a potentially promising direction. They were, however, consistently criticized and dismissed. No one willingly fought for them or for their future. Instead of investigating the core of each of their issues and exploring ways to

improve their lives, focus was placed primarily on their struggles. The uncertain future these children faced affected me deeply, as I realized not only had the system failed them in daily practice but also on its biggest promise: that one day it would find a family who would love them.

### **Summary of Findings**

Older youth in the foster care system are often thrown carelessly into the transition from childhood to adulthood with little to no preparation at all. They are essentially forced to separate themselves from a system that solely exists because of their dependency. For such an extreme change, it is imperative and an inherent right that foster care youth be prepared in advance to be on their own completely. As Fordyce (2017) found in research conducted among a broad spectrum of foster care adolescents, meaningful time period for transition as well as meaningful legal representation are two additional rights that are not currently recognized within the foster care system but that would certainly benefit the children soon to age out within it (Fordyce, 2017, p. 602).

According to Fordyce (2017), there must be opportunities for young people to practice deliberate decision making, free from social influences and with support from encouraging professionals (Fordyce, 2017, p. 602). In addition, in order for foster children to succeed, a significant time period for transition is essential, as opposed to being released on their own on the day of their eighteenth birthday. With a significant amount of time and support in their transition, as well as adequate preparation beforehand, young people in foster care can have greater success in their life outcomes (Fordyce, 2017, p. 602).

Although youth in foster care are known to face more academic challenges, research on their school-related experiences compared with their high school peers remains scarce. In the few

studies that have been conducted, research shows that "adolescents in foster care are one of the most vulnerable and academically at-risk populations in the United States" (Benbenishty, 2018, p. 261). Literature research indicates that after controlling for age, gender, and race, adolescents in foster care reported more discrimination-based harassment, use of weapons, gang involvement, and victimization in school (Benbenishty, 2018, p.265). These findings are very important as each factor mentioned plays a significant role in other areas of adolescent's lives. For example, youth who are victimized by their peers at school are placed at a much higher risk for poor academic achievement. When youth experience discrimination of any kind, it was identified in the study by Benbenishty (2018) as "a contributing factor to poor academic performance" (Benbenishty, 2018, p. 265). In line with the initial statement that adolescents in foster care are among one of the most vulnerable populations in the United States, "adolescents in foster care reported feeling less safe at school, lower levels of inclusion, and less support in the school environment" (Benbenishty, 2018, p. 265). In addition, research has indicated that "youth ageing out of foster care are more likely to drop out of high school, to be unemployed, and to be dependent on public assistance when compared to children in the general population" (Barnow et al., 2015, p.159).

It was emphasized throughout the literature that since the majority of youth in foster care do not have adult support outside of school walls, it is imperative that they have adequate support within them. This can serve a much-needed protective role in the lives of youth in foster care. Benbenishty (2018) stated that "academic engagement, homework completion, and teacher relationships all had a positive influence on students and contributed to academic success" (Benbenishty, 2018, p. 265). In addition, it was also concluded that just two of the

aforementioned risk factors, such as school misbehavior and school mobility, could potentially predict academic failure (Benbenishty, 2018, p. 265).

Another practice to consider in relation to this is adequately preparing youth for the transition from foster care to adulthood. In a recent study that focused on effective services for improving foster care outcomes, results identified how important it is to implement programs that work with foster care youth, particularly programs providing job preparation skills and providing adolescents in foster care with income support services (Barnow et al., 2015, p. 166.). Both services were proven to drastically improve the chance of adolescents in foster care achieving a positive outcome upon their release from care (Barnow et al, 2015, p.166).

The risk of psychiatric disorders among foster care youth is exceptionally high due to several factors. Many of the factors associated with this risk are mentioned throughout the literature researched. Greater placement instability, a common issue within the foster care system, predicted higher odds of depression, PTSD, substance abuse disorder, and alcohol use disorder (Okpych & Courtney, 2018, p. 277). In addition, according to Okpych and Courtney (2018), "an increase in the years spent in care was associated with depression and alcohol problems" (Okpych & Courtney, 2018, p. 277) . There are many "drifters" within the foster care system, a term applying to children who come and go from the foster care system throughout their lives. These children were at the highest risk for psychiatric disorders and substance abuse problems. Despite this, little assistance is offered to this growing population, contributing the rising statistics of ongoing issues that lead to severely detrimental problems in the future.

