

# Reflections on Foster Youth and Education: Finding Common Ground

Tonya Glantz and Melinda Gushwa

**Abstract:** It was during the winter of 2010 that Tonya Glantz, Child Welfare Institute, and Melinda Gushwa, Rhode Island College School of Social Work, discovered their shared passion for supporting school success for students in foster care. Tonya Glantz shares The Education Collaboration Project (ECP), a model she developed for engaging participants from overlapping systems in a critical discussion and problem solving process. Melinda Gushwa shares reflections from more than two decades as a child welfare worker, forensic pediatric medical social worker, educator, and child welfare researcher. Their joint interest led the duo to present a workshop, Bridging the Education-Child Welfare Communication Gap: A Model for Cross-System Collaboration, at the 18th National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect. This narrative uses the practical and research experiences of its authors to explore the benefits of interprofessional curricula and interprofessional teams as resources for supporting child welfare and education professionals in their joint service to students in foster care.

**Keywords:** child welfare; educators; interprofessional collaboration; foster care

## Moving Toward a Solution

The literature is rife with evidence of failed collaboration between professionals in the public school and child welfare systems and marked by poor communication, a lack of cross-disciplinary language, and confusion regarding professional practices (Coulling, 2000; Courtney, Roderick, Smithgall, Gladden, & Nagaoka, 2004; Wulczyn, Smithgall, and Chen, 2009; Leone & Weinberg, 2010). Equally irrefutable is the evidence related to adverse implications for the educational experiences of students in the foster care system, often as a result of missed opportunities at the system and professional levels (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000; Finkelstein, et al., 2002; Altshuler, 2003; Wulczyn, et al., 2009). In fact, much of the research and commentary available on the topic of school success for students in foster care seems so burdened by the existence of the *problem* that one might believe that there are no possible solutions. The following vignettes are offered not as evidence of the problem for students in foster care, but as examples of the ways we tend to get stuck and why we must seek shared solutions for child welfare, schools, and students in foster care.

## Maggie:

*Growing up in foster care and without support for academic success contributes to generational cycles of disempowerment and life-long struggles for youth.*

After a long awaited return home to her mother, stepfather and siblings, Maggie leaves behind five foster care and residential placements and several schools. Maggie is excited to live the life of a child who is not in foster care. Her dream of living with her family and attending a community school is finally realized. Despite her emotional and learning needs, Maggie aspires to join the US Air Force and attend college. Unfortunately, the joy of Maggie's reunification is quickly replaced by the trauma of another removal when she discloses repeated instances of sexual abuse by her stepfather.

Upon re-entry into the foster care system, Maggie spends over three months in a shelter, where her enrollment in a new school district is delayed by several weeks. The task of school enrollment is met with confusion regarding who, child welfare or the shelter staff, is responsible. Despite laws and policies allowing for Maggie's school enrollment, the school claims that Maggie lacks the correct paperwork to be enrolled. By the time Maggie is allowed to attend school, she is emotionally exhausted, worried about her family, and unsure of

her future. Maggie's emotional trauma manifests in her special education classroom through claims of sexual activity with fellow students and pregnancy fantasies. School staff is unprepared for and uncomfortable with Maggie's behavior. Just as Maggie begins to become stabilized, she is placed in a treatment foster home and moved to another state and a new school. Maggie will move to at least three more homes and schools before she ages out of care. She will have a baby before she turns 18; she will be forced to rely on public assistance to support herself and her child and inevitably, with no place to live, she will return to her family home where she was abused.

**Evelyn:**

*Growing up in care and without support for academic success causes youth to miss out on their potential and leaves them asking why no one cared.*

As the oldest child of parents struggling with addiction, mental health illness, and criminal behavior, Evelyn spends most of her time running her home and caring for her younger sibling. Evelyn's sibling's special needs require special care and Evelyn rises to this challenge with great care and love. Unfortunately, Evelyn enters care shortly after the incarceration of one of her parents and a finding of abuse and neglect on the other. Being placed in a group home is difficult but nothing compared to Evelyn's sense of loss and worry due to her separation from her sibling. Despite being enrolled in school, Evelyn's school activity consists of entering the front door and immediately leaving through the back door. The importance of school pales in comparison to Evelyn's need to make sure her sibling is all right and taking care of her mother, who is still living in their old apartment.

