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Better Serving Students in Foster Care in the Classroom

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Introduction

In my teaching experience and classroom placements throughout my college career, I have worked with increasing numbers of students in foster care. I became curious about the topic and when asking mentor teachers, other classroom teachers, and my fellow preservice teachers, I did not find many answers about the topic. It seemed that there was a lack of knowledge about children in foster care, the foster care system as a whole, and ways to help these students thrive in the classroom. When I was asking questions I also was met with a lot of uncertainty as teachers were unclear about what information pertaining to their students is public knowledge and what they were allowed to know about their students' changing situations. They wanted to know more in order to better understand their students' situations and better respond to them and serve them. The lack of confidence in the legal process and gap of knowledge about the system itself, proved a trend and a barrier disrupting better instruction and supports for these students.

In response to this issue and to my own curiosity and unanswered questions, I created the framework for this project in order to find answers. I surveyed other preservice teachers to discover areas for growth and common questions. I utilized detailed research, classroom observation and hands-on experiences, and many interviews of professionals within the system to inform my research and develop a response to the unknowns. In this paper I will create a detailed picture of how the foster care system and how it is intertwined with education. I will also provide ideas and resources to better serve foster care students in the classroom.

Statistics Nationwide and In Ohio

“Foster care is a temporary living situation for children whose parents cannot take care of them and whose need for care has come to the attention of child welfare agency staff” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). Children in foster care live with relatives, foster families, or in group

facilities. Over 50% of children who enter foster care are able to return to their families when the situation has improved. This is the goal in most cases, to be able to reunite families and provide aid and services to families in order to better their situation and make a reunion possible. How long children stay in foster care varies. It depends on their family's situation and the opportunities available to their family within their community.

Over 400,000 children nationwide are in foster care each year and the number is growing. On July 1, 2013, 12,654 children in Ohio were in foster care according to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. On that same date in 2017, there were 15,510 children in foster care. In a report from Public Children Services Association of Ohio titled "The Opioid Epidemic Impact on Children Services in Ohio" it is projected that the number of children in foster care will rise to 20,154 by mid 2020, a nearly 60% increase since 2013 (Cass, 2017).

Informing the Research: Survey Analytics

While formulating a framework for this project, I was working in classrooms where an increasing number of my students were in foster care. This presented a new set of teaching challenges and opportunities that I will emphasize later. My co-teachers and I had a limited knowledge of the foster care system and the rules, regulations, and circumstances that were affecting our students. In order to inform my research, I surveyed over 100 students in the Inclusive Early Childhood Education program at Bowling Green State University, a revolutionary interdisciplinary program combining early childhood education courses and early childhood special education courses taken for the purpose of obtaining dual licensure. As a member of the program myself, I identified areas that students were taught a lot about such as trauma informed care, and what areas I thought were lacking like implications of this trauma in the classroom and solutions to work through these challenges. I surveyed other teacher

candidates to gain perspective on their knowledge of the foster care system and its implications in the classroom.

Out of 107 students surveyed, an almost equal third of the participants were second year, third year, and fourth year students respectively. The Inclusive Early Childhood program at Bowling Green State University provides emphasis on trauma informed care throughout required classes. Over 56% of surveyed students had questions about how this information relates to students in foster care. Over 37% of teacher candidates surveyed knew that they have had students in foster care in the classrooms in which they have been placed throughout their observational and student teaching experiences. Nearly 45% were unsure if they had worked with students in foster care in the early childhood classrooms in which they had been placed.

Teacher candidates who have worked with students in foster care highlighted challenges in the classroom that they experienced when working with these students and their foster families. A few reoccurring challenges were reported. First, teacher candidates recorded communication issues between the school, the foster care system, and families. There was inconsistent family support and even a lack of communication as to who the students were staying with. One teacher candidate explained how, when sending information home with the uncertainty of who her students were staying with, she said, “take this home to [not only] mom and dad but also grandmas, aunts, uncles, etc.”

An overwhelming amount of teacher candidates surveyed reported attention and behavior issues among students in foster care. Many teacher candidates observed that these behaviors would fluctuate, correlating with when students were visiting biological families, or experiencing changes at home. Students struggled with transitions and trusting the adults in their classroom. Many teachers explained that children in foster care were often behind academically and it was

difficult to close the educational gap since teachers did not know how long students would remain their classrooms and it often was not long. Many teacher candidates also reported that students in foster care were not always ready to involve themselves in the classroom. They would hesitate or shut down when completing tasks and were not willing to participate in group lessons. Teacher candidates also admitted that they struggled navigating asking questions and gaining answers about their students affected by foster care. They were worried about maintaining confidentiality and adhering to state and county regulations, but they reported not knowing what their role was in the equation and that the lack of knowledge on the subject inhibited them from better serving their students.

Teacher candidates selected areas that they would like to learn about in order to have a better understanding of the foster care system and how they could accommodate students in their classrooms. Twenty eight percent of teacher candidates surveyed wanted to learn more about why children are placed in foster care, while 57% of those surveyed wanted to know what it takes to become a foster parent. Over 95% of those surveyed were interested in learning more about what they can do to assist children and their foster families to make the educational experience more positive.

Only 14% of teacher candidates surveyed strongly agreed that they could envision possible challenges with foster students in the classroom and were confident in how they could solve these problems. Similarly, only 9% of those surveyed strongly agreed that they feel prepared to accommodate foster students in their classroom.

Who is in foster care and why?

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services oversees the foster care system.

Children are in foster care because their families are facing a crisis (ODJFS). This is an issue facing children of all ages, from babies to teens. When the Public Children Services Agency, or PCSA, deems their situation unsafe, children are removed from their homes. This might be due to an unsafe environment, abuse, neglect, or parents lacking the means and resources to care for their children in their current circumstances (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). When the home is deemed unsafe, the local court can give custody of the child to the agency. This places the child in a substitute care setting. As mentioned earlier, substitute care settings can vary.

