

RECOGNISING BARRIERS TO ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF FOSTER CHILDREN IN MALAYSIA: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Previous studies have shown that foster children frequently perform poorly in school (Watson & Kabler, 2012; Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Zetlin, Weinberg & Kimm, 2003). Most foster children remain in the same grade at least once, are in need of special education classes, and have higher rates of dropout than non-foster children (Zetlin, Weinberg, and Kimm, 2004). The reason for their poor academic performance is uncertain. According to Sala (2009), some of the children in foster care in Kenya reported skipping school to look for food because their foster caregivers provided them with one meal per day or sometimes, none. Consequently, these children have to miss school to look, beg, and raise money for food (ibid.). This could also be one of the reasons for their absenteeism and dropout of school. Similarly, Chan (2013) found that some foster children turn to stealing because they are not provided with adequate provision of food and pocket money. Using data derived from interviewing the teachers in school, this study aims to examine whether the inadequate provision of food and pocket money can affect the academic performance of children in foster care. Content analysis approach is used in this qualitative study. The narratives elicited from the interviews are analysed based on Searle's (1969) Speech Acts Theory. This study reveals that the teachers used representative speech acts to describe, make claims, and complaints about the lack of pocket money and inadequate provision of food that might affect the academic performance of the foster children in school.

Keywords: academic performance, concern, foster children, Malaysia, Speech Act Theory

Factors of Foster Children Not Performing in School

In Malaysia, children are placed in Children's Homes "for a specified period as determined by court until their biological families are ready to accept them or until Social Welfare Officers manage to find suitable foster families for them" (Azizah Mohd. and Nadhilah A. Kadir, 2012, p. 63). Foster care is a service aimed at providing protection to children who have experienced serious family adversities.

Children in foster care are given special education programmes due to their poor grades, high rates of absenteeism, misbehavior, and retention in grade (Leiter and Johnsen, 1997). Zetlin, Weinberg, and Kimm (2004) discover that most foster children remain in the same grade at least once, need special education classes, and have higher rates of dropout than non-foster children. Similarly, the Casey Foundation has also discovered that the rate of foster children dropout of school is twice as much than their counterparts. According to Zetlin, Weinberg, and Shea (2006), child welfare agencies usually pay no attention to issues related to foster children's performance in school as they have lack of knowledge about the

education system and teachers feel the same when dealing with the foster care system. The foster caregivers and teachers might have overlooked the problems faced by the foster children, which in turn could affect their performance in school such as the inadequate provision of food and pocket money.

According to a study conducted by Sala (2006), 72.5% of the foster caregivers in Kenya claim that they undergo problems in the provision of education for the children in foster care. A total of 22% of children in foster care dropped out of school. In addition, the quality and quantity regarding the provision of food and education in foster care in Kenya is also poor. Sala (2006) found that the children in foster care are provided with only one meal per day, sometimes no food was given to them. Food is one of the unmet needs that ranked second at 46.3% (Sala, 2006). Moreover, majority of the children in foster care report that the foster caregivers seldom provide them meals because they either could not afford to or had to leave early (Sala, 2009, p. 316). Some of the children in Sala's (2009) study claim that they had to raise money for food. Some of them even missed school to look for food (*ibid.*, p. 317). This indicates that insufficient and low quality of provision of food can be one of the factors of their absenteeism, dropout, and their academic performance (*ibid.*, p. 318).

Additionally, in Sinclair, Wilson, and Gibbs' (2001) study, it is revealed that the foster children wanted more pocket money, as much as the amount of other children from a normal background received, merely because they do not have enough. Similarly, in Chan's (2013) study, some foster children in Malaysia reportedly turned to stealing because they are desperately in need of money; some of the reasons include being bullied, wanting to buy candy, cigarettes, or mobile phones. Some of the stealing instances involved breaking others' lockers for food (*ibid.*, p. 126). Most of the stealing cases are related with money and food because the children are hungry and the quality of food served in the foster home does not meet their expectations (*ibid.*, p. 125). The children in his study criticized that the foster caregivers provided them with low quantity and quality food or even expired food. Hence, some of them resort to stealing because they were in desperate need of food (*ibid.*, p. 125). This study analyses the speech acts used by the school teachers when voicing their concern about the barriers that affect foster children's academic achievement.

As having adequate food and nutrition is of utmost importance to the academic performance of children, this study aims to investigate whether the lack of provision of food and pocket money are the reason of the foster children's underachievement.

Methodology

Using semi-structured interview questions as instrument, the data for this study was collected over a period of four months through a series of interviews with 27 school teachers from a selected secondary school in Klang Valley area in Malaysia. The audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed verbatim based on the adaptation of Jefferson Transcription Conventions (1984). Content analysis serve as a research tool used to subjectively analyse the content of interview data through the process of coding and identifying the types of concern based on Searle's (1969) Representative Acts.

Data Analysis

Since this article is part of a larger project on addressing the needs of foster children in Malaysia, it only discusses one of the needs, namely the provision of food and pocket money. Out of the twenty-seven teachers in this study, there are only ten teachers who have voiced their concern about this issue.