At the age of 18, Evelyn's reading level is that of a third grader, and she has missed most of her high school education. However, on a warm day in June, Evelyn is awarded a high school diploma. It is not until a good three years later that Evelyn realizes the full impact of her lost education. In a group discussion, with a look of sadness and confusion on her face Evelyn says, "Do you know that some mothers read to their babies before they are even born, when they're in the stomach? No one ever did that for me. Why didn't anyone care or miss me when I wasn't in school. By myself, I was more

worried about my brother than staying at school. But a grown-up should have cared. Now I'm twenty-something; I can only read as good as a third grader; I want to go to college and do things but I know my brain isn't as smart as other kids my age. It's just not fair."

The stories of Maggie and Evelyn are but a few of thousands belonging to children and youth in foster care. We can sigh, convinced of the enormity of the problem, and give up. Or, we can see the opportunity to look and learn more deeply from what Maggie and Evelyn are sharing with us. The Education Collaboration Project (ECP) invited a group of child welfare and school professionals and a small group of youth with foster care history to look and learn more deeply. Together, this somewhat unsuspecting group came together to explore challenges and to identify opportunities to promote school success for students in foster care. The ECP thoughtfully integrated an interprofessional curriculum at the college level with a built in mechanism for building an interprofessional-consumer team that united professionals from child welfare and schools with youth with foster care histories.

The Education Collaboration Project (ECP) became an opportunity to validate the mutual disempowerment of youth in foster care, as well as that of child welfare and school professionals. Moving beyond disempowerment, the groups were invited to seize their own empowerment through mutual discovery, communication, negotiation, and action. The ECP was delivered over the course of a thirteen-week graduate course and was informed by an innovative theoretical framework that allowed for validation of each individual group and support as they explored their own and then others' connections to school success for students in foster care. Though somewhat unorthodox, the framework wove together, in an intentionally progressive fashion, three core theories. First, critical pedagogy (Freire, 1994) became a resource for defining and building relationships among the constituent groups and engaging them in a process of re-defining their roles and relationships to one another. Second, adaptive change theory (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001; Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009) represented a resource for understanding the consequences (disempowerment) of excluding and the benefits of

including the input of youth in care and professionals from child welfare and schools. It is from the integration of critical theory and adaptive change that Wenger's (1998) communities of practice (COP) became a theoretical and practical resource for taking action. Wenger's theory relies on the creation of meaning and resulting changes or

into the ECP participants' journeys from isolation to action. It was from this process that Melinda Gushwa and I decided to collaborate through conferences and webinars to advocate for change and to support the empowerment of professionals and youth involved in this issue.