Typically, agencies first try to place the child with family members or other adults in their life like family friends or neighbors to prevent children growing up in the foster care system and aging out of care when turning 18. These placements are known as kinship care. This is beneficial not only for the child maintaining a sense of stability, but it also aids in preserving the dwindling number of foster homes for children who cannot be placed in kinship placements. If kinship care is not an option, the agency will place the child in a group home setting or in a licensed foster home. Agencies are required to perform a diligent kinship search within the first 30 days of the child's removal to identify relatives and notify them of the situation, giving them the option to take in the child. When there is not a relative able to assume legal custody of a child, non-relative kin can be considered. If this is also unsuccessful, the PCSA petitions the court for temporary custody. This allows the PCSA to oversee the child's placement and find them a safe living space such as a group home or licensed foster family until the child can return to their home or a more permanent living arrangement.

Throughout this process, children and families can visit within court mandated settings if it is at all possible and remains safe for the child. Many children have experienced many placements with non-family members and sadly have often lost contact with their extended

family members. “Connection to family is a basic element to live, simply put children need their families and families need their children,” (ODJFS). Family provides security for all parties involved and it provides children with social, emotional, and cultural security. Family gives children a sense of belonging and identity. The foster care system is working towards better involvement of children and families, especially when working towards reunification. The Ohio foster care system had a child focused view that is now morphing and changing towards a more family involved and focused system.

The goal of the foster care system is to find permanence for the children involved in care. For young people in out-of-home placement, planning for permanence should begin at entry into care, and be youth-driven, family-focused, culturally competent, continuous, and approached with the highest degree of urgency. Permanence should bring physical, legal and emotional safety and security within the context of a family relationship and allow multiple relationships with a variety of caring adults (ODJFS).

Throughout their journey in and out of care, children must be given opportunities to learn the life skills necessary for adulthood through family and community involvement.

According to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, “Ohio values placing siblings together unless there is some reason it may not be in the children’s best interest to do so. It also values maintaining continuity for the child with relationships he or she has in the school and community.” These values are becoming difficult to uphold due to growing numbers of children in foster care overcrowding the system and overwhelming resources.

The accounts of abuse, neglect, and unsafe homes has sadly increased due to the opioid crisis currently affecting Ohio. According to the Public Children Services Association of Ohio, a “tsunami of opioid-affected children is flooding Ohio’s children services agencies, exploding

county budgets and overwhelming available foster care resources” (Cass, 2017). Executive Director of the PCSAO, Angela Sausser, said, “The Great Recession followed by the opioid crisis led to more children being drawn into the system, and these kids are complex, their trauma more challenging, and their placement costs dramatically higher than Ohio’s child protection agencies have ever witnessed” (Cass, 2017).

Foster Parents

Foster parents in Ohio must be licensed by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) through their county’s public children services agency or a private agency certified by ODJFS. The job of foster parents is to care for children until a court comes to the conclusion that they can return home safely or should be placed with a permanent adoptive family or other legal guardian. Foster parents often have a relationship with their foster children’s biological parents. They might help teach the parents skills and encourage them. Foster parents are expected to have an active role in their child’s case “attending court hearings, school meetings and functions; providing routine transportation for the child; and communicating regularly with caseworkers and service providers,” (ODJFS).

Many foster children are reunited with their biological families within a year of removal, but foster parents agree to keep care of the child as long as necessary. Foster families often maintain positive and encouraging relationships with their former foster children and their families even once they are able to return to their biological families.

When surveying preservice teachers, many indicated that they wanted to know more about what it takes to become a foster parent. In Ohio there is a list of basic requirements that must be met before beginning the foster parent application process and the foster care journey. Foster parents must be at least 21 years old and at least one person in the home must be able to

read, write, and speak English or be able to communicate with the child placed in the home and the agency. Being a foster parent is not limited to any marital status, orientation, or religion.

Prospective foster parents must provide references. The household must have adequate income to meet the needs of the family members already living in the home and to make payments of shelter costs. Foster parents do not need to own their homes but there must be adequate living space within them for the foster child. Children must have their own beds, and “separate bedrooms for children if there are boys and girls over age 5,” (ODJFS).

To ensure safety and adequate care for foster children, foster parents must not have any physical, mental, or emotional conditions that could affect their ability to care for the child or possibly endanger the child. Each adult in the home must also pass background checks and abuse and neglect checks. Foster homes must pass an inspection including a safety audit and fire check and ODJFS can conduct periodic checks of the conditions throughout the foster care process. Additionally, parents must complete all trainings required by their foster care agency.

Foster parents do receive financial reimbursement to help cover the cost of housing a foster child. Their medical expenses are also covered within Medicaid and foster parents are not expected to pay for their foster children’s medical expenses. Additional information on the process following initial approval and more resources for parents beginning their journey with foster care can be found on the ODJFS website under the foster, adoption, and kinship care subsection.

Lucas County Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)

The Lucas County Juvenile Court created the Court Appointed Special Advocates or (CASA) volunteer program in 1980. It was the first program of its kind in Ohio and there are only a few of these programs throughout the United States. The program was developed to meet

the need of advocacy for abused and neglected children through the juvenile court proceedings “from the onset of the case until a safe and permanent resolution is reached” (Lucas County CASA).

Through my research I had the opportunity to interview Judith A. (Judy) Leb, the director of the Lucas County CASA. Judy helped me create a better understanding of the role that CASA volunteers plays with children in foster care. As someone at the heart of the system and immersed in the foster care process each day, she was also able to give me pertinent information on the issues facing the foster care system and the children involved in my own community.

A Court Appointed Special Advocate, or CASA, is a citizen volunteering from the community to be an advocate for children throughout their foster care journey. In Lucas County it is required by law to appoint a Guardian ad Litem (GAL) “to serve every abused or neglected child brought into the protection of the juvenile court” (Lucas County CASA). This guardian can be a paid attorney or a CASA volunteer; both fulfill the same role of advocating for the child throughout their journey within the juvenile court including the possibility of foster care. Since Lucas County has the advantage of a strong CASA program, CASA volunteers are appointed as GALs as long as they are available and paid attorneys are only appointed when there are not enough CASA volunteers to serve the population. CASA volunteers must be 21 years of age and complete an interview process and pass background checks in order to serve. Becoming a CASA volunteer also requires 40 hours of evaluated training and volunteers are sworn into their position by officers of the court.

