



Exploring Superficial Care's Impact on Foster Children's Well-being

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Abstract

This study analyses Lynda Mullaly Hunt's One for the Murphys and Alex Wheatle's Home Girl, exploring the impact of superficial care on foster children's development. Aided by the theorist Urie Bronfenbrenner, it examines the foster children's development in five systemic levels – the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem. The American novelist Hunt showcases the journey of a twelve-year-old Carley Connors and gives a touching but realistic depiction of the foster care system. The novel One for the Murphys further accounts for a terrible betrayal by her own mother that leads Carley to be placed with the Murphy family. The British novelist Wheatle portrays the story of Naomi, a teenage girl growing up fast in the foster care system. The novel Home Girl is fast-paced, funny, tender, tragic, and full of courage, just like Naomi. The protagonist, Naomi Brisset, a fourteen-year-old girl, has to face a lot of challenges in her journey through various foster care homes. She was unable to build trusting relationships as she was accustomed to shifting and changing environments. Ultimately, both novels bring to light the harsh realities of the foster care system, revealing the effects of family dynamics and the survival practices adapted by the foster children.

Keywords: foster care, ecological systems theory, temporary placements, trauma and superficial care

Introduction

Foster care is a child welfare system that provides short- or long-term care for children who cannot remain with their birth families due to abuse, neglect or other circumstances. It aims to protect their growth, safety and well-being by placing children in the care of trained foster parents, relatives or residential establishments. When reunion is not possible, the system works to achieve adoption. It aims to reunite children with their families whenever possible. Foster care is safe, secure and nurturing, but it also brings its own disadvantages of instability, emotional pain, and difficulty in forming healthy, stable lifelong

relationships. The experiences of children in foster care vary dramatically, influenced by various factors including the length of stay, quality of care and the policies governing the system. Lynda Mullaly Hunt's One for the Murphys and Alex Wheatle's Home Girl are examined to analyse the problem statement in a more profound context. Though the novels are set in two different countries, the United States and the United Kingdom, they offer a wide range of commonalities in their approach towards foster kids. Both the protagonists of the novels, Carley and Naomi, experience superficial care in various walks of their lives, which makes them exhibit vulnerability



rather than kindness towards the people around them. They expect cruelty and harshness rather than genuine care.

One for the Murphys by Lynda Mullaly Hunt has a deep, introspective, emotional, and character-driven writing style characterised by Carley's internal conflicts and her gradual emotional evolution as a character. The short, fragmented sentences and internal monologues in first-person narrative convey Carley's doubt, fear and reluctant understanding of care and connection. Hunt uses deceptively simple language, symbolism and captivating storytelling techniques to deliver a deeper emotional impact.

Alex Wheatle's *Home Girl* is quick and visceral which gives Naomi a voice that is sharp and unapologetic. In contrast to Hunt's gentle tone, Wheatle's first-person is loud and confrontational, and filled with slang, reflecting Naomi's anger, resilience, and struggle for identity. His narrative style mimics the chaos of Naomi's unstable life, reflecting the unpredictability of consecutive foster placements. Wheatle also focuses on the use of realism and sarcasm, showing Naomi's emotional detachment, anger and then vulnerability through her interactions.

Hunt begins the novel *One for the Murphys* by introducing the protagonist, Carley Connors, and her unwilling journey to her new foster home. She was still figuring out the reason behind her mother's hospitalisation. Meanwhile, Mrs. MacAvoy, a social worker, was assigned to her and was shifted into a new foster home. Though the family, especially Mrs. Murphy, welcomed her with open arms, Carley could not find her to be a good fit for the family. During her initial days at the Murphys household, she constantly had thoughts of her mother and her well-being.

Hunt demonstrates the emotional turmoil, prejudices in society, and the restorative power of healthy foster care relationships. The novel explores various themes like foster care, resilience, and healing by dealing with the complexities of forming trust and belonging in an unfamiliar environment. It serves as a key to understanding how literature represents foster care not only as a systemic process but also as a deeply personal and emotional journey for children.

Alex Wheatle's *Home Girl* examines the effects of superficial care on the development of children in foster care, offering a poignant view of what foster situations can yield to a child who is accompanied by racial differences. Naomi's views in the novel highlight the critical issues of race, trauma, and systemic neglect, shedding light on the challenges faced by foster children who are overlooked by the system. While Carley finds herself in foster care after a single traumatic experience, Naomi has moved from home to home, and she is resistant to attachment and leery of authority. In her experience in the system, care is often conditional, and trust is a fragile act. Her arrogant and hard-as-nails demeanour is a cover for the instability she has endured. Through Naomi's story, Wheatle highlights the emotional scars that foster youth often carry and their capacity for resilience in the face of adversity.

Problem Statement

The foster care system is intended to be a safe zone for children when they experience difficulties at home, but it fails to meet the emotional and psychological needs of many of them. One increasingly critiqued aspect of this system is the amount of fleeting and checklist-based care that takes place when attention is directed only to procedural requirements such as ensuring a child is fed, housed, and schooled, and not on the essential emotional elements of connection, consistency and belonging. But it is a far cry from the warmth and authenticity that healