

Pushed Aside by COVID-19: The Ongoing Challenges of a Foster Youth Advocate to Support a Native American Foster Child with Educational Attainment

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Abstract

Foster youth are plagued with emotional, psychological, physical, behavioral, mental, and health challenges that may take years and the involvement of many social services to recover from, if they ever do. Obtaining an education is a critical element for ongoing self-sustainability, confidence, and growth as they age out of the foster care system. A foster child who is of Native American heritage has an even greater challenge to obtaining an education with the lack of parental support and guidance, and an even greater trial to obtaining an education in a pandemic-laden world. This manuscript will detail the challenges a Native American foster youth met due to being pushed aside from obtaining an education critical for engaging in a successful and positive life as a direct result of COVID-19. The manuscript is an auto-ethnography written from the perspective of the foster youth advocate who personally undertook the challenges to ensure that a foster child would have access to an online learning environment. The purpose of this manuscript is to detail the extenuating educational access challenges a specific foster youth and her advocate experienced as result of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures.

Keywords: Foster Youth, Education, Education Obtainment, C, COVID-19, Native American Children

Introduction

Foster youth are young people who are not living with a biological family for a variety of reasons. They are temporarily placed into settings such as group homes, residential care facilities, kinship placement, temporary guardianships, and other living arrangements which are overseen by state agencies (U.S. Health and Human Services, 2020). Vacca (2008) states that foster youth do not perform as well in school as some of their non-foster youth peers. Additionally, youth in foster care typically have high rates of absenteeism, below-grade level academic performance, higher-than-normal rates of academic grade retention, and higher rates of disciplinary referrals (Vacca, 2008). The author states that foster youth lack an adult at their homes to assist them with homework and support for other school challenges that may arise, and this lack of guidance and support may lead to a foster youth who do not complete school assignments or who may need assistance with further learning (Vacca, 2008). This manuscript will provide an auto-ethnographic focus into what challenges a foster youth and her advocate endured due to the pandemic and school closures.

Statement of the Problem and Research Question

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic shuttered schools and in-person instruction, businesses, and other essential services for students and their families. What was not known was the impact COVID-19 took on all foster youth in general, but one example could provide an insight to the challenges that one foster youth and her advocate experienced to ensure she did not fall further behind in her learning.

The research question for this manuscript focuses upon: "What experiences did a foster youth and her advocate endure to ensure that the youth had equitable access to online learning due to school closures as a result of COVID-19?"

Limitations of the Study

The experiences gathered in this auto-ethnographic study are focused upon specific episodes, experiences, and challenges of one foster youth advocate. According to Wall (2008), and auto-ethnographic study "is an intriguing and promising qualitative method that offers a way of giving voice to personal experience for the purpose of extending sociological understanding" p. 38). Widely publicized research on these individual experiences were not in place, nor were there widely published experiences of specific foster youth, and their opportunities for access to online learning due to school closures. Furthermore, literature pertaining directly to this type of educational access situation was limited in scope and availability due to the specificity of a worldwide pandemic; there was not much information published related to how a world-wide pandemic have on school closures.

Foster youth are an at-risk population even without a pandemic in place. According to Morton (2015), youth in foster care represent one of the most vulnerable student populations with high academic risks due to the life-circumstances they have endured, but specific instances of foster youth directly affected by COVID-19 affecting their academic performance were not in publication.

Literature Review

Inequities Abound

The COVID-19 pandemic had a challenging, effect on every aspect of life for every person, world-wide. More importantly, Donohue and Miller (2020) point out that the pandemic was especially hard on specific populations of children. Additionally, Donohue and Miller (2020), state there is a strong correlation between education, life expectancy, income, and overall health has shown that “school closures could have long-term deleterious consequences for child health, likely reaching into adulthood” (p. 1). The authors also write that school closures for students enrolled in K-12 campuses have been affected since these environments provide students with daily meals, social interaction, health care, physical activity, and special education support and guidance (Donohue and Miller, 2020). Additionally, the authors recorded that school closures have opened equity issues not seen before the pandemic (Donohue and Miller, 2020). For example, equity issues such as students whose neighborhoods do not have adequate access to Internet connectivity, lack of access to resources schools provide, such as electronic devices, regular nutritious meals, tutoring, and other educational supports. Lower income areas do not have the necessary resources to meet the needs of these students, and the inequities have been vivid (Donohue and Miller, 2020).