These volunteers come from all walks of life. Being a responsible person is more important than the education level of these individuals and a high school diploma is not required to do the job, although many volunteers have advanced degrees. The only academic requirement

is being able to read and write well enough to complete the forms required. It is more important that CASA volunteers have good common sense, are honest and unbiased, and will be able to keep information confidential. Diversity among the CASA volunteers in Lucas County is encouraged so that they are representative of the population they are serving in the greater Toledo Area. All races and ethnicities are encouraged and many also benefit from speaking another language, in Lucas County that is often Spanish. Many volunteers work full time, but they must be able to balance their job schedules to be available in court a few times a year. The Lucas County CASA/GAL department provided CASA volunteers to advocate for 720 children in 2018. Since its conception in 1980 the CASA volunteers have served as guardians for over 12,000 children.

The moto for CASA volunteers is always to fight for the best interest of the child. The Lucas County CASA themselves describe it well in stating:

Underlying all of CASA work is a commitment to improving the lives of children, one child at a time. The key to the success of CASA advocacy is the absolute commitment of all CASA volunteers to conduct their duties with a willingness to learn, with a freedom from personal bias, with an open mind towards life experiences different from their own, and most importantly, with the best interests of the child always first and foremost.

To better understand how the CASA program works, I analyzed what a typical day looks like for an attorney working there. Early in the day emails come in about how many emergency shelter care hearings are expected that day. An emergency shelter hearing is the first court hearing that takes place in a case where a child has been removed from their home from the immanent risk of harm. Law requires hearings within 24 hours or one business day of the child's removal. In order to accommodate this timeline, an hour is set aside and left unscheduled each

day so that hearings can be fit into this block of time. These primary hearings first decide if there is in fact an emergency such that children need to be placed in shelter care to protect them. Initial emergency hearings are not to decide if the child is abused or neglected. There is not enough information present the day after a child's removal to come to a clear consensus and make a judgement on that issue. The decision on whether or not abuse and neglect is taking place happens about four to six weeks later at a second hearing.

Second, during the emergency hearing the court also evaluates whether or not the child protection agency, in this case Lucas County Children Services, used reasonable efforts to avoid removing the child from their home. Reasonable efforts include giving family services such as counseling for the parents, parenting classes, mental health treatments, or evaluating options such as moving an abuser out of the home, filing a restraining order, or creating a safety plan such as moving the children into a family member's home. The whole process of displacing children and analyzing the situation is traumatic and removing a child from their home creates more trauma. In order to avoid as much trauma as possible, the system works towards fixing the problem while the child is in the home or with relatives if it is at all possible and if the safety of the child can be maintained through the process. During this hearing, the child protection agency must be able to show the court that the removal of the child from the home was necessary in order to keep the child safe and to avoid negligence.

A CASA staff member attends these court hearings because there is not yet time to appoint a CASA volunteer. This staff member prepares notes for the volunteer and passes along the complaint that was filed, the home studies and information on potential relative involvement, and police reports for parents and relatives taking the child. CASA volunteers utilize this information to conduct an investigation and write their report for the next hearing where it is

determined if the child was abused or neglected and they work towards a safe solution for child placement.

It was clear to see the great need for these services even within my own community when I interviewed Judy. On the day of the interview she shared with me that they had nine children just the day we spoke who needed hearings, three families with three children each.

An attorney working at the CASA also spends much of their day retrieving information on the families of the children involved in their cases so that police reports can be run. Additionally, they seek out information for police reports on the relatives that children are and could be placed with. They look at the home studies that were done on children's relatives to prepare for emergency shelter hearings and complete paperwork that is given to the CASA volunteers with the information that they need in order to take on the case.

CASA volunteers and other court appointed Guardian ad Litem have specific jobs to ensure that they can properly advocate for the children throughout their court process. They are investigators. The Ohio Law requires that advocates conduct an independent investigation of all the facts and services about the family of the child or children they are serving. This thorough investigation includes gaining information from looking at a variety of records and turning to a range of sources. They interview and observe each child in the family, mothers, fathers, and all relatives. They are compiling information to draw conclusions as to whether or not there is a home in which they could be placed to avoid placement with a stranger. They also talk to children's teachers, school nurses, counselors, and other support staff in the school who might work with the children. They look at school absence records and police records showing violence and listen to any relevant 911 calls. Advocates also seek any pediatric records and any records from emergency room care. They investigate if there is any medical neglect or if there have been

injuries. From an educator's standpoint, it is important to distinguish that while CASA volunteers collect information from schools, they do not provide schools or teachers with information about the children that they are serving.

CASA volunteers or alternate advocates write a report to the court including every piece of information that they found during their investigation including descriptions of each place they searched and what they looked for. As the only member in the juvenile court process whose sole purpose is to advocate for the child without blinders on and no other mandates or any motives towards other pieces of the situation such as bias towards reunion with the family or other solutions, or any ties to other parties in the case, they give their recommendations for court orders. The first recommendation is always who has custody of the child. Will that be the parents? The parents with legal services? A relative? Lucas County Children Services and foster care? The second recommendation involves advocating for the child's best interest in the schools. This might include recommendations for additional school services including a special education plan such as an Individualized Education Plan or a 504 plan, therapies, or services at the Department of Developmental Disabilities. The third crucial step for the advocate is to ensure that the court orders are being followed through and done so quickly.

Staff members accompany volunteers to all hearings. Their days are mostly spent in the court room attending to the hearings, accompanying volunteers to hearings, and answering any questions throughout the process.

Challenges Facing the System

There are many challenges facing the foster care system in Ohio but currently, one main issue is the common link at the source of the problem and rippling out to create additional issues. The opioid epidemic has caused a dramatic increase in the number of children requiring foster

care. In 2008 the Lucas County CASA served 558 children. In 2017 they served 869 abused, neglected, or dependent children, a 57% increase in less than 10 years (Leb, 2018).

The epidemic is lowering the age of children in foster care due to the number of children being born addicted to opiates. This is not to discount the many older children being severely neglected or abused because of their parents' addiction. The average age of children served in Lucas County is four to five years of age (Leb, 2018).

