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Do teachers' perceptions of students success differ between students in foster care and students who are not in foster care

Nira Ortega Mejias

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DO TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS SUCCESS DIFFER BETWEEN STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE AND STUDENTS WHO ARE NOT IN FOSTER CARE

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

by
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June 2008

Approved by:

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6-5-08 Date
ABSTRACT

The study examined teacher's perceptions of students in foster care in comparison to students who were not in foster care. Teachers from two high schools participated and were randomly assigned to two comparison groups. Teachers were distributed self-administered questionnaires which asked them to respond to statements predicting academic success, future employment, criminality, and substance abuse in regards to a child in a vignette. There were 36 teachers that responded to the survey. Results indicated that the two groups predictions were similar in the areas of academic success, future employment and substance abuse. The two groups were not similar in the area of predicted criminality. Specifically, the group that responded to the vignette with the foster child more often predicted that the child would become arrested and participate in a crime.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Firstly, I would like to recognize the assistance of the graduate advisory committee. I would also like to give recognition to Chaffey High School and La Sierra High School for allowing me to conduct my research on their campuses; specifically Linda Fujiu and Martin Alvarado whose help and patience are greatly appreciated. This thesis could not have been written without the guidance, encouragement and assistance of my research advisor Dr. Laurie Smith who consistently challenged me to do my best. Lastly, I would like to give a special thank you to my professors, classmates, and colleagues who supported me throughout this process.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis project to my husband and mother who have been strong supporters of my academic career. Raul, thank you for your patience, understanding and wealth of support, I couldn’t have done it alone. Mom, thank you for your words of encouragement and praise, they inspired me to keep moving forward.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

There are currently about half a million children in foster care in the US (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2007). In California alone there are 75,000 children in the foster care system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2007). Due to drugs, neglect, mental illness and abuse, children are taken away from their parents and placed into the child welfare system. While in the child welfare system, children in foster care do not do as well academically as their non-foster care counterparts (Blome, 1997). School attendance, grades, participation and overall performance is lower among students who are in the foster care system than students who are not in foster care (Burley & Halpern, 2001). Children in foster care are less likely to graduate from high school, and even less likely to attend college than others their age. Children in foster care also score lower on tests, are more likely to be placed in special education classes, and have lower enrollment rates in college preparatory classes.
Studying teacher’s perceptions of foster children is important at this point in time where about 800,000 children are in the foster care system (Pecora et al., 2006). If teachers have negative perceptions of foster children they may not be as encouraged to do well. The children may sense the negative perceptions and internalize those beliefs.

The educational experience of a child in foster care is an important aspect of their development to examine. Included in a child’s educational experience is their relationship and interaction with teachers. Teachers’ perceptions of students are influential in the overall educational experience of children. It is important specifically, to assess teacher’s perceptions of students in foster care. First, children in foster care may live in a series of homes, causing disruption in home environments, and in adult and peer relationships. With great instability in a foster child’s life, the teacher may be one consistent adult in their life. Secondly, a positive experience with a teacher who believes the child can be successful may encourage the child to do well.

California Assembly Bill 490, “Ensuring Educational Rights and Stability to Foster Youth” was introduced in
2003 by State Senator Darrell Steinberg, then State Assemblyman. The bill was passed and became effective January 1, 2004. The bill is intended to ensure that all children in foster care receive educational services and decisions that are based in the best interest of the child. It states that all foster care children should have access to equal academic opportunities, services, and resources. Teachers, caregivers, advocates, and county workers are required to guarantee that these rights are fulfilled. Bill 490 also requires districts and counties to have educational liaisons to advocate on behalf of foster children. This change in state policy came in response to the lack educational achievement attained by children in foster care.

Foster family agencies and county social workers work to ensure all aspects of a foster child’s life are as equally fruitful as the lives of children that are not in foster care. Educational achievement are among the most important of these aspects, but often times the most difficult to address. Unfortunately, it is common for social workers to have the majority of their children on their caseloads performing below academic standards.
Social workers take on the role of advocate and liaison between the child and the school, working with teachers to better meet the needs of foster children. Often times the problem is that teachers are not aware that their students are in foster care, leaving them unaware of other external factors that may be contributing to low levels of academic performance. Another part of the problem may be that foster children are perceived differently than children who are not in foster care. It is important for social workers to be aware of these possibilities. It would be important to educate teachers about children who are in foster care, to understand the uniqueness of the child's experience, and how that experience influences their academic and educational functioning. A study that examines teacher's perceptions of foster care children would help to gain insight on resources that teachers may need to better handle and cope with foster children.