Education During Emergencies

Reich, Buttner, Fang, et. al. (2020) state that all children should stay connected to their schooling, and that it can help to build their resilience for each to know there is something familiar available during turbulent times. The authors affirm that familiar relationships with peers and protective adults, and established routines can help youth cope with the unfamiliar situations of an emergency (Reich, Buttner, Fang, et. al., 2020). Ensuring that there is equitable access to education for all students is a responsibility on the part of schools during an emergency, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to an education will provide students with a familiar environment from which to feel safe and supported.

Reduced Achievement in Math, Reading, and Writing Due to Lowered Instructional Time

Frenette, Frank, and Deng (2020) wrote that students who were lacking direct instructional time, because of school closures and because of the pandemic, may suffer lowered academic achievement. They clarified that a lack of access to online learning, resources such as tutoring, materials, and direct instruction, and other learning-based activities may affect certain students more than others (Frenette, Frank, Deng, 2020). The authors have made it clear that “there is no way to know for sure, although an earlier study may provide some insight as it estimated the relationship between instructional time and academic performance in reading, mathematics and science among a sample of 15 and 16-year old youth (Frenette 2008, p. 5). According to the study conducted by Frenette (2008), students who received one less year of instructional time due to being born after a school entry start-date, earned a score on a standardized reading test 6%, on average, less than their peers who had an additional academic year of instructional time. Furthermore, Frenette (2008) stated that children who had one less year of instructional time scored about 5.9% lower in math, and 4% lower in science on standardized examinations. Overall, students with fewer years of instruction have shown to suffer from lower academic achievement than their peers who have had more instructional time.

Students who do not have access to an education that is supportive of their needs, goals, and circumstances, may not flourish and achieve at elevated levels. School closures have made this difficult for many students, especially those who are in foster care, and who may not have supportive relationships to ensure they have the necessary access, resources, and supports to further their education.

Methodology

The methodology of this paper is an auto-ethnography written from the perspective of the advocate directly involved with the situation. The challenges of school closures on at-risk youth, such as those youth in the foster care system, have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collected for this auto-ethnography was a first-person account of what an advocate traversed through to ensure that her foster youth did not fall further behind due to school closures. The student will be referred to as “Isabel” throughout the document to ensure her confidentiality.

According to Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang (2010) an auto-ethnography “is a qualitative research method that utilizes data about self and its context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context. This research method is distinctive from others in three ways: it is qualitative, self-focused, and context-conscious” (p.1). Furthermore, an auto-ethnography is a structured way to collect data about self and how firsthand experiences have interacted with each other in a socio-cultural context (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang, 2010). Auto-ethnography writing allows for a deeper self-reflection of unique experiences and specific circumstances that only an author of this writing format can provide, according to Duncan (2004). Finally, the author is the subject and the object of the research being outlined in an auto-ethnographic manuscript, and this format allows for the reader to understand what the author has personally

faced, according to Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang (2010). Without the opportunity to share in personalized experiences through an auto-ethnographic format of writing, the experiences an author provides may be lost and the reader would not be able to grasp an opportunity to gain experience from this evidence.

A Specific Situation

With the onset of COVID-19, all schools across the globe were affected by the pandemic and many had to shutter and move learning to an online format. Approximately 1.2 billion students across the world were forced to learn outside of a traditional classroom as schools closed due to the raging pandemic (Li & Lalani, 2020). A specific situation for a foster youth who was Native American, who was deeply affected by school closures, and her learning in an online format was limited. This student had no resources or direct support to continue with her education. It was the advocate's responsibility to ensure that the foster youth was sustained by a caring adult, who identified and communicated for her best interests, and for others like her.