The number of children needing care is increasing much faster than the number of available foster homes in the state creating a shortage of foster homes and foster parents. This has led to an increased strain on caseworkers who experience secondary trauma when performing their roles resulting in an increasing turnover rate for caseworkers. Additionally, when the advocates and court system cannot find homes for the children in the county, they have no choice but to use foster homes that are further and further away from the children's original homes. This leads to less frequent visitation with parents. Parents are entitled to visit their children at least once a week if at all able within the court. This is an essential relationship for families to continue, especially when the primary goal of foster care is to reunite families if a situation is possible and safety can be ensured. This is especially vital for the increasing number of babies in the system so that they can bond with their parent. Often, seeing their children also motivates parents towards their goals that need to be met to allow reunification.

When foster homes are further away, transportation to visits becomes increasingly difficult. Many families live in poverty and there often is not adequate transportation to travel long distances for meetings. It also requires more time for case workers driving hours to and from visits which takes a toll on the system and their ability to serve children. Additionally, when scheduling visits with the agency, the saturation of children in the system causes the rooms

used to be booked. There are not enough time slots accommodate weekly meetings for all families and many have to wait.

Judy Leb also shed light on a tragic situation that is becoming more common throughout the opioid epidemic. Many parents are overdosing during their children's case. Judy explained, "Their kids are living with strangers and seeing their parents maybe an hour a week then they are told that the[ir] parents die. They die when you've been living with strangers and the last time you saw them was in an agency room" (2018). This situation was one that affected a student in a classroom in which I served and inspired me to pursue further learning about the foster care system.

Minority groups especially African American, Native American, and Latino families are overrepresented in foster care in many communities. The reason behind the disproportionate representation in the child welfare systems is complex and has inspired studies, activism, and efforts to change how communities support vulnerable families. The variety in the experiences of children and families in the child welfare system might be attributed to these systems being managed by their own local and state agencies (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, "evidence indicates there are significant differences in the need for child welfare interventions by race" (2020). African American children are at a greater risk of abuse and neglect than white children in many communities. This is largely attributed to the connection between maltreatment and poverty and higher poverty rates in African American families (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). This leads to the complex issue of the relationship between poverty and child maltreatment. Research indicates an increased likelihood of child maltreatment in impoverished situations especially when coupled with other risk factors such as substance abuse and mental health challenges. Contrastingly, a national study concluded results

indicating that when considering socioeconomic status and family structure, there are circumstances where white children are more at risk in the same instances (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020).

Of the near 1.6 million people incarcerated in the various correctional institutions nationwide, 1.3 million have been in the foster care system. That is approximately 80% of incarcerated people in the United States (Chefalo, 2016).

Children in foster care often experience frequent moves between homes, group homes, or even residential treatment facilities. Shenandoah Chafalo, now a lawyer and advocate for children in foster care, recounts in her memoir, “I was initially excited when I finally got to go to school. But I never attended the same school for more than two or three months at a time, and often was lucky to make it two weeks. My mom would register me for a school on Friday, and by Monday we would move. I spent one day in some schools, if I showed at all” (Chefalo, 2016, p. 30). This leads to struggles feeling secure, growing secure attachments, building friendships and relationships, healing from trauma, and difficulties in school. The difficulty in building relationships and life skills is compounded when children are living in group homes rather than with a foster family. These settings make it challenging for children to build strong relationships with the adults caring for them since it is not in a parental role. Building strong bonds to parental figures is important to a child’s well-being and for their development of secure attachments. Many state and local welfare systems do not properly acknowledge and address the trauma experienced through moving homes frequently or lacking a secure relationship with a parental figure (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020).

Even if a child is not being disrupted through moves and transitions, being in foster care or experiencing any other forms of trauma have an effect on the child. Through my research

process I had the opportunity to interview Shenandoah Chefalo, a lawyer who advocates for children suffering from abuse and neglect and for those who enter the foster care system. Shen, as everyone calls her, gives a unique perspective because after a dysfunctional childhood journey with neglectful and drug and alcohol addicted parents, she placed herself in foster care at age 13. She is also the author of the memoir *Garbage Bag Suitcase* where she tells her story of how she overcame her challenging childhood, deals with the lasting effects, and “presents grass-root solutions on how to revamp the broken foster care system” (Chefalo, 2016).

Within her book, she recounts a specific time when she had a realization about the foster care system once she had become a part of it. She explains:

What I hadn't realized or taken into account was that the system is broken. There are hundreds of thousands of kids in care, and very few options on where to place or even house them. Caseworkers change monthly, sometimes more frequently. I lost count of the number of caseworkers I had after receiving three different ones in the span of two months. Just when I thought I could trust one to share what was really happening in my life, a new one would take over. My fear of abandonment amplified with each change (Chefalo, 2016, p. 75).

This personal account of the lack of resources speaks volumes to the truth of the matter, especially since it was noticeable even from a child's perspective. Shen also explains how she was being used as a paycheck to pay the bills and that the foster family in which she was placed did not have the happy ending that she thought it would when she escaped her troubled situation with her parents. Although this is not always the case and there are some incredible foster families doing great work, it is important to be aware that there are abusers of the system choosing foster care as a way to make ends meet instead of wanting to help a child.

Shen also pointed out an element affecting children of the foster care system that is often overlooked. From her work now with different charity groups and through her experience as a lawyer and advocate for foster children, she stresses the importance of addressing psychological issues they are experiencing. She highlights the depth of the effects of privation throughout one's life and emphasizes this as an area that needs to be studied further (Chefalo, 2016, p. 171). She also explains how growing up in unstable circumstances without strong role models leads to lack of many skills. These children grow into adults and lack skills like money management. Shen writes, "It's hard to ever feel comfortable and relaxed where money is concerned," since having money for basic needs was never a given growing up (Chefalo, 2016, p. 171). She remembers growing up learning that all extra money needed to be spent immediately because if you did not spend it you might lose it, and there were always bills to be paid and needs needing met.

Another lifelong effect of growing up in a dysfunctional, neglectful, and abusive home and then entering foster care is difficulty trusting and liking other people. Children struggle with developing secure attachments and believing when people have good intentions. This proves challenging in the workforce, forming romantic relationships and friendships, and developing mentorship relationships throughout childhood which I will touch on later as I explore challenges facing children in the classroom (Chefalo, 2016, p. 172).