Purpose of the Study

There has been little research conducted in the area of teacher's perceptions of foster care students. This project would help gain some insight on teacher's
perceptions and begin discussion and assessment of the influence of teacher’s perceptions of foster care students on academic achievement. The purpose of this study is to assess teacher’s perceptions of academic and life success among high school students in foster care in comparison to high school students who are not in foster care. The intent of the study is to examine whether teachers view students who are in foster care placement differently than students who are not in foster care. Teacher’s individual perceptions will not be assessed due to the possibility of participants responding based on social desirability. Teacher’s responses will be looked at collectively as a group, either a group that received vignette A (foster child) or Vignette B (non-foster child), as described below.

Teachers from two local high schools were selected to participate in the study. This is a convenience sample, based on established association with the local school districts. Teachers at the high schools will receive a self-administered questionnaire in their staff boxes. Half of the questionnaires will include a vignette where the child described will live in foster care. The other half of the teachers will receive a vignette where
the child described will not live in foster care. Both vignettes are exactly the same except for their placement status. Teachers will be asked to read the vignette then respond to a series of closed-ended questions regarding their opinion of the child's current and future academic and life achievements. This is the most reasonable design given time and monetary limitations.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

The proposed study is needed to better understand teachers' perceptions of students in the foster care system. With more children living in foster placements, teachers increase their chances of coming into contact with a student in foster care. If teachers perceive students in foster care as less able academically, then teachers' behavior towards foster care students may reflect these low expectations. Low expectations from teachers may directly impact a student's level of achievement. Therefore, it is important to assess teacher's perceptions of foster care students.

The proposed research project can benefit the practice of social work on all levels. At the individual level, dissemination of the findings may help teachers
become aware of personal biases and stereotypes associated with children in foster care. It will help teachers and social workers to better communicate, implement and plan to meet the needs of children in foster care when perceptions limit expectations among children in foster care. At the agency level, districts and county agencies may begin to collaborate and plan trainings to better orient and prepare teachers on dealing with students in foster care and understanding the system of which children in foster care are a part.

Social workers can facilitate these trainings and focus on training teachers on how to work with children in foster care and to shed light on the uniqueness of each child's situation. The laws that are set in place for children in foster care can also be discussed to further educate teachers on resources that may be available to them. At the macro level of social work practice, this project may arouse discussions of possible legislation in regards to mandatory teacher trainings, and possible education plans designed for students in foster care. This project will also be a contribution to the scarce literature available on teacher perceptions of students in foster care.
The objective of this project is to determine whether high school teachers perceive students in foster care differently than students who are not in foster care in regards to their academic and life achievements.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

There is no doubt that education is an important value in the US. At least theoretically, children are given opportunities to attain quality education. Over the years there have been great efforts to improve education for children with special needs with individualized education plans, resource classes, and special education classes. The educational experiences of children with special needs have also been examined by researchers to better understand the differences in outcomes experienced by children. Some studies have compared educational experiences and attainment of foster care children and non-foster care children, while others have looked at teacher's perceptions of students with learning disabilities in comparison to students without learning disabilities.

Teacher Perceptions

As mentioned earlier, various studies have investigated teacher's perceptions of their students, and, how those perceptions may influence educational
outcomes. Teacher’s perceptions of students have been examined regarding race, gender and income as they relate to achievement. These studies found that teachers’ perceptions of their students varied among race, gender, and income (Rosenthal & Curiel, 2006; Zimmerman et al., 1995). Although researchers have examined teacher’s perceptions of students regarding these student characteristics, an aspect they have not studied is teacher’s perceptions of students in foster care.

One study (Shore, Sim, & Le Prohn, 2002) examined teachers and care givers perceptions of foster children’s behavior. The study asked teachers and caregivers to rate certain behavioral characteristics. The responses for children in kinship placements and non-kinship placements were compared. The study found that teachers had similar ratings for children in kinship and non-kinship foster placements. Overall, teacher’s rating of behavior among foster children living in kinship care and non-kinship care were the same. While this study aims at looking the effect of placement type, another study focused on teacher’s perceptions of student’s race.