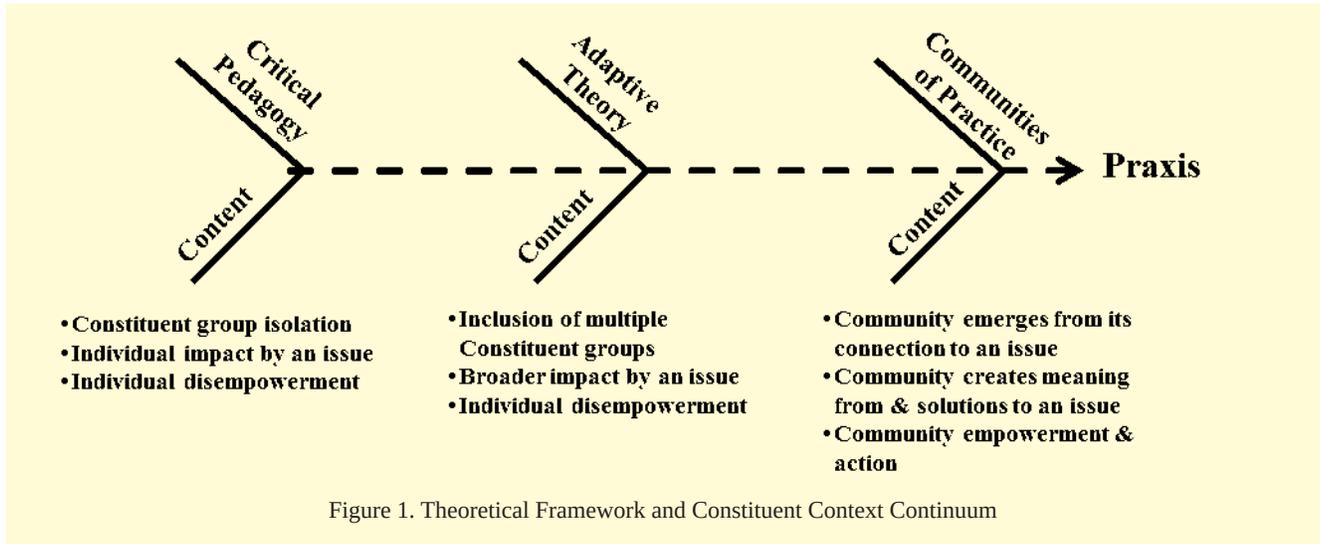


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework and Constituent Context Continuum

action that arise when individuals come together to form a community of practice (COP), which is what occurred with the ECP. This construction of theories formed the foundation of an intervention that honored, modeled, and embraced interprofessional relationships as an essential tool for creating change.

### Five Stages of Transformation

What follows is a brief overview of the five stages of transformation achieved through the ECP.

During the Education Collaboration Project, it was my hope to fully engage the diverse participant groups in a meaningful and honest exploration and problem-solving process. I was eager to gain insight into the role of training as a tool for conventional education and, more importantly, as a resource for empowerment and change at the personal and system levels. I suspected that the barriers surrounding poor communication and collaboration were less about professional apathy and more about a basic lack of understanding and personal and/or systemic oppression. Because of these concerns, I carefully attended to issues of identity, agency, and power over the course of the ECP. The information that follows provides insight

### Submergence- Disempowerment

At the start of the process, the youth, school, and child welfare participants were comfortable in the isolation of their separate groups. The preliminary steps in the ECP process suggested the absence of shared awareness or responsibility by the two professional groups. Instead, there was strong evidence that each group felt misunderstood and disrespected by the other groups or the broader society. These perceptions intensified the feelings of isolation and the projection of blame onto others, which actually increased the feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness among the groups. At the start of the ECP, it was clear that participants had done very little, if any, work to reach out to other groups to better understand or to join forces in support of school success for students in foster care. The two professional groups were entirely victims of their isolation and ignorance. The youth group, while much more globally aware than the professional groups, remained stymied by their lack of voice and access. As a result, the first four weeks of the ECP required engagement methods, where these otherwise submerged participants remained in their separate groups, shared their realities, and received affirmation of their experiences (Freire,

1994). During this time, participants could be characterized by a sense of personal complacency; *this is how it has always been*, with significant fragmentation across the groups and their respective systems. This combined complacency, fragmentation, and isolation contributed to the construction of identities that were closed and lacked access to wider perspectives. It was not until the participants began to be exposed to each other's perceived realities that movement away from their isolation was possible. Much of my 23 years of practice resonates with the experiences of the ECP participants, where systems have worked hard to maintain a distance and territory or silos against collaboration or integration. I am encouraged by the recent movement away from *silos* toward integrated *systems of care* (Pires, 2002) taking place across the country and in State 1.