There were many children in the foster care system across the United States, and when the pandemic took effect, there were not enough supporters in place to make their voices heard. According to Pitzel (2018), "each of the 15,869 children in Arizona's foster-care system are supposed to have an advocate, someone who fills a role somewhere between friend and lawyer. But only 10 percent of those children had court-appointed special advocates to assist them through the trauma of being separated from their families" (p.1).

Moving Forward...Sort of

Isabel was barely passing 8th grade, but she had potential to make-up the missing work, improve her grades, and make a successful transition to high school. These efforts for Isabel to catch-up took place in the spring of 2020. Her advocate met with all her middle school teachers to arrange for make-up work and tutoring, so she would be on-track for the fourth and final quarter of 8th grade. Isabel's teachers reported she was progressing nicely with this arrangement. The advocate's vision for Isabel was to ensure passing scores on spring standardized testing, passing grades in all classes, and a solid foundation with attainable goals to work towards a successful transition to high school. Isabel's legal caregiver collaborated with the supporter and with Isabel about this effort. Isabel mentioned being hesitant, at first, but she became more comfortable with this plan, as she stated she was looking forward to the assistance from her teachers. Furthermore, Isabel needed to attend summer school courses to further her successful transition into high school, as she struggled with math and reading.

Communication with Isabel's various caseworkers regarding her need to enroll in summer school courses took place via the advocate, so Isabel could become familiar with the format of high school and earn high school credits prior to entering her freshman year. Her caseworker team members were supportive of this. The school counselor, where Isabel would be enrolling as an incoming first-year student, suggested a summer course that many first-year students enjoy and were successful in completing. That suggested course covered leadership skills, study skills, and career exploration. Isabel was informed about this course, and it was also outlined with her caseworker team's full agreement to enroll in this class. The approval from the case worker team prompted her advocate to immediately write grant proposals for summer school tuition and fee payment, which was available through a local non-profit organization supportive of foster youth.

The advocate worked with Isabel's state-level case management team to arrange for transportation to and from the assigned summer school campus daily, and she made sure Isabel had access to healthy snacks for the summer learning term. The school district was not offering meals, as the free and reduced lunch program was closed for the summer. It was March 6, 2020, and Isabel's advocate obtained funding to pay for the summer school course tuition and fees, and to finalize arrangements for her to successfully attend a summer learning program. Isabel was moving forward on her bridge to high school. On March 9, 2020, the formal announcement was made by state officials that all schools would close, and online learning would be replacing face-to-face instruction. No in-person instruction would be a detriment to Isabel as she had no device or Internet connectivity to access online learning. The advocate immediately sensed urgency to close these gaps.

What Now?

State officials originally announced schools would remain closed through the end of March 2020, and there would be periodic updates about this issue as data related to the pandemic became available. Isabel would return to the fourth quarter of eighth grade, but it would be a more consolidated learning period where she would be simply having to work harder and for a shorter period of time. Isabel had no computer, no Internet connection, no school supplies, and she was a participant in her middle school's federal Free and Reduced Lunch program. Participation in a school's Free and Reduced lunch program indicated that Isabel's legal caregiver lived below the poverty level, and two meals per day were provided by the school.

By March 25, 2020, state officials announced all schools would remain closed for the rest of the spring semester which meant Isabel would lose half of a semester of instruction. She struggled in reading and math, and to be successful in high school, Isabel needed as much support and instructional time as possible. Her advocate was hopeful that the school would be passing out devices to their students, but there was no decision on the part of the public school district where Isabel was enrolled to hand out computers, at that time. Furthermore, Isabel and her caregiver moved to an apartment, where no Internet connectivity was present in the complex, and there were no funds to pay for such a resource.

No computer, no Internet connectivity, no school supplies, no communication from the school district about any planned support measures, such as devices were available. Isabel had nothing. The advocate reached out to the Native American tribal community, of which Isabel was a member, for such resources and they were not able to provide anything due to the huge demand. Isabel was not going to be able to grasp for her education, at that time.