Zimmerman et al. (1995) looked at teacher’s perceptions of their students’ race/ethnicity and gender.
The results indicated that teachers who were of like race/ethnicity as their students, viewed their behavior to be less problematic than those of students who were of a different race/ethnicity. These results suggest that teachers perceive problematic behavior in relation to racial/ethnic similarities or differences. These results leave other areas to be explored. One question that arises is that if teachers are capable of perceiving differences in behavior based on differences in ethnicity, then they may perceive other differences among their students based on whether they are in foster care or not.

One study parallels the proposed research study. Edwards-Willey and Chivers (2005) conducted a longitudinal study over the course of ten years, and analyzed prison teacher’s perceptions of inmate-students’ versus traditional college students and their ability to succeed. The results indicated that inmate students and traditional college students were perceived by their instructors to have equal ability to succeed. The sample included 59 teachers from a single university. Results are not generalizable to a small sample size from one institution. The strength of the study was that it was
longitudinal, results remained consistent over time. These results indicate that teachers perceptions did not differ based on the inmate status of the student. This study contradicts other findings of teachers’ perceptions. This study shows that teachers do have positive perceptions of their students’ success and it is not determined by factors of incarceration. In some cases it appears that there are differences and in others there are not.

Foster Children and Academic Achievements

There have been many studies that analyze the academic achievements of foster children. For example, Blome (1997) implemented a longitudinal study that included self-administered surveys and secondary data analysis; surveying 600 foster youth over the course of six years, the sample was randomly selected through a national database. Blome’s (1997) study showed that foster youth dropped out of high school at a more rapid rate than their non-foster care counterparts. Foster youth had more disciplinary problems and had lower enrollment status in college preparatory classes. Foster youth were less likely to go to college and had less
financial assistance. In overall comparison, youth in foster care ranked lower in most areas of education.

One major finding was that foster care youth had equal grades and test scores as their non-foster care counterparts. An interesting question that emerges is that; if foster youth have the same grades and test scores as their non-foster care counterparts, why are they being placed in remedial classes and not being prepared for college. Could it be that teachers and other professionals in the school system expect less from children in foster care? This is a very important question to be addressed.

Zeltin, Weinberg, and Kimm (2004) also found similar findings in their study that examined educational progress of children in foster care and impact of educational liaison. They reviewed school records of 120 foster youth compared to 111 children who were not in foster care. They found that children in foster care had lower GPA scores, lower math and reading test scores, more absences from school, and higher rates of special education enrollment. They also randomly divided the foster care students and provided educational interventions from an educational liaison to half of the
students. Researchers found that there were differences in academic success among students who received the interventions. This study reflects Blome’s (1997) earlier study that children in foster care are more vulnerable to academic failure. This study also shows that positive educational interventions can be extremely helpful in the educational success of a foster care child.

In Stone’s (2007) review of the literature on foster children’s academic achievements over the past 15 years, she discusses the factors that make foster children more vulnerable in the educational setting. She underlines common factors from other research to report that multiple placements, emotional disturbances, learning disabilities, and disruptive school transitions are factors more prone to be experienced by a child in foster care which contribute to their unsuccessful academic experiences over children who are not in foster care.

The literature on the child welfare system has shown that children in foster homes have more academic problems due to their behavior. Rosenthal and Curiel (2006) looked at teachers’, youth, and caregivers perceptions of behavior among children in the child welfare system. Teachers, youth and caregivers were asked to rate the
child’s behavior. The results of the ratings were compared across income, education, gender, and living situation. The results concluded that teacher’s perceptions of a child’s behavior varied based on the income and education of the parent and living situation. In homes where foster parents made less and had lower levels of education, teachers had greater ratings for problematic behavior. Teachers’ ratings were also different when scores were compared among boys and girls; boys had the highest problematic ratings overall. This study compared teacher’s perceptions and foster parent perceptions of foster children’s behavior. Overall, teacher’s perceived children in foster care to have higher levels of problematic behavior than their caregivers.

Coulling (2000) investigated the perceptions of professionals and foster children regarding successful education using a qualitative method. Two major findings emerged from this study. First, the professionals stated that the quality of foster care was the most important factor in educational success. From the child’s perspective, the most important factor was for teachers to understand the unique needs of children in foster
care. These findings suggest that if these factors were to be met, children in foster care would have a more positive educational experience that would yield more positive outcomes. Although the study appears to have contributed beneficial results, the study did not indicate the sample size, or where it was derived from.