### **Youth, School, and Child Welfare ECP Participants**

During weeks two through four, ECP participants were able to view and listen to each other's responses to the same exercises. Because, to a certain extent, submergence provides a sense of safety, albeit a false one, I maintained the separation of the groups to afford the comfort of their same-group peers as they confronted the perceptions and words of the other groups (Freire, 1994). Maintaining homogeneous groupings was important at this stage, as it afforded protection and an impetus to move beyond submergence. The information being shared was especially difficult for the child welfare participants to hear, due to the often negative views held by the other groups. Even though the sharing of the other two groups' experiences made the child welfare participants feel badly or angry, the experiences and perceptions were shared in a manner that promoted empathy and critical thinking. One message that carried through the collective groups' pieces of feedback was the undeniable vulnerability of youth in foster care and an equally indisputable link to the efforts of school and child welfare professionals. This information became a focus that began connecting participants to the issue or domain and role or practice within it (Wenger, 1998). During the end of Week Four, the separate groups began to consider themselves as a part of a process and not just as separate (youth, school, or child welfare) participants. At the point when the discrete participant groups became a

single group of ECP participants, the whole group's identity started to emerge, as it moved toward the establishment of a *community* (Wenger, 1998).

### **ECP Participants**

During weeks five through nine, ECP participants began moving in and out of allegiance to the group with which they originally identified. A factor that promoted the merging of participants occurred during Week Five, the first time that all three groups met together and participated in an introduction exercise. I would not qualify this first full meeting of the ECP participants as easy or an instant community; however, there was a different sense of knowing and chosen vulnerability that all the participants willingly embraced as they met one another. There was an effort to share space and talking time and a sense of intended equal treatment that I do not think could have existed early in the process when groups were defensive, hurt, and more disempowered. In addition to the introduction exercise, the ECP participants began taking stands on issues that were not always consistent with positions taken in their original group affiliation. For example, one child welfare professional decided to express a very strong stance on the need to disclose a child's foster care status and provide a justification. Her statement was in contrast to the views of several child welfare professionals and at least one of the youth. In the audio recording, there are changes in the speaker's tone and breathing, which signify her nervousness at taking this risk. When the woman did take this risk, the school professionals, who stood with her, supported her. This act of bravery brought the issue to a level of discussion that was not possible before. This one example captures the crossing of territory and the attempt to reach beyond one's self and one's professional group in order to reach out to a broader group to negotiate meaning (Freire, 1994; Wenger, 1998). Subsequent group discussions and exercises afforded additional opportunities for the ECP participants to explore their collective voice, which helped to transform them into more of a community and less of a random group of participants in a shared process.

### **Education Collaboration Project-Community of Practice (ECP-COP)**

With the formation of a community connected to the issue of school success for students in foster care

and a growing consensus of the need to make improvements, the ECP participants began to move into a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). The evolution to an ECP-Community of Practice (ECP-COP) became apparent when members began raising questions about the *status quo* and asking why things couldn't change. The ECP-COP's movement toward collaboration and action intensified quickly following its community formation. I saw this development as evidence of the power of finally being able to consider openly and honestly the realities facing ECP-COP members and what it meant to them and the world that they

conversation during these strategy meetings was powerful because the members, regardless of their youth, school, or child welfare status, equally agreed, disagreed, explored other options, and advocated amongst each other to negotiate and construct meaning for their ECP-COP. From this intense process, evidence of the ECP-COP's work became clear in the reifications and artifacts they produced, especially in their policy recommendations to the state's child welfare and education systems and the *Digital Stories*, recorded narratives of some ECP-COP members linking their experiences with recommendations for change