The federal government and most state governments do not keep strong records and statistics on children once they leave the foster care system but the facts that have been collected are startling. About 61% of children age out of foster care when they reach adulthood without having a place to live or a family leaving them homeless. Less than 3% of adults who were in foster care go to college and less than 1% receive a college degree. Less than 50% of children received a high school diploma or alternate G.E.D. Over 50% of adults exiting the foster care

system are unemployed and over 80% will become a parent and receive public assistance in some capacity within two years of aging out of the system (Chefalo, 2016, p. 175).

The statistics on mental health of people who have been through the foster care system are also striking. A study from The Casey Family showed that children in foster care experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, at double the rate of Iraqi war veterans. About 25% of children in foster care experience PTSD and similarly, about 25% of foster care alumni experience depression. 43% of children in foster care experience anxiety and over 10% of children in foster care experience addiction. Crime statistics are also significant and 60% of men who were in foster care are convicted of a crime in contrast to 10% of the general population. With all of this increased need for health services, about one third of foster care alumni surveyed by The Casey Family had no health insurance (Chefalo, 2016, p. 176). Clearly, more has to be done to combat these long-lasting effects caused by being in foster care and related traumas. Federal, local, and state governments are spending billions of dollars on incarcerated inmates, a huge number of those being from foster care, but money and resources are not being spent and used on our children before they are convicted of a crime to help them through healing and the transition to adulthood. According to Shen, “This is not just an issue of addressing a broken system for a few children, but rather understanding the effects the broken system has on children, resulting in adults that can’t function in a world that has warehoused them, giving them an incarcerated mentality,” (Chefalo, 2016, p. 178).

Possible Aids to Solving the Problem

Boarding schools have been studied and are already being used in cases across the nation in a few areas to combat problems in the foster care system. If boarding schools open as an alternative to traditional placements, there are many initial positives like removing children from

locations that might be abusive and providing them with stability, security, and consistency that is lacking in the lives of almost all foster children. They could provide transitional housing for students who move on to college but lack a home to return to during holiday breaks and summers. They also can provide mentors, teachers, and other students who understand the specific needs and challenges experienced by those in foster care. These schools should not be confused with orphanages or residential treatment facilities. The priority, like other boarding schools can be on school, but additional services and benefits will be easily incorporated into these systems to accommodate foster care systems (Chefalo, 2016, p. 181).

The Crossnore School in North Carolina has been running their school on this type of model for years. They use a holistic approach to teach the whole child utilize modalities based on the Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACE, model. The ACE model describes traumatic experiences in a person's life before the age of 18 and gives the person a score based on events that caused trauma that they have experiences (Crossnore School and Children's Home). Schools like Crossnore become more widespread could give many children the start they need and tools they can use to live a fulfilling life and lower the negative statistics about foster care alumni.

A program in Minnesota is testing a program to foster the whole family. The idea of fostering the whole family came about in an attempt to limit trauma experienced when removing children from the home, and with the facts in mind of about 50% of foster families working towards and achieving a goal of reunification. This gives opportunities to teach parents good strategies and good decision making to prevent future issues like early pregnancies and addiction (Chefalo, 2016, p. 182). This is a program needing further exploration but holding great promise of positive outcomes.

Challenges in the Classroom

Frequent moves and insecure attachments and relationships with parental figures mentioned above, also have a significant affect to a child's life at school and their experience in the classroom. While there is federal legislation trying to keep children in their home schools as much as possible, that does not always happen (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). This disrupts the important stability that school can give to students.

Additionally, children are affected academically. First, students who enter foster care often have significant absences from school. This is accentuated if a child has to change school districts and readjust to new teachers, new friends, new teaching and learning styles, and new curriculums. Many students also end up missing important material or contrastingly, repeating much of the same material as they transition from school to school.

Shenandoah Chefalo's first-hand account about how one teacher made a difference and changed her outlook and the way she viewed herself resonated with me as an educator. She recounts much changing in her sixth-grade classroom with Mr. Derby, "the only elementary school teacher whose name I actually remember" (Chefalo, 2016, p. 46). She recounted him appreciating the work she did and praising her for it, "He said he had a feeling I would be an important person in the world" (Chefalo, 2016, p. 46). At the time, in the thick of hardship and neglect, Shen wondered, "Doesn't he know my background? Doesn't he know I don't have any skills or abilities? Doesn't he know I'm destined to be a good-for-nothing drug addicted wandering gypsy, like my mother?" (Chefalo, 2016, p. 46). This kind encounter with a good teacher was enough to inspire Shen to escape the low expectations that the world had set for her which stuck with her throughout her life but especially as she soon placed herself in foster care. Shen also interviewed other foster care alumni who consider themselves successful in adult life

and found that they all credit a specific teacher or education the reason for their success. This is good news as an educator- we can and are making a difference!

Strategies to Better Serve Students in Foster Care in the Classroom

When working with children in foster care in the classroom, social and emotional health and well-being are extremely important. Children must be self-regulated. If students are dysregulated, they are thinking about other things and not ready to learn. When interviewing Shenandoah Chefalo, she explained that the first thing we must do as teachers, is make sure we are self-regulated (2020). We need to be able to manage ourselves in order to respond to our students. Shen travels throughout the country leading workshops and trainings to administrators on trauma and trauma care in the classroom. She is challenging traditional thinking by reversing common questions and retraining common trauma thinking. She explains that the things we need to be thinking about within trauma training is “How does this apply to me?” This causes teachers to evaluate questions like “Why does this student behavior push my buttons?” and “How can I better respond from a self-regulated place?” (Chefalo, 2020).

It is also important for teachers to support each other. If a member of the team is dysregulated and struggling one day, a colleague in executive function can help. Building relationships and connections allow teacher teams to empower each other. By having support, teachers are given the space to ask difficult questions, pause within a challenging situation, and evaluate what is really going on and how they can best respond to situations. Teachers need to take care of themselves and keep regulated in order to help their students do the same.