Grasping at Straws for an Education

The state where Isabel lived had a wide variety of online schools which would be able to provide devices and Internet connectivity to access learning. The advocate checked with Isabel's caseworker team, and her caregiver to disenroll her from her existing middle school and move her to an online learning school, which may have been able to keep her going, academically. Isabel's advocate contacted no less than 5 online schools, and many were no longer accepting new students, due to having met their campus enrollment limits. Finally, the advocate located an online school which was still enrolling, but it did not have devices or Internet connectivity supports in place for their students, especially newly enrolled ones. Isabel moved ahead one step, but she was pushed back by at least two more steps.

This was unacceptable. Isabel was only able to grasp at straws for an education she had a right to have. Knowing that a laptop computer was the only way to access her learning, Isabel's advocate went to work trying to find a device and Internet connectivity through any means possible. Her caregiver was not able to afford either resource, or did they have access to such. A local Internet company offering a deeply discounted connectivity access and there was access to refurbished devices. The refurbished devices were available at a cost of \$100 each, and that was not within any budgetary reach. Next, the advocate reached out to the Tribe, and resources were scarce due to huge demand. The advocate continued to communicate with Isabel's caseworker team, and they were not able to find either a suitable device or Internet connectivity funding or other options through their connections. Digital devices and Internet connectivity were in such high demand, they were non-existent for all students who were shut out of their education. Isabel was shut out of her own education by COVID-19.

Small Steps of Success

Isabel had to have access to her learning in order to experience academic success so she could move beyond the trappings of foster care. She wanted to and deserved to become a self-sustained, motivated member of society, and she had the capability to achieve. The advocate made many calls to non-profit agencies which supported foster children, she contacted computer refurbishing organizations looking for device donations, she spoke with Internet providers, such as Verizon, AT & T, and other corporations, who provided refurbished modems looking for any connections they may have or paths they could point her towards. The advocate contacted large retailers looking for device returns that were not suitable for resale but were donatable. She looked at her own resources and it was not possible since the supporter had moved to working part-time. All efforts were coming up empty for Isabel to access and continue her education. Finally, the advocate inquired at the school district where she lived, there were devices available to only those currently enrolled students, and no new students were being accepted from outside of the area.

To make matters worse, the state where the closure of schools, and the nearly non-existent resources of devices and Internet connectivity was taking place, had regular news reports stating that nearly 13% of students from low-socioeconomic areas, or about 350,000 households, were without devices or Internet connectivity, according to Steinberg (2020). Steinberg (2020) wrote "for low-income students stuck at home, which can mean missing classes conducted over video conferencing apps like Zoom or Google Hangouts. It also means fewer opportunities to download and upload homework" (p. 1). Furthermore, "...rural areas lack internet at greater rates than the rest of the state, but nowhere more so than on Native American reservations" (Steinberg, 2020, p.1). The Native American foster youth the advocate was assisting was part of a community located within a suburban area with more options for connectivity than those who were living in rural locations. All told, the advocate spent approximately 9 weeks, from early March to mid-May contacting non-profit agencies and corporations, speaking with Isabel's caseworker team, using her own resources, researching connectivity options from Internet providers and the efforts were not fruitful. A few days later, the advocate happened to be speaking with a local benefactor regarding her efforts to provide educational access for Isabel, and she stated that she would be happy to purchase a Chromebook for her, but she would not be able to pay for Internet connectivity. Additionally, the benefactor stated the computer would not be delivered for Isabel's use until there was evidence from the family that Internet connectivity was in place. The advocate was ecstatic that half of Isabel's educational challenges were solved, this was a small step towards success.