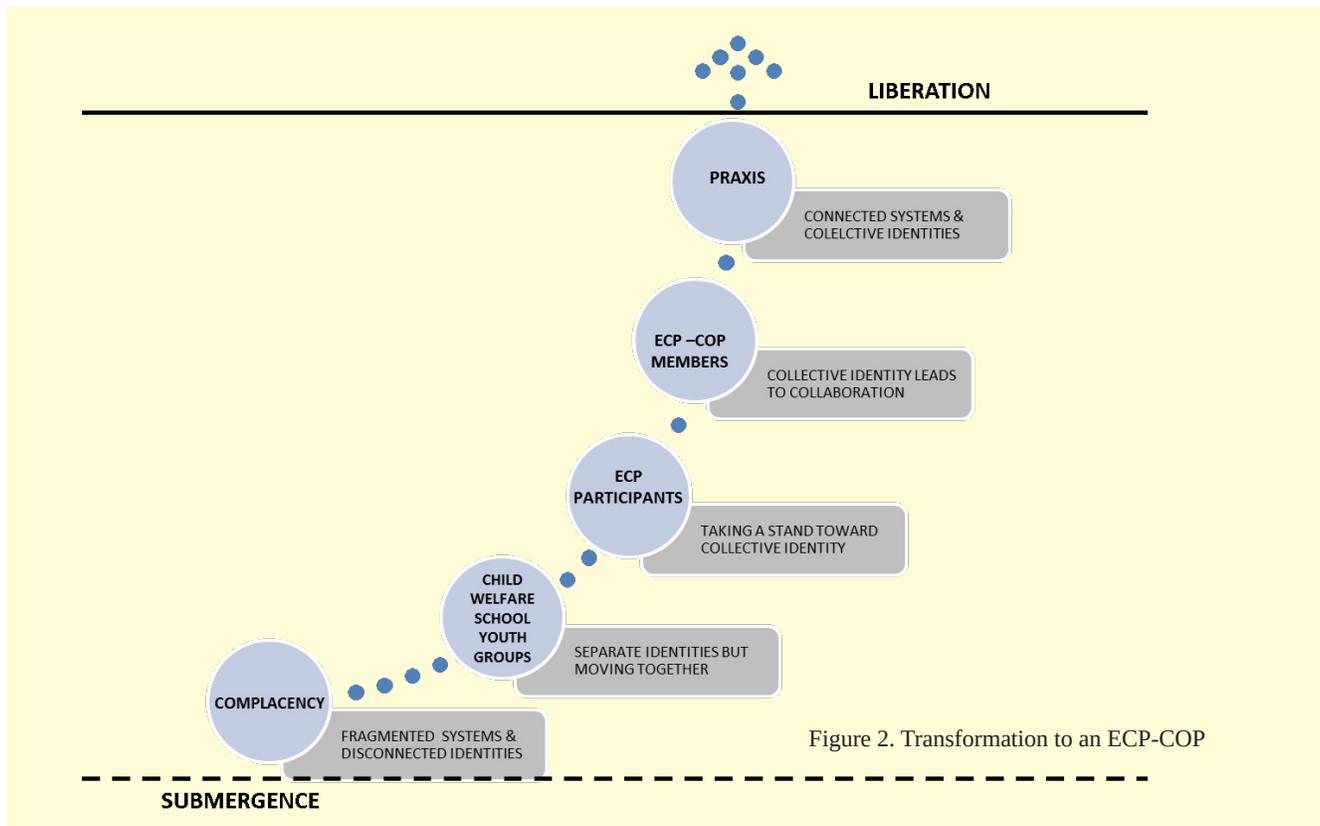


Figure 2. Transformation to an ECP-COP

were trying to improve. The members welcomed the opportunity to meet with a legislator who was co-chairing a task force related to foster care and education. There was a wonderful energy on the day of the meeting, but the energy became even more intense when those ECP-COP members who attended the meeting reported to the full ECP-COP community. This exchange really buoyed the spirit of the group and served as a call to action for them. During Weeks Ten through Twelve, the members worked collectively to identify primary areas to target for change and to define the intricate steps and resources necessary to support their ideas. The

(Wenger, 1998). It was from their work on creating strategies to support change that the members of the ECP-COP truly began to free themselves from the constraints and limitations that burdened them at the start of the intervention.