Zima et al., (2000) looked at academic success in relation to placement characteristics. She conducted a quantitative study in Los Angeles County where she interviewed 302 foster children, foster parents and teachers. She found that 88% of the sample had behavior problems, 26% had academic skill delays, and 27% had been retained, suspended or expelled. Zima et al., found that there was a correlation between the length of time a child spent in foster care and school failure which is defined as retention, suspension and expulsion. She also found that as foster children experienced changes in placement, the child also experienced delays in academic skills. Findings from the teachers and foster parents were similar.

The studies reviewed have examined teacher's perspectives across various factors including gender, race, income and even incarceration, but have not
included foster care placement. There is scarce literature in the area of teacher’s perceptions of children in foster care and their potential success. Although some studies have come close to examining these variables, there is no specific study in this area. It is important to examine teacher’s perceptions in the particular area given that more and more children are entering the foster care system.

Theoretical Perspectives

Labeling, symbolic interactionism and self-fulfilling prophecy are important theories and concepts that can be applied to this study. These theories are relevant to understanding the influence of teacher’s perceptions of students and the implications they have over a student’s academic success.

Labeling theory states that if a person is defined as having particular characteristics or traits; the person begins to carry out those characteristics. The labeling theory also states that when people are labeled they are perceived as abnormal. The stigma of the label perpetuates the “abnormal” behavior. If students in foster care are labeled as having certain characteristics
based on teacher's perceptions of them, then these students may begin to exhibit those traits. Conversely, teachers may see the behavior (and future possibilities) of foster youth differently than those of other students because of their foster child label.

A theory that should also be considered in relation to this topic is Symbolic Interactionism. People perceive themselves according to the way they believe others to perceive them. These perceptions influence interaction and behaviors with their environment (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2004). Applied to foster care youth in school, if students feel that they are being perceived in a particularly negative way by their teachers, which may influence the way they view themselves. If teachers project to some students that they are not smart enough, then it may be that these particular students will begin to believe themselves that they are not smart enough. Referring to the self-fulfilling prophecy, if a student begins to really believe that they are not smart they will begin to act as though they are not smart which could be reflected through a decline in grades from lack of studying, participation and completion of homework.
The concept of self-fulfilling prophecy parallels the Labeling theory and indicates that if a person believes something about themselves to be true, even though it is not; they begin to display behaviors that reflect the false ideas about themselves. This concept applies to the topic area because if a foster child is viewed as unsuccessful, the child will begin to believe that they are unsuccessful, then begin to display behavior that reflect they are unsuccessful, such as truancies, failure to complete assignments, lack of participation and attendance. The self-fulfilling prophecy influences a person's self-concept, which comes from Carl Rogers's self theory. To be successful in life and be a productive person and have valuable life experiences one must have a good self-concept.

Self-concepts are structured through a combination of self-perceptions and others perceptions and support (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2004).

In conclusion, teacher's perceptions have been looked at from various angles and have yielded different results. Although, theses studies have contributed to the literature of teachers perceptions, and our knowledge of foster children research lacks in the area of teachers...
perceptions of student’s success based on the child living in foster care. There are many books today to prepare teachers to better handle the various types of students in their classes such as children with attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other learning disabilities (Bender, 1997). We may extrapolate that teachers are having difficulties with students who may be labeled at-risk. If this is the case, the point of the proposed study is not to point the finger and solely blame teachers for the lack of educational achievements some students have, but it is to educate teachers on the educational needs of children in the foster care system. Increasing knowledge and assessment skills for teachers of child welfare students may provide a clearer picture of student’s abilities, needs, and possible resources (Cormier, 1994).

Summary

Existing research does not address teacher’s perceptions of foster care students in comparison to non-foster care students. However, some studies have revealed that teacher’s perceptions do differ by student characteristics. It is important to gain more knowledge
of teacher’s perceptions of academic success of children in foster care. The proposed study will build on the knowledge we have of teachers perceptions but it will consider students placement status as opposed to race/ethnicity, or gender. Specifically, the study will answer the question; do teacher’s perceptions of student’s potential success differ between students who are in foster care and those who are not?
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

An overview of the research methods that was utilized in the proposed research study (teachers' perceptions of academic success among high school students in foster care) is presented. The study design, sampling, data collection method, instrument, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis are delineated and discussed in detail in this section.

Study Design

The study was a cross-sectional quantitative design, using a self-administered questionnaire. This was most appropriate for this research project because it allowed for teachers to self-administer the survey and also reached as many teachers as possible to participate in the study.