One practical application of this idea is to utilize mindfulness in the classroom. Sometimes bodies have arrived in the classroom, but minds have not yet. As teachers, we can use mindfulness to connect with our students first before we begin learning, “Connection before

correction” (Chefalo, 2020). Using good shared language and asking powerful questions can help teachers be curious instead of approaching situations like we have the answers. For example, a student saying that their stomach hurts might really mean they are having anxiety, but they are lacking the language to express that. Instead of assuming a solution to the problem, a good teacher can take a moment to connect with the student and ask good questions before rushing to correct the issue. Asking questions and being curious helps put the pieces together. It is also important to note that healing and getting regulated looks different for everyone and we can explore different strategies to do so in ourselves and with our students.

These tools and emphasis on social and emotional well-being not only benefit children in foster care, but every child in the classroom. It is easy to separate different groups of children when thinking about instruction, but the process of being self-regulated and ready to learn is important for all students. Any child could have had a bad day or be distracted by something going on in their life whether it be big or small. The most important takeaway that Shen stressed to me as a foster care alumna herself, advocate and lawyer for foster children, and a national speaker and presenter on the topic, was to turn the lens on the teacher (Chefalo, 2020). She stressed the need for teacher teams to work internally first before turning externally to their students. They must first use good practices in team and staff meetings and find how this social emotional lens can be used. She presented me with a great example of these practices in action. When presenting to a room of over a hundred school principals, she asked how many of them wanted their teachers to take lunch breaks. All of the principals in the room raised their hands. Contrastingly, when asked how many of them take a real break during their lunch, very few claimed to do so (Chefalo, 2020). We need to change the standard of always jumping into work without evaluating and ensuring that we are mentally ready to do so. Teachers need to care for

themselves in order to care for their students and also to avoid work stressors and teacher burnout as much as possible.

Although we preach these values to teachers and students through new research and popular professional developments, it is difficult to make the shift in the classroom since common routines and practices are not reflective of these values. Through this research, I looked for practical ways to implement these ideas into the classroom. The first one, as mentioned above, is including mindfulness in the classroom. There are YouTube videos, and programs through teacher tools such as ClassDojo and GoNoodle that have great introductory and child friendly tutorials utilizing mindfulness through different breathing exercises and yoga practices. Looking through these tools, teachers can find what method works best for them and their students and evaluate their daily schedule for a time when students might benefit from mindfulness such as at the beginning of the day to become centered and ready to learn, after a high energy activity, or when returning from specials or coming in from recess.

Another method to implement regulation and social emotional health in the classroom is through community meeting circles. These can look different from classroom to classroom and in different grade levels. These meetings can be utilized as a time to form connections with students and build healthy and trusting relationships. These are great times to acknowledge how students are feeling and help them build tools to express their feelings. This might look like each child answering a daily question and teaching respectful and encouraging ways to respond to each other. It could also come in the form of a game, for example tossing a feelings ball with strong feeling words to help students articulate answers to questions. In younger grades it could even be a time for students to share the thing that is on their mind with the teacher while attendance is being taken so the child is not distracted with their thought throughout the lesson to

follow. This practice gives students a chance to connect with their teacher and share what they are thinking about in the moment so that they are not consumed by it and are ready to learn. It also gives teachers a chance to connect with each student first thing in the morning to ensure they are fitting in time for healthy connection. Overall, it is important that teachers are supported and trauma-informed so that they have the knowledge to first work on themselves, return to regulation, and build personal resiliency before teaching the same skills to their students.

Throughout my personal teaching experience, I have utilized many strategies to help not only students in foster care but other students who need additional support in the classroom. I have also gained ideas from experienced teachers and ways in which they support their students. One strategy that is easy to accommodate in the classroom but can make a big difference for a student, is allowing them to complete their daily reading homework at school. In one classroom in which I have worked, students were given a bag of books each week that they chose from the classroom library to take home. That way, each student had level appropriate books that they were interested in to practice their reading at home each day. A student with a challenging home life did not have the opportunity to complete her daily reading at home. Instead of chastising the student, her teacher kept a bag of books aside for her in the classroom each week. She gave the student twenty minutes each day to spend reading the books and when she was able, she had the student read to her so she could include informal instruction and get the child excited about what she was reading. This strategy is simple but can make a huge difference in a child's confidence and reading scores. The child is no longer stressing about fitting in reading at home, bringing back their weekly reading log incomplete and unsigned, or losing books in home transitions. The log and daily reading can be completed at school.

A similar mentality can be taken with homework. Some students do not have time and resources or a healthy environment at home in which to complete homework. Instead of penalizing the student, teachers can give the student an opportunity to complete their homework during the school day. Often times, schools have an arrival window with time before instruction begins. This might be a great window of time to allow students to complete homework. The penalizations often given for students completing homework at school are unwarranted in cases where they cannot complete their work at home. Responsibility can still be taught by using this method. For example, if a child is assigned homework on Monday and it is due Friday, the child can complete the homework at school at any time but must present it Friday morning like their peers. Completing the assignment Friday morning when they enter the classroom would not be the responsible choice and the teacher can guide them in appropriate times to complete homework throughout the day so that they are not missing other instruction.

Teachers can also use a communication journal with students. A child could benefit from this journal and build a strong relationship with their teacher, work on writing, work on expressing their emotions, and give them an extra chance to connect with a good mentor. This could also give teachers a better insight to the child and what is going on in their life. This might require communication with the family to explain what it is and the purpose behind the journal. Depending on the situation, teachers have also used this strategy and couched it under a personal journaling project between student and teacher, communicating with families who agree to participate that the journal is private. If this is an option, a child might share more and feel safer knowing that their parents are not reading their journal entries. This is not a graded assignment but rather a journal passed between teacher and student where the student can share their thoughts with their teacher and the teacher has a chance to give them good feedback.

Teachers know the importance of good documentation and careful assessments to document academic and behavioral progress. These strategies are especially important for students in foster care. Behavior records especially can be shared with families so that they have a better understanding of their child in the classroom and ways to support them. Parents and guardians in temporary placements or new placements are not yet experts on their child. As they move through the transition of becoming a home for the child, teachers can help in the adjustment process by sharing techniques that have and have not worked for the student in the classroom. This gives new parents more information to help them maintain behavior at home and understand what behavior management looks like at school.