### Liberation

The ECP-COP members hosted a policy forum in support of promoting school success for students in foster care – what I consider their praxis event (Freire, 1994). They took their message to a very broad audience: child welfare professionals, community providers, family court representatives,

higher educators, legislators, school personnel, and other youth in care. As the ECP-COP, they came together and coalesced around the issue of school success for students in foster care. They created a shared awareness of and meanings for this issue and their collective relationship to it and each other, which reinforced a collective identity for themselves. It is as a result of their joining together that their voices and message are strengthened and made more powerful, not only to benefit the ECP-COP but to advance the broader discourse beyond the ECP-COP.

This study and the corresponding three years that went into planning, implementing, and analyzing it was time well spent. While small in scale and limited by sample selection and my role as a participant-observer, the findings from this study have merit to offer child welfare and school systems as they struggle to overcome the inequality of school success for students in foster care. As the Child Welfare Institute, where I oversee training for numerous public and private agencies in State 1, this study affirmed my belief that training, as an empowering intervention, can be a tool for change. This effort represents the power of interprofessional teams and the important role of interprofessional training in bringing otherwise disconnected groups together in shared solution finding. It was the ECP that inspired Melinda Gushwa and I to reach out to a larger audience to the opportunities of interprofessional training and teams.

### **Spreading the Word**

As a newcomer to the State 1 College School of Social Work in 2010, I was eager to meet with Tonya Glantz, given my interests in child welfare. When she first began to tell me about her work with the ECP, I was mesmerized. I traveled back in time to my experience as a child protection worker in Southern California in the 1990s. The issues she was describing did not seem to have changed much, as I recalled debates with school teachers/administrators about our roles, and, sometimes it seemed like we were in a race to prove who had the child's "true" best interests in mind. In reality, it was not a competition about who cared more, yet it often felt that way. And I frequently left work feeling ineffective, misunderstood and frustrated. This brings to mind a quote from Lerner, Stevenson, and Behrman (1988), which, I believe,

truly encapsulates the experiences of many child welfare workers:

The stakes are high. Overestimating the degree of danger could needlessly shatter a family and rupture the child's closest relationships. Underestimating the danger could mean suffering or even death. The decisions caseworkers make every day would challenge King Solomon, yet most of them lack Solomon's wisdom, few enjoy his credibility, and none command his resources. (p.19)

Child welfare workers and educators alike often find themselves in no-win (damned if you do, damned if you don't) situations, and while this common experience should have led to a bond among us, instead it led to isolation. I was in fact, a worker confined (as Tonya Glantz described) to the silo of "the child welfare system role," working with educators who were confined in the silo of "the school system role." The only problem was that our silos, while they may have helped to create professional identity, and professional pride (and, perhaps, professional hubris), were, in fact, distancing us from the children that we were charged to protect and educate. It seems like the two systems have been muddling along of years, trying to do the best they can. And while the good intentions are there, the mechanism to best meet children's needs hasn't been adequately navigated, as we know that so many youth in foster care face brick walls in their educational experiences. And these walls become higher and denser as they traverse through their lives. In many ways, education is everything, and without educational achievement, they are stuck. Tonya Glantz's work represents a true paradigm shift, and I remember thinking "this is amazing participatory research, and we can't just keep it a secret here in tiny State 1. The word must be spread." To that end, we decided to work together to combine our areas of expertise and find an avenue to present Tonya Glantz's findings.