Although the survey approach to this research project was appropriate it possessed limitations. Quantitative research did not allow for in-depth data. Respondents were asked closed-ended questions with limited responses, not allowing for personal input.
Results from a sample of teachers from two high schools in Riverside and San Bernardino County make the data difficult to generalize to the larger population. The data collected from the high school teachers are not generalizable to teachers in elementary or middle schools.

Sampling

Access to two local high schools in Alvord Unified School District and Chaffey Joint Union High School District was secured. Permission was obtained from the school and from the district coordinator of child welfare and attendance and safe and healthy schools.

The high schools have about 100-150 employed teachers. All teachers at the selected high schools had equal chance at participating in the study. Non-teacher employees at the school were not eligible to participate; this included principals, custodial personnel, secretaries, and nurses. The sample included female and male respondents. The age range of respondents ranged from 21 to 75 years. All ethnicities were included in the research project.
The sample was selected through non-probability convenience sampling. Among the convenience sample, random assignment determined which vignette teachers received. About half the teachers received vignette A and the other half vignette B. The sample size for this study consisted of 36 participants.

Data Collection and Instruments

The data was collected through self-administered surveys. Questionnaires included demographic information such as age, gender, ethnicity, and number of years teaching. Teachers were presented with one of two vignettes where the student is having academic problems. In one vignette the student lived in foster placement, in the other, the student did not. Teachers were then asked to respond to statements regarding the social academic success of the student. The independent variable in this study is placement status, whether the student described in the scenario is in foster care or not. The level of measurement for this variable is nominal. The dependent variable is teacher’s perceptions which will be measured by a Likert-type scale, assigning the variable a score making it ratio/interval level of measurement.
An instrument was created for the purpose of conducting this study. The instrument was a 10-item Likert-type scale, where teachers indicated their degree of agreement or disagreement with the statement asked. Agreement ranged from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Sample statements included, "Johnny will graduate high school", "Johnny will probably commit a crime", and "Johnny will go to college". The measure was created by examining other existing measures and evaluating commonalities among them. The instrument was pretested to ensure that it yielded appropriate results. Five teachers were included in the pretesting process, where they self-administered the questionnaire and provided feedback to the researcher (see Appendix A).

Procedures

The researcher obtained permission from the Department of Child Welfare and Attendance coordinator, and principals in order to conduct the study at the high schools. The survey questionnaire was a self-administered questionnaire distributed by the researcher to teachers personal mailboxes located at the high schools. All teachers at the participating high schools received a
survey. Using random assignment, one half received the foster youth vignette and the other half received the non-foster youth vignette. The completion of the survey took about five minutes.

Once surveys were completed, teachers placed surveys into a locked, secured ballot box for convenience that was checked and collected on a daily basis by the researcher. Teachers were given approximately two weeks to return the survey. Participants also received a consent form, confidentiality information, and debriefing statement. After a two week period the researcher collected the surveys. Thirty-six surveys were returned to the researcher and they were then analyzed.

Protection of Human Subjects

Anonymity and confidentiality of participants was ensured during the process of this study. Participants were informed of the confidentiality of their responses and overall participation in the study. No identifying information was collected from participants. For data analysis purposes the questionnaires were assigned identification numbers. The collected data was kept confidential, in a locked filing cabinet at the
researcher's home during the course of the study. Once data was entered into the computer for data analysis, surveys were destroyed.

There were minimal foreseeable risks involved. The anticipated risks to participants in the study included discomfort while completing the survey. Questions regarding children in foster care may have evoked slight distress among certain individuals. Participants were informed that they may refuse to answer any question they wish and withdraw from the study completely at any time without recourse. A project proposal was also submitted to an IRB sub-committee for approval (see Appendix B and Appendix C).

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics was used to describe the demographic characteristics of the participants, through frequency distributions and measures of central tendency. Demographic characteristics included age, gender, and ethnicity. A t-test, which compared the means of two groups, was conducted to determine a relationship between the nominal independent
variable (placement status) and the continuous dependent variables (perceptions of success).

Summary

A quantitative survey design was employed to examine teacher’s perceptions of academic achievements among foster care students and non-foster care students. The data was collected through self-administered questionnaires from a convenience sample of high school teachers in Alvord Unified School District and Chaffey Joint Unified School District. The data was then analyzed through appropriate descriptive and inferential statistics that determine relationships or associations between the independent and dependent variables.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The following are the results of the study that examined the perceptions of high school teachers towards students in foster care as compared to similar non-foster care students. Perceptions in the areas of future success, academics and criminal activities were examined. A demographic description of the participant sample is also included to clarify age, gender and ethnicity of the teachers who responded.