The Insufficient Amount of Pocket Money

The data from the interview reveal that foster children often could not attend extra classes provided by school. Since extra classes are usually held after school hours, many foster children skip extra classes because they could not afford to buy lunch as they are not provided with sufficient amount of pocket money.

In Excerpt 1, T26 indicates that the foster children do not receive their pocket money on a daily basis. Therefore, they could not afford to stay beyond school hours. This correlates with Sala's (2009, p. 318) claim that insufficient provision of food can be one of the factors of their absenteeism and their academic performance.

Excerpt 1

[104] T26: *Duit pun tak dapat kan / duit poket / kadang-kadang*
They don't even get money / pocket money / sometimes
dapat / kadang-kadang tak dia orang cakap /
they do / sometimes **they said** they don't /

By making the claims about the problem faced by the foster children in her class, it shows that T26 is aware and understands why these children fail to attend extra classes after school hours.

The notion of foster children not having enough money is also perpetuated by T8, as seen in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2

[52] T8: *err::: bantuan / contohnya dari segi sokongan err::: wang*
aid / for example in terms of support pocket
sakulah kan / kalau wang saku mungkin kalau kanak-kanak
money / if pocket money maybe if other children
yang lain err pelajar yang lain / mungkin dua ringgit /
other students receive / maybe two ringgit /
dua ringgit setengah / tiga ringgit / ada yang lima ringgit /
two ringgit and fifty / three ringgit / even five ringgit /
tapi kalau dia orang / saya tanya / ada yang seringgit
but for them / **I asked** / **some received only one**
setengah je / dia bezalah / mungkin ada
ringgit and fifty cents only / **not the same for all** / maybe
beza ada yang dapat dua ringgit / ada yang dapat seringgit
different as some received two ringgit / others one ringgit
setengah / macam tu /
fifty / so it's like that /

T8 is being made aware by the foster children that they are not receiving enough pocket money when he describes the amount of pocket money received by the children. To confirm this matter, T8 took the time and initiative to ask these children about the amount of pocket money received by them. T8 highlights the barriers faced by the foster children by reporting the fact that they only receive Rm 1.50 as compared to other students who are given at least Rm2 to Rm 5 per day for their pocket money. This difference is substantial. By taking the time and initiative to enquire further, denotes that T8 is actually concerned about the students who are in need of support. This finding is in accordance with in Sinclair, Wilson, and Gibbs' (2001) study where foster children do not have the same amount of pocket money as children from a normal background.

Similar to Excerpt 1 and 2, T25 feels obligated to pay for the students because they do not have sufficient amount of pocket money for food. This is evident in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 3

[52] T25: *Kalau dia time rehat / kadang-kadang kita kesian kan /*
If during recess time / **sometimes we feel sorry for them** right /
bagi dia belanja dan sebagainya / dari situ kita rapat dengan dia /
(we) pay for their food and so on / from there we become close to them /

In line 52, it is apparent that T25 feels obliged to aid the foster children by paying for his or her food as illustrated in *kadang-kadang kita kesian kan, bagi dia belanja dan sebagainya* 'sometimes we feel sorry for them right, (we) pay for their food and so on'. It is clear that she recognizes that the foster children do not have adequate amount of money to buy food when she claims that she empathizes with them and decides to aid these children.

Similar to Excerpt 3, T17 also agrees that the foster children do not receive enough pocket money. He is aware that the foster children skip lunch because they could not afford to buy food. This can be seen in Excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4

[60] T17: *Contohnya baru-baru ini err mereka mengatakan mereka*
For example recently **they said they do not have**
tidak cukup wang saku / untuk pengetahuan puan /
enough pocket money /for your information /
mereka ada yang diberi satu ringgit lima puluh sen sehari /
some of them were given only one ringgit and fifty cents a day /
sedangkan mereka kadang-kadang berada satu hari di sekolah /
when they sometimes have to be at the school for the whole day /
daripada pukul tujuh setengah hingga pukul lima petang mereka
from seven thirty to until five in the afternoon as they
ada kegiatan ko-kurikulum di sekolah petang / dengan satu ringgit
have co-curriculum activities in the afternoon / with only one ringgit
lima puluh sen tu / itu yang membuat mereka mungkin lapar /
and fifty cents / that maybe makes them hungry /
mereka tak tak ya lah tak selesa / tak enjoykan
they are not comfortable / not able to enjoy
dengan duit keadaan duit tu / itu yang kita berbincang pula
with the little amount of money / that's what **we discussed**
dengan Pengetua bagaimana keadaan ini boleh diselesaikan /
with the Principal to see how the situation can be resolved /
ah itu salah satu contohnya /
that is one example /

In order to highlight the financial problem faced by the foster children, T17 reports that these children are only given Rm 1.50 pocket money per day. It is apparent that the children will be hungry and unable to focus in activities after school hours, which are the consequences of not having sufficient pocket money. Likewise, Chan's (2013) study also discovers that children in foster care are not given sufficient amounts of pocket money and some of them are in desperate need of food.