Careful documentation can also be used to create a portfolio for students. This is a great technique for all students to take from grade to grade, but it is especially helpful for students like those in foster care who might be moving classrooms more than the average student. By putting some important pieces of student behavioral data and good work samples and student scores in multiple academic areas, new teachers can have an insight into their new student instead of starting from scratch. This can also be helpful for families to look at and to keep with the child and add to throughout their educational experience.

Helpful Books for Children, Teachers, and Families Connected to Foster Care

Books can be a great way to help explain difficult situations to children. I have highlighted a few that are great resources specific to children in foster care. The first book is *Maybe Days: A Book for Children in Foster Care* by Jennifer Wilgocki and Marcia Kahn Wright. This is an honest book for young children ages 4-7. It explains the foster care system in age appropriate terms. It highlights how many unknowns, or maybes, children are experiencing and how confusing it may be to have so many unanswered questions. The book also helps

explain the roles of different people that children may come in contact with like social workers, judges, and lawyers. The second book is *The Great Gilly Hopkins* by Katherine Paterson. This is a Newberry Award winning novel about a young girl in foster care. The book details her many adventures and it is an appropriate and exciting read for children ages 9-12. Another children's book I would like to highlight is *Murphy's Three Homes* by Jan Levison Gilman. This is a children's book however it should not be read to children. It is especially inappropriate for the young intended audience going through foster care. The story is about a puppy, but the dog is blamed for his many foster placements and the moves are attributed to his bad behavior. Children in foster care already often blame themselves for situations that are not their fault and this idea should not be reinforced with this book. There are helpful insights for foster parents in the note section of this book despite the questionable story.

The Trauma Sensitive Classroom is by professor of education, Patricia Jennings. It includes a guide to creating a classroom that recognizes and adapts to children who have experienced trauma in all forms, not just trauma caused from foster care. The resource provides practical suggestions and self-assessments supporting the mentality explained above of the importance of first looking internally as teachers before teaching students strategies and self-regulation. It also offers information as to why such recommendations are helpful fostering understanding of the importance of creating a compassionate classroom. *Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom* by Kristin Sours offers a unique perspective on helping children cope in the classroom from her angle as a licensed mental health counselor. She has experience working with children and their teachers, helping her use her counseling knowledge in a classroom setting. This book provides hands-on strategies for multiple grade levels and subjects. The resource also includes self-care strategies to maintain

teachers' own self-regulation in order to be able to in turn help their students to the best of their ability. *Reaching & Teaching Children Exposed to Trauma* by Barbara Sorrels is a great resource to gain knowledge about how to break through and touch children dealing with trauma and to help them heal. It covers a variety of topics such as behaviors, relationships, and social skills. This knowledge can be used to inform teaching and develop lessons that will be beneficial for all students. The last resource I will suggest is entitled *Inclusive Education: A Practical Guide to Supporting Diversity in the Classroom* by Joanne Deppeler, David Harvey, and Tim Loreman. This is a textbook not specific to the needs of children in foster care but sharing information on supporting classrooms designed to support diversity. It presents ideas to strengthen the classroom learning environment for all students. It also gives great teacher tools including a variety of assessment tools, teaching models, and classroom organizing ideas. It also provides links to additional websites and resources to extend learning beyond the text.

Annotated Bibliography

1. About CASA – Casa Kids – Court Appointed Special Advocates. (n.d.). Retrieved January 2020, from <https://casakids.net/about/>

This is the official website for the Lucas County Court Appointed Special Advocates. I utilized this site to gather information on the foster care system specifically in my area. It provides information as to what it takes to become a CASA volunteer as well as additional resources to volunteers, parents, and families affected by the foster care system.

2. Alber, R. (2019, August 30). Supporting Students Living in Foster Care. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/article/supporting-students-living-foster-care>

This article explains the large and growing number of children in foster care in the US and the impact the increase is having on educational outcomes, including lower third grade reading rates, higher dropout rates and other alarming numbers that compel educators and other adults to take action. The article provides practical and strategic actions that teachers and other caring adults can take to help students cope with the trauma they have endured.

3. Big Numbers, Big Needs in Children Services . (n.d.). *Public Children Services Association of Ohio, 14th Edition*. Retrieved from <https://www.pcsao.org/pdf/factbook/2019/CASEFLOW.pdf>

This infographic clearly and succinctly explains the ways in which children are categorized for services, including abuse/neglect. The graphic shows that while progress is being made, more work remains.

4. Cass, A. (2017, December 30). Report: More than 20,000 Ohio children projected in foster care by 2020. Retrieved November 10, 2019, from <https://www.news->

[herald.com/news/ohio/report-more-than-ohio-children-projected-in-foster-care-by/article_93531344-1e31-58eb-94ca-5b575ec8ce7b.html](https://www.clevelandherald.com/news/ohio/report-more-than-ohio-children-projected-in-foster-care-by/article_93531344-1e31-58eb-94ca-5b575ec8ce7b.html)

This article explains the expected increase in foster care through 2020, attributing much of the increase to the opioid epidemic. Issues stemming from the rise are discussed including frustration from county officials given the low investment of public funding to address the challenges.

5. Chefalo, S. (2016). *Garbage bag suitcase: a memoir*. Traverse City, MI: Mission Point Press.

This moving memoir shares the heartbreaking and heartwarming story of Shenandoah Chefalo, who at age thirteen made the difficult decision to place herself in foster care. Her journey from one foster home to another illustrates the challenges children face in the educational system and the tremendous difference one caring adult can make. Chefalo is now a lawyer who advocates for children suffering from abuse and neglect and for those who enter the foster care system.

6. Crossnore School & Children's Home: Foster Care: Clinical Services. (2020, March 25). Retrieved April 2020, from <https://www.crossnore.org/>

This is the official website for the Crossnore School & Children's Home, a revolutionary boarding school combating issues within the foster care system with their new and unique model. The school provides strong academic teachings and a support staff that is trauma informed and who understands the specific affects that foster care has on children. The school is able to provide a stable environment for children who need it most while eliminating many issues causing trauma while moving through the foster care system.

7. Deppeler, J., Harvey, D., & Loreman, T. (2010). *Inclusive education: a practical guide to supporting diversity in the classroom*. London: Routledge.