A t-test was conducted to analyze teachers perceptions of students in foster care compared to students not in foster care to see if there was a difference in their perceptions. As the following results delineate, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups in the areas of future success and academics. However, in the area of future criminal activity, the results indicate that there were two statements in the responses for which there was a statistically significance difference in the perceptions of foster youth as compared to non-foster youth.
Presentation of the Findings

The data collected was analyzed with a quantitative approach. Univariate analysis of the data was conducted to analyze the demographic characteristics of the sample. The total sample consisted of 36 high school teachers from two high schools. The average age of teachers who participated was 44 years old. The sample included 16 female and 20 male participants. The respondents in the study were asked to identify their race/ethnicity; 72.2% identified themselves as white/non-Hispanic, 16.7% of the respondents identified themselves as Latino/Hispanic, and 11.1% were "other" (See Table 1). The average number of years that teachers spent teaching was 12 years. Most teachers (91.7%) responded that they did have students who were in foster care in the past. The rest (8.3%) reported that they did not know whether they ever had foster care students in their classes. In addition to that question, teachers were asked a similar question that asked if they currently had students in the foster care system in any of their classes. Of the 36 participants 52.8% reported that they currently had foster care students in their class, 5.6% stated that
Table 1. Participant Demographics

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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Currently have students in foster care</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
they did not and 41.7% reported that they did not know if they currently had foster care students in their classes.

A t-test was conducted to compare the means of the two independent samples representing the two groups of teachers surveyed; the first independent sample represent the teachers that received the vignette where the child was in foster care and the second independent sample representing the teachers that received the vignette where the child was not in foster care. A separate t-test was conducted for each question.

Of the ten questions that measured teacher’s perceptions, two statements yielded significant responses between the two groups. The first statement that presented to be statistically significant was the statement “Johnny will probably get arrested as an adult”. The other eight statements presented to have no statistical significance. These included statements regarding academic success; “Will Johnny graduate high school”, “Will Johnny go to college”, “Johnny will raise grades to passing”, “Johnny is probably very disruptive in class”, and “Johnny will seek help from teachers to improve grades”. One statements presented to the teachers was a statement regarding substance abuse; “Johnny will probably become involved in alcohol or drugs” (See Table 2).
Table 2. Participant Response Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SIG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Will Johnny graduate high school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.690</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.577</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnny will probably get arrested as an adult</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>.750</td>
<td>.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.577</td>
<td>.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnny will go to college</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>.680</td>
<td>.228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>.494</td>
<td>.195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnny will get a well paying job after high school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.577</td>
<td>.146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>.277</td>
<td>.092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnny will raise grades to passing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>.745</td>
<td>.328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>.506</td>
<td>.290</td>
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<tr>
<td>Johnny will probably commit a crime</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>.680</td>
<td>.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>.494</td>
<td>.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnny will seek help from teachers to improve grades</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>.657</td>
<td>7.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>.832</td>
<td>8.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnny is probably very disruptive in class</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>.510</td>
<td>.159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>.599</td>
<td>.177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnny will probably become involved in alcohol or drugs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>.700</td>
<td>.127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>.650</td>
<td>.122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnny will drop out of high school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>.759</td>
<td>.894</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>.515</td>
<td>.884</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

To summarize the findings of the research project; teachers that participated in the study did not differ significantly in their ratings the child's future academic success and involvement in substance abuse. A
significant difference between the two groups was detected on statements regarding criminal activity.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Discussion

In this study, 36 teachers were randomly assigned either a foster youth or a non-foster youth scenario. The participants included males and females of various ages and with varying amounts of teaching experience. Analyses comparing the two groups on demographic characteristics found them to be similar. Of ten statements regarding the future of the youths in the scenarios, the two groups rated foster and non-foster youth similarly. These statements were about academic success such as raising grades, graduating, and going to college, indicating no differences in perceptions. However, there were statistically significant differences in perceptions among the two groups of teachers in the area of predictions of future criminal activity. The two statements that related to criminality were “Johnny will probably commit a crime” and “Johnny will get arrested as an adult”. These results support the research question that there are differences in perceptions among students who are in foster care.
These results suggest that when it comes to criminal activity foster children are perceived by their teachers to be more likely to participate in crime. The difference in perception suggests that children in foster care are viewed differently than their non-foster care counterparts in some areas, but not in others.