Based on the interview, T17 claims that he has made an effort to discuss with the Principal a way to solve this problem. T17's collaboration with the Principal shows that he is concerned about the foster children's condition.

The notion of foster children's lack of pocket money is also perpetuated by T22, as seen clearly in Excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5

[76] T22: If they've some problems / some of them do come and see me / yes / there are one or two students who they come and see me **they say** teacher / **I don't have this enough money to buy uniform** / for as I say this uniform bodies / the **uniform itself is expensive** / so when they these people come and see me / **we will try to solve their problems** /

T22 is aware of the fact that foster children cannot afford to purchase the school co-curriculum uniform. Hence, she affirms that she is willing to solve this problem. Her willingness to help the foster children denotes that she is concerned about them.

The effect of the lack of food towards foster children's academic performance

The data from the interview also reveals that the lack of food and environmental factors can affect the foster children's academic performance in school. T18 is aware that the foster children are interested in the school activities, but at the same time, they are less active, as shown in Excerpt 6.

Excerpt 6

[36] T18: *Kebanyakan yang saya nampak pelajar-pelajar ini err mereka ini*
From what I see these students err they are
err:::minat bersukan tapi dalam masa sama mereka kurang aktif
err::: interested in sports but at the same time they are less active
dalam err sukan-sukan yang tertentu / terutamanya err aktiviti-aktiviti
in err certain sports / especially err activities
yang lebih lasak sebab mungkin sebab faktor pemakanan dan
that are rigorous **maybe due to factors like food and**
faktor persekitaran / saya rasa macam tu lah /
environment / I think it's like that /

In line 36, T18 highlights the reasons for the foster children being inactive in school activities, by claiming that it is due to food and environmental factors. This is also similar to Sala's (2009) claim where food and environment are identified as the reasons for the children's poor performance in school. It is apparent that T18's awareness of the consequences faced by the foster children for not having sufficient provision of food and environment indicate that he is concerned about them.

Misuse of funds given to the foster children

One of the teachers in the data has also complained about the misuse of funds given to foster children. In Excerpt 7, T8 complains that the funds provided by the government are not channelled to the foster children as the foster caregivers tend to misuse them.

Excerpt 7

[62] T8: *Di peringkat mereka sendiri / err mereka sudah dapat dana / saya rasa*
At their level / err they have received the funds / **I think that**
dah dapat danalah daripada government kan / jadi why not
have already received the funds from the government / so why not
kalau gunakan sepenuhnya dana itu untuk anak-anak bakti /
use the funds fully utilize it for the foster children /
err::: sebab ini penting / sebab err::: dana tu adalah untuk
err...because this is important / because err...that fund is for
keperluan pelajar / bukan untuk keperluan mereka /

the students' needs / **not for their (caregivers) needs** /
sebab saya adalah dengar juga pelajar-pelajar yang cakap /
 because I've also heard that from the students /
err itu saya saya nak pergi ke dia orang lah / dia orang nak pergi
 err that's why I want to see them / they want to go
ke klinik sebab sakit / tapi tak dibawa /
 to the clinic because of illness / but (they) were not sent /
duit dah dapat dah / hari itu duit dah dapat /
 the money has been received / that day money was received /
duit tu untuk pembiayaan dia tu apa surgery dia / tapi
 that money is for paying the cost of the surgery / however
alang-alang tak tak dibuat operation /
 the operation was not carried out /

In line 62, he strongly emphasises that the funds should be used for the foster children's needs and not for the caregivers. At the same time, the teacher is also frustrated at the foster caregivers when he complains about their misuse of the fund as illustrated in *bukan untuk keperluan mereka* 'not for their (caregivers) needs'. T8's frustration on the misuse of funds by the foster caregivers shows that he cares and is concerned about the foster children and their rights to the finances.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that inadequate provision of food and pocket money does affect the academic performance of foster children. Teachers claim that the foster children cannot afford to buy school supplies such as stationery, books, and co-curriculum uniforms because they do not have sufficient amounts of pocket money. In addition, some of the foster children skip extra classes or school activities because they cannot afford to stay beyond school hours.

Besides this, hunger may affect their concentration and learning. The focus of getting food affects the foster children's academic performance. Hence, this issue should not be taken lightly and teachers should play a role in helping the foster children.

Based on the data, the teachers have used the representative speech act to state their beliefs. They make claims about the reason foster children could not afford to stay for extra classes and are unable to buy food for lunch. They have also claimed and affirmed that they will try to help these children to solve their financial problems. In addition, the teachers have complained about the foster caregivers' misuse of foster children's fund. In addition to this, some teachers have also reported and described the foster children's condition by comparing the amount of pocket money received by these children and children from a normal background. These are the strategies of the representative act used by the teachers in addressing the barriers that the foster children encounter. Indeed, these teachers are concerned and aware of the problems which pose as the barriers to foster children's academic achievement.

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