Getting Connected

It took weeks for Isabel's family to get back with the advocate to show evidence of Internet connectivity. When asked how they were making this happen, it was stated that Isabel would be temporarily moving in with a family member who had a Wi-Fi connection as part of the apartment complex he lived in. Evidence of this was forwarded to the benefactor who purchased the Chromebook, and it was shipped to Isabel at her temporary residence. The advocate was able to briefly visit the apartment, and the family help them set up the connection, and demonstrate to them how to navigate the device. Isabel would finally be able to connect to

her first high school summer course through her new Chromebook and temporary Internet connection, which was not part of her regular residence. This hurdle was temporarily out of the way for just her summer school schedule, but the school year remained a new challenge to undertake. All told, this effort took nine weeks to ensure that Isabel would be able to obtain a suitable digital device and Internet connectivity, for only the month of June, when summer school was being held online. The challenge was in the upcoming school year for consistent Internet connectivity for Isabel's long-term learning opportunities.

Conclusion

COVID-19 pushed Isabel aside and kept her from accessing a valuable resource, her own education. The pandemic opened a huge gap which showed foster youth, other students and their families who didn't have the financial means or other resource opportunities to meet the changing environment in which they live will, inevitably, be left behind. Furthermore, the foster care system was not prepared to support Isabel, or other foster youth and their caregivers, with access with an online learning format.

Mobilization of resources for all foster youth, whether it be through the Native American communities in which Isabel was a part, or other accessible resources for these children and their caregivers must be in place. These resources should be available whether provided by state or national governments or set a of organizations in partnership with schools or non-profit agencies. The advocate was fortunate to be a direct and available support for Isabel to ensure she was able to regain access to her education, but it was not an easy process to help her equalize the opportunities. Isabel was pushed aside by COVID-19 but imagine how many other foster youths never had a chance to return to school after March 2020. The efforts outlined in this manuscript by the advocate only yielded Isabel the opportunity to actively engage in her education for the month of June, when online summer school was planned to be held.

The research question which framed this manuscript of "What experiences did a foster youth and her advocate endure to ensure that the youth had equitable access to online learning due to school closures as a result of COVID-19?" was met with the experiences provided in the manuscript of the foster youth and her advocate. These experiences were outlined in a manner that allowed for the reader to not only understand the challenges of school closures, and the lack of opportunities for online learning, but the reader may also understand the trials that were in place which opened wide gaps of educational inaccessibility for low-income families.

Implications for Future Research

This is an auto-ethnography of one foster youth advocate who was personally involved with the educational access of a Native American foster youth. The experiences are limited by only a single author's experiences, but there were highly likely many students, not necessarily foster youth, across the United States and elsewhere, who were victims of the pandemic and school closure, which limited their online learning opportunities. When these resources closed, vulnerable students were not able to access their learning due to a sudden pivot of school moving to online instruction. Further examination and examples of these different scenarios would benefit lawmakers and others in the child welfare system, schools, and local businesses and industry, to understand these challenges foster youth, low-income families, and others had to face during the pandemic. A written compilation, analysis, of similar resource-void situations, such as what was outlined in this manuscript, should focus efforts to create local and national action plans, mobilization of resources to effectively ensure that at-risk and challenged youth are not pushed aside from the education they not only deserve, but need to have to move to self-sufficiency and to be prosperous members of society. Without this auto-ethnographic experience being shared, understanding of this situation from the perspective those who endured through it would not be in place for further actions to be taken in the future.

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As a lifelong learner and public school educator who has taught and led schools where at-risk youth were the foremost focus, I developed a focus on those youth who were not able to be a part of a stable homelife. I found these youth struggled more, fell behind more, but wanted to be successful, just like their peers, but the barriers of their lives were overwhelming, and often got in the way of their goals. There was not much I could do to help them, and this left me empty. I worked as a correctional education program director for a state prison, and the inmates at that prison raised funds for, and some of my teachers were involved with a program called CASA, court appointed special advocates. CASA is a national program that connects volunteer advocates with foster youth to bring stability and guidance to their lives. I felt that with my education background, and the experience working with challenged youth, that volunteering as a CASA would be a mutually beneficial experience in supporting these youth. From there, I have written about my experiences as a CASA, and I love this work very much! I would highly recommend that anyone take on this challenge to make the life of a foster youth brighter and easier, as they often don't have these experiences.