As discussed in the review of the literature, there are theoretical concepts that are relevant to this study. In examining the finding it is possible to infer that the differences in the perceptions among children in foster care may affect their overall education. In reference to the labeling theory, if a child is perceived to have a higher degree of possible delinquency then the child will begin to treated as such, and then act out those behaviors.

Looking at the symbolic interaction concept, these children may begin to perceive themselves as future delinquents based on the delinquent views that others have of them. This parallels the labeling theory where the children then will act out in delinquent ways because they believe that they are delinquent. This would impact not only their academic success but also their overall success as adults. Studies have reported that children in
foster care have lower academic achievements, become involved in violence, substance abuse and delinquency at higher rates than their non-foster care counterparts. These results may imply that teachers' perceptions might influence the success of children in foster care, it also implies that if teachers may have different perceptions of children in foster then other professional and individuals may have different perceptions as well. As Gustavsson (1991) reports that the label of foster care alone may influence rejection and isolation from their peers and adults as well.

If the gap between teachers and foster care students is to be filled then more social workers are needed in the school setting to educate teachers, collaborate, assess for needs and disabilities, make referrals, and provide mental health services. Foster children want teacher and school support, and feel that it is a contributing factor to their educational success (Martin & Jackson, (2002). Teachers need to be involved in case plans, treatment teams, be aware of the child’s special needs. Teacher’s need to be aware that their students are even in foster care, of the 36 teachers surveyed, 41.7%
indicated that they were unaware if they had students in foster care.

Although there were differences in regards to the criminality statements, the questions surrounding academic success were similar. This implies that teachers have the same perceptions of their students regardless of their status as a foster care child, only in the area of future academic success. Teachers may feel that as teachers they can be a part of a child's academic success and see all children as successful, but in areas where they have less influence they perceive the level of success of children in foster care differently. This is evidenced in the significant differences in perceptions of future criminality of foster children. Can they be seen as having potential for academic success at the same time as being viewed as potential criminals? Although inferences can be made from these results it is also important to highlight limitations of the study.

Limitations of the Study

The sample size in this study was small and therefore results cannot be generalized to the larger population. Another limitation that makes it difficult to
generalize the findings to the larger population is that a large majority of the respondents were older, white males. The age, gender, and ethnicity of the male respondents were overrepresented in the sample. Women and other ethnicities, and younger teachers were underrepresented in the sample.

When comparing the two groups of teachers, it can also be considered a limitation that the two groups were not equal. Group 1, which responded to the vignette where the child was in foster care, was larger than Group 2 which may have contributed to the results that were found.

Another limitation of the study was the instrument used to measure teacher perceptions. The instrument was developed by the researcher and pretested among a small group of teachers making the validity and reliability weak.

Suggestions For Future Research

The instrument used in the study to assess teachers' perceptions was limited to current and future academic success, criminality, substance abuse and employment. It would be beneficial to include other aspects of a foster
child's life to get an overall assessment of teachers' perceptions. It may elaborate on the criminality and substance abuse questions, and expand to include questions regarding future violent behavior, relationships, and financial success. It would also be important to consider surveying a larger sample size and administering to a larger selection of schools: this would yield more generalizable results. The larger selection of schools would allow for a more diverse sample that would be representative of the larger population. It would also be interesting to examine not only teachers' perceptions but also the perceptions of other professionals or individuals who have significant contact with foster children like perhaps foster parents or mental health practitioners.

Practice, Program, and Policy Implications

The research findings that showed no differences in academic success may be due to the fact that teachers are more aware now of the complex environments that foster children experience. There are more policies, such as AB 490, in place to keep children in their home school, allow for immediate enrollment, and require foster care
liaisons at the county level to ensure educational rights are being met among children in foster care. There are also programs that offer free tutoring services to foster youth and college scholarships that are only available to foster youth. Policy and programs such as these are new and have started to pave the way for academic success among foster children. As more programs and policies are created more attention is brought to the matter allowing individuals to become educated about the issues. With more education and knowledge individuals including teachers can better understand the psychological and social differences among children in foster care that may contribute to a change in perceptions allowing them to be viewed as other children. The changes in perception can lead to changes in interactions with children in foster care.

The findings that foster children are perceived to be involved in future criminal activity resonates with the statistics of foster children and juvenile delinquency. Jonson-Reid and Barth (2000) found that large percentage of children in foster care become involved in acts of delinquency at higher rates than their non-foster care counterparts. They become involved
in the juvenile justice system and continue into adulthood.