This led us to the 18th National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, where we had the opportunity to present to a packed room of professionals from key stake holding disciplines: public child welfare, private child welfare,

education, mental health, law, and policy. I started out with some background on the challenges educators and child welfare workers face in their work, particularly issues of burnout and stifling organizational climates and cultures, and then moved on to the multi-challenges faced by youth in foster care with regard to their opportunities for educational attainment and the impact on their life outcomes/opportunities. I responded to the energy of the room, which offered many nodding heads and a seeming chorus of “oh yeah.” And then Tonya Glantz began to unfold the story and experiences of the ECP, and the room became rapt in her narrative. The question and answer period that followed was rife with participants wanting to know more about the process and the ways they could potentially start up similar collaborations in their own communities. This was an exciting time, and we were both profoundly thankful to the workshop participants for their enthusiasm and interest. Our conference presentation led to another opportunity to spread the word. In January of this year, Tonya Glantz, Trisha Malloy (a child welfare professional from the community and a graduate of our MSW program), and I participated in a webinar regarding the ECP with The National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth who are Neglected, Delinquent or At-risk. This was an excellent opportunity to spread the word to a larger audience and generate dynamic interest in Tonya Glantz's work.

The pathway to spreading the word has many avenues, and interprofessional education (IPE) collaboratives among social work and education programs represent a promising approach for joining these two strong professional communities at an early stage of their learning. Gillespie, Whiteley, Watts, Dattolo, & Jones (2010) noted that exposure to IPE among these two groups can, in many ways, inoculate future child welfare and education professionals against many of the pitfalls of their professions (burnout, job dissatisfaction, etc). In light of our institution's strong commitment to IPE among nursing and social work education programs (Murphy & Nimmagadda, 2014; Nimmagadda & Murphy, 2014), we definitely have the capacity to expand the ECP to an IPE model in the future. Additionally, given that child welfare professionals frequently interact with other professions such as law enforcement (LE), health

care, and others, including other disciplines in future collaborative efforts could help to strength the somewhat historically sticky challenges with information sharing among these groups (Ross, 2009). We like the idea of creating a “template” and foundation on which others can build.

Additionally, given that child welfare professionals frequently interact with law enforcement (LE) professionals, including LE in future collaborative efforts could help to strength the somewhat historically sticky challenges with information sharing among the two groups (Ross, 2009). We like the idea of creating a “template” and foundation on which others can build.

Who are we? Each of us should perhaps tell the reader more at this point about who we are.

Tonya Glantz: I have been working in the field of child welfare for 23 years. Over the course of these years, I have worked directly with child welfare involved families as a caseworker, conducted training and completed home studies for pre-adoptive families, and served as a trainer and developer of curriculum for child welfare and other disciplines. Across these roles, the issues of education and the hardship experienced by students in foster care were ever present. After too many years of struggling to understand barriers to collaboration between school and child welfare systems, and the resulting isolation of students in foster care, I decided to stop focusing on the problem.

Instead, I wanted to be part of the solution, a solution shaped by those with the most knowledge, child welfare and school professional and youth with foster care histories. So, I created the Education Collaboration Project (ECP), a research and training process within the RI Child Welfare Institute. The goal of the ECP was to promote open communication and to build relationships among key constituents: (1) youth with foster care history and professionals from (2) education and (3) child welfare systems. The ECP sought to understand the needs of all constituents and to use this knowledge to empower these groups to improve school success for students in foster care.

Melinda Gushwa: My first job in child welfare was

at an emergency placement shelter for children in Nevada. Just out of college and armed only with a degree in English and Anthropology, I was ill prepared to deal with issues of child maltreatment. It was a trial by fire that laid the foundation for a 24-year career devoted to child welfare practice, training, and research.

My areas of interest focus on child welfare workforce issues, child welfare training, and high-risk child maltreatment cases, particularly maltreatment fatalities. I tend to be very risk-focused when I think about child welfare issues—risks that children, youth and families face, as well as the challenges and risks faced by the workers charged to protect and support them. Education is a protective factor for children. It represents hope and opportunity, yet our systems tend to place child welfare workers and educators at odds.

Tonya Glantz's research is particularly compelling, given my interest in organizational and workforce issues in child welfare. Its emphasis on bridging systems issues in service of supporting youth and their pursuit of education is indeed fascinating, and I have been honored to work with her over the years.

We hope to continue to spread this word for years to come.

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