While not specific to the needs of children in foster care, this textbook reminds that a classroom designed to support diversity strengthens the learning environment for all students. The book provides a variety of assessment tools, teaching models and classroom organizing ideas. The web links connect to additional resources, if needed.

8. Developmental Issues for Young Children in Foster Care. (2000). *American Academy of Pediatrics* , 106. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.106.5.1145>

This scholarly article examines the complicated and serious mental, physical and developmental issues facing children entering foster care. By explaining the biological changes children experience, the health care, social service and educational systems can be better designed to support children. Furthermore, the article provides evidence about the importance of assessing placements and evaluating children before and after placement in foster care.

9. Gilman, J. L., & OMalley, K. (2009). *Murphys three homes: a story for children in foster care*. Washington, DC: Magination Press.

While the notes at the end of this book provide excellent insight for foster parents, the book itself should not be read to children, especially those who are 3-6 years old (the intended audience). While the illustrations of the puppy in the story are charming, the puppy is blamed for his multiple placements in foster homes due to his naughty behavior. Children in foster are often blame themselves for the situation in which they find themselves and the feeling should not be reinforced by a story.

10. Jennings, P. A., & Siegel, D. J. (2019). *The trauma-sensitive classroom: building resilience with compassionate teaching*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Written by a professor of education, this book is a realistic guide to creating a classroom that recognizes and adapts to children who have experienced trauma. Offering practical suggestions, self-assessments and techniques while at the same time explaining why such recommendations are helpful makes this classroom guide a valuable tool for creating a compassionate classroom where all children can thrive.

11. Office of Families and Children: Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. (n.d.).

Retrieved January 2020, from <https://jfs.ohio.gov/ocf/fostercarelicensing.stm>

This official website of the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services provides information and legal requirements of all things foster care. It details the role each person plays in the foster care system; roles of foster parents and case workers were particularly helpful in informing research for this presentation. This website also details the requirements for becoming a foster parent and provides other areas that community members can help children in foster care and the system in general.

12. Paterson, K. (1978). *The Great Gilly Hopkins*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co.

The 1979 U. S. National Book Award winner and Newberry Award Winner, novel is a realistic story about Gilly, a young girl in foster care. Gilly is witty, ornery and unforgettable and her adventures are a great read for children ages 9-12.

13. Phone Interview: Judy Leb, JD, CASA Director, Lucas County CASA; 2018.

CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) is a non-profit organization of volunteers who work for juvenile court judges to advocate for the best interests of abused and neglected children.

The goal is for every child to be safe, have a permanent home, and the opportunity to thrive. Ms. Leb provided an overview of the program and the important role trained volunteers play in the life of a child who has experienced abuse and neglect. She explained that more than 4000 cases of child abuse and neglect are investigated annually in Lucas County and volunteers are provided to 800-1000 children each year.

14. Sorrels, B. (2015). *Reaching and teaching children exposed to trauma*. Lewisville, NC: Gryphon House, Inc.

Dr. Sorrels' provides insight into the importance early childhood educators play in the life of children who have been exposed to trauma in order for them to heal. Chapters cover a variety of topics including behaviors, relationships, social skills as well as other relevant topics which are critically important to developing curriculum that will benefit all children.

15. Souers, K., & Hall, P. A. (2016). *Fostering resilient learners: strategies for creating a trauma-sensitive classroom*. Moorabbin, Victoria: Hawker Brownlow Education.

As a licensed mental health counselor, Souers offers a unique perspective on helping children cope in the classroom based upon her experience working with students and their teachers. The book provides hands-on strategies that include multiple grade levels and subject matters. The resource includes helpful self-care strategies, recognizing the teaching profession can be stressful.

16. *The Role of Schools in Supporting Children in Foster Care*; Safe Schools Healthy Students National Center Brief (March, 2010). *National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention*. Retrieved from

<http://www.promoteprevent.org/sites/www.promoteprevent.org/files/resources/The%20Role%20of%20Schools.docx.pdf>

This article provides succinct information about the roles of many of the individuals with whom children in foster care come into contact and the importance of understanding the interrelatedness of each. The article provides information divided by age group enabling readers to understand the varying challenges children face and ways in which to intervene depending upon which agencies are working together.

17. US Department of Education and US Department of Health and Human Services: Guidance on the Foster Care Provisions in Title 1, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as Amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. (June 23, 2016). Non-Regulatory Guidance: Ensuring Educational Stability for Children in Foster Care, 1–28. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/edhhsfostercarenonregulatorguide.pdf>

This non-regulatory guidance provides reference for school districts, child welfare agencies and other partners relative to their legal role and responsibilities in educating and providing services for children in foster care. The document includes specific topics such as student data transfer and privacy, dispute resolution and transportation. The guidance contains specific examples of how state agencies collaborate for better outcomes.

18. What is Foster Care? (n.d.). Retrieved January 2020, from https://www.aecf.org/blog/what-is-foster-care/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI-f_Mnsef6QIVOP3jBx2k1QaHEAAYASAAEgJiFvD_BwE

This site provides answers to common questions about the foster care system. It includes important but staggering statistics about the number of children in foster care. It also answers common questions about the role of foster parents and different steps in the process of transitioning from care in one capacity or another. It also explains some of the challenges facing

the system including disproportionate numbers of minority groups affected and the complex relationship between poverty and foster care.

19. Wilgocki, J., & Kahn Wright, M. (February 1, 2002). *Maybe Days: A Book for Children in Foster Care*. American Psychological Association.

This honest and straightforward book for children ages 4-7, explains the foster care system in terms children can understand. When children enter the system, the answer to so many of their questions becomes “maybe” which can be confusing and distressing. The book provides helpful information including the roles of various individuals the child may come into contact with such as, social workers, judges and lawyers.

20. Williams-MBengue, N. (May 9, 2016). *The Social and Emotional Well-Being of Children in Foster Care* (pp. 1–13). National Conference of State Legislatures. Retrieved from https://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/cyf/Social_Emotional_WellBeing_Newsletter.pdf

As the number of children in foster care continues to grow, legislatures across the country are grappling with the issue of child well-being. State legislatures must understand the issues facing children in order to allocate resources appropriately. Budgets for Medicaid, school funding, residential treatment and more all impact decisions lawmakers must make.