More programs and policies are needed to address the issues that correlate with delinquency and incarceration, such as reduced number of placement, permanent living situations, and assistance with transitional living. Although programs are now set in place they need to be carried out at the micro level and possibly restructured at the macro level to ensure that the programs that have been set are providing the needed services to foster youth for a successful future, meaningful relationships, financial security, independence, and an equal education.

In the United States all children have the right to a free an appropriate education under the law; appropriate being the key word. Foster children are vulnerable to academic failure through the circumstances of being a foster child. Teachers need to be aware of the circumstances and impact that being in foster care has on their education and their life. If foster children are perceived differently and then treated differently in the school setting then they are not receiving the appropriate education that they are entitled to.
APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE
Johnny is a 17 year old in the 11th grade. He is a fairly new student at your High School. He has been at your High School for 1 semester. He lives with a foster family and has been in the foster care system since he was 10 years old. Johnny is currently failing 3 of his 6 classes. He has a close group of friends with whom he spends much of his time with. He tried out for the football team at the beginning of the school year, but quit the team after two weeks. Johnny will be turning 18 before the end of the school year.

Responses: Based on the case you just read, please respond to the following statements. Indicate your degree of agreement by circling the letter(s) that correspond with each statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Johnny will graduate High School.</td>
<td>SA A D SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Johnny will probably get arrested as an adult.</td>
<td>SA A D SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Johnny will go to college.</td>
<td>SA A D SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Johnny will get a well paying job after high school.</td>
<td>SA A D SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Johnny will raise failing grades to passing.</td>
<td>SA A D SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Johnny will probably commit a crime.</td>
<td>SA A D SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Johnny is probably very disruptive in class.</td>
<td>SA A D SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Johnny will seek help from teachers to improve grades.</td>
<td>SA A D SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Johnny will probably become involved in alcohol or drugs.</td>
<td>SA A D SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Johnny will drop out of High School.</td>
<td>SA A D SD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Demographic Information: Please circle your response.

1. Your gender:  
   1) Female  
   2) Male

2. You age: __________

3. Your ethnicity:  
   1) African-American  
   2) Native American  
   3) Latino/Hispanic  
   4) White, Non-Hispanic  
   5) Asian  
   6) Other: __________

4. How long have you been teaching? __________

5. Have you ever had students who have been in the foster care system?  
   1) Yes  
   2) No

6. Do you currently have students who are in the foster care system?  
   1) Yes  
   2) No  
   3) Don't Know
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT
The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to investigate teacher perceptions of students in foster care. This study is being conducted by Nira Ortega Mejias under the supervision of Dr. Laurie Smith, Associate Professor of Social Work. This study has been approved by the Department of Social Work Institutional Review Board sub-committee, California State University, San Bernardino.

In this study you will be asked to respond to a vignette. Ten questions regarding a student’s potential success will be asked. The survey should take about 5 minutes to complete. All of your responses will be held in the strictest of confidence by the researcher. No information which identifies you will be released without your separate permission. All data will be reported in group form only. It is expected that approximately 100 teachers will participate in this study, including both women and men.

You may receive the group results of this study upon completion in September 2008 at Pfau Library, California State University San Bernardino.

Your participation in this study is totally voluntary. You are free not to answer any questions and withdraw at any time during this study without penalty. When you have completed the survey, you will receive a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail.

By participating in the study you will be contributing to the social work knowledge base. Some direct benefits of participating in the study may include being able to identify personal biases. Some risks may include discomfort that may arise while responding to statements in the survey. Should you feel any discomfort while completing the survey you are free to not answer particular questions or withdraw from the study completely.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Laurie Smith at lasmith@csusb.edu.

By placing a check mark in the box below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and that I understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate. I also acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

Place a check mark here: [ ] Today’s date: __________________________
APPENDIX C

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT
“Teacher’s perception of student’s in foster care”
Debriefing Statement

The study you have just completed was designed to investigate teacher’s perceptions of students potential academic success. Teachers were asked to respond to statements regarding the academic success of hypothetical students. We are particularly interested in differences in perceptions regarding students who are in the foster care system.

Thank you for your participation and for not discussing the contents of the survey with other participants. If you have any questions about the study, or you wish to obtain a copy of the results of this study, please feel free to contact Professor Laurie Smith at lasmith@csusb.edu at the end of Spring Quarter of 2008.
REFERENCES