As Hines & Wyatt (2005) stated after conducting research among fourteen foster care youth who spent a significant amount of years in the system, "efforts to promote healthy functioning among foster care youth should focus on the individual, family, and system-related

attributes that promote adaptive processes" (Hines & Wyatt, 2005, p. 392). In essence, the development of programs that promote individual empowerment, emotional support, and ability individuals in foster care during the transition to young adulthood is a potentially promising direction that merits further research when exploring diverse, effective foster care practices (Hines & Wyatt, 2005, p. 392).

This knowledge is essential to social work, especially social workers working with foster children. It is of vital importance to not only consider the apparent effects foster care has on youth in care but also the underlying issues that can result from foster care placement. As stated by Barnett, Cleary, Butcher, & Jankowski (2018), "trauma-informed services from the child welfare and mental health sectors may help prevent poor outcomes by helping children and parents identify and understand trauma and its impact on children's behavioral health and receive effective treatment" (Barnett, 2018, p. 1). In addition, it is especially helpful to understand and recognize risk factors for the development of mental health issues among foster youth in order to implement plans that may prevent these issues from developing.

Another factor to consider when determining the best practices in foster care is the impact of drug use on foster children in the system as well as its prevalence. As mentioned throughout the literature researched, foster care children face a number of obstacles in comparison to their non-foster counterparts. According to J.C. & E. (2018), it would appear that the foster care system itself seems to further complicate and worsen the prominent developmental and mental health problems most foster care children are already facing before they enter the system (J.C. & E., 2018, p.10902). These factors all contribute to the widespread amount of drug use among children in foster care, in addition to the growing number of children in foster care who have been exposed to illegal drugs (J.C. & E., 2018, p. 10902). Another finding within the literature

reported that children in foster care engage in sex under the influence of drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism for the treatment they are receiving from their foster parents (J.C. & E., 2018, p.10910). Though whether substance use leads to crime has been debated, researchers have found that although petty crime precedes drug use, offending increases as drug use increases (J.C. & E., 2018, p.10911).

It was stressed throughout the literature that in order for substance abuse prevention strategies to be effective among children in foster care, it is imperative that community effort initiators understand the interconnectedness of substance abuse and children in foster care (J.C. & E., 2018, p.10913). It is also critically important to understand how substance abuse among foster children contributes to poor academic performance, high risk sexual behaviors, and delinquent behaviors. In order to better prevent drug use among foster care children, greater emphasis must be placed on this growing epidemic within the foster care community as well as potential solutions to prevent it.

Many homeless children in the United States have temporary stays in foster care. Each population is subject to higher rates of psychological and social difficulties compared to other children. Unfortunately, which interventions achieve the best outcomes for children in these transitional living situations remains largely unknown. Literature researched reviews currently existing literature with the purpose of identifying which practices are most successful for children living in transition. The final sample of articles within this research describe interventions that fell into two categories: mental health and case management (Zlotnick, Tam, & Zerger, 2012, p. 453). This article concluded that the bridge connecting these two populations were trauma, substance abuse, and mental health problems (Zlotnick, 2012, p. 453).



The cycle begins with young children whose parents have substance abuse and mental health problems that can eventually lead to child neglect and, later on, child placement into foster care (Zlotnick, 2012, p.450). Though the two populations of homeless children and foster care children have been studied exclusively, similar conclusions have been made on the types of services needed for each population. Homeless children have high rates of unmet health needs as a result of living in unstable environments, have higher rates of developmental delays, and display behavior issues (Zlotnick, 2012, p.450). Comparably, children entering foster care also have high rates of physical and mental health concerns. Though service needs vary among families experiencing homelessness or navigating the foster care system, many are basic and concrete, such as help finding and applying for food assistance services, housing resources, and transportation services to attend appointments (Zlotnick, 2012, p.450). The literature reviewed reveals the potential for these two parallel universes- U.S. foster care and homeless service systems-to learn from each other and, from doing so, develop innovative practices that serve both homeless and foster children to ensure greater outcomes for both populations.

Researchers within the literature have come to the conclusion that sibling relationships are an important part of family life, but that within the foster care system, they are especially significant (Wojciak, 2017, p. 1283). Five major themes were identified of what siblings mean to youth in foster care: bond, dependable, fulfillment despair, and impact of separation (Wojciak, 2017, p. 1286). Participants in the research study on which the literature was based off of shared both the positive and protective influence their siblings have in their life as well as the challenges associated with being separated from their sibling while in foster care. Throughout this particular study, foster care youth reiterated their sibling is someone with whom they share a close bond with and someone who they are sure cares for them deeply, as well as someone who helps them

to feel less alone in foster care (Wojciak, 2017, p. 1283). Youth shared the sadness and despair experienced when being separated from their sibling and the impact separation had on their relationship with their sibling (Wojciak, 2017, p. 1283).

The knowledge obtained from this study is crucial to effective social work practice, particularly to social workers working with children in the foster care system. This examination of foster care children and the importance of their relationship with their siblings proves this to be a vital aspect of children within the system's lives. Implementing the practice of ensuring that foster children are able to maintain close relationships with their siblings, whether they are separated or not, greatly increases the chances that a foster child will thrive not only in the current environment he or she is placed in but also once she ages out of the foster care system.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Although there is a significant amount of research conducted on children in foster care, there are still a few gaps, such as which interventions achieve the best outcomes for children in transitional living situations and the academic experiences of adolescents in foster care compared to their peers. However, I do believe I was able to find enough evidence to answer my research question: what are the best practices in foster care? I think more research should be conducted among adolescents who are aging out of the system. If foster children were given a survey upon initial departure, perhaps we would gain a better understanding of the practices proven most beneficial to them as well as the resources they are lacking. Additionally, gaining a perspective of their overall experience would allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the practices that could potentially provide a more positive outcome.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The theory I found most applicable in relation to the best practices in foster care is Erik Erikson's theory of psychological development. Erikson's theory is composed of eight stages, focusing primarily on how personalities evolve throughout life as a result of the interaction between both biological and societal factors (Zastrow, 2017, p. 321). The main aspect of this theory is that the role of the social environment is crucial in personality development of individuals, the search for identity coined as the crisis that confronts people during adolescence. (Zastrow, 2017, p. 321).

Foster children are often placed in foster care during the years most crucial to their psychological and intellectual development. The environment they are placed in when these certain crises occur will determine their ability to thrive as individuals. Thus, it is imperative that we understand the best foster care practices to ensure they have the opportunity to grow and develop throughout their time spent in the foster care system, ensuring the possibility of more positive outcomes upon their release.

### **Conclusion and Position**

Research in the literature reviewed points to several practices that are more likely to ensure a positive outcome for children in foster care. Transition-age youth face several challenges upon exiting a system that has made each and every decision for them (Fordyce, 2017, p. 604). Therefore, a significant amount of time and adequate preparation before aging out of the system is essential. Additionally, continual academic support throughout the life of a child in foster care can make an immeasurable difference, as they are often not supported outside of the school environment (Benbenishty, 2018, p. 265). In correlation with this, giving foster care children the opportunity to maintain a close relationship with their siblings has also been proven as a practice that greatly benefits them, as this serves as an irreplaceable component to children

feeling less alone within the system ((Wojciak, 2017, p. 1283). Another practice to implement is understanding the interconnectedness of substance abuse and adolescents in foster care (.C. & E., 2018, p.10913). Emphasis must be placed on this growing epidemic within the foster care community and its effects, as well as the implementation of potential solutions and programs to prevent it.

I did not find any tension provided in the literature reviewed and my own beliefs about what the best practices in foster care are. I strongly believe that adequate preparation before aging out of the system, consistent, academic support, the opportunity to remain in close contact with siblings, and the implementation of programs that educate and prevent substance abuse among foster care youth are all crucial practices that will contribute to a more positive outcome for children placed in our foster care system.

As foster children continue to remain a very defenseless population in our society with very limited resources, it is essential that social workers recognize the fragility of their futures. Positive school experiences coupled with adequate preparation for transitional-age youth could certainly serve as a life-altering role for students facing the host of risk factors that youth in foster care continually face. If social workers and local churches within the community played active roles in the administration of outreach programs and educated themselves as well as the community on the steps needed in order for foster children to age out successfully, perhaps we would witness a drastic shift in the statistics regarding children who age out of the foster care system.

On a micro level, the best way to begin the administration of the best practices in foster care is through public education of the statistics regarding foster care children within our society as well as the practices that research has proven to produce the greatest outcomes. The more

widespread this knowledge becomes, the more willing people in the community will be to participate in the implementation of these practices. On a mezzo level, organizations working with children in foster care could offer resources through the distribution of pamphlets or local events whose prime focus is ensuring greater outcomes for foster children, perhaps allowing foster care children within the community to speak about their own experiences within the system. On a macro level, advocacy groups and non-profit organizations who work with foster care children directly can continue to educate and bring awareness nationwide to the alarming statistics regarding children in foster care and the practices that must be implemented to bring change and to pave a way towards a more promising future for the forgotten youth of American society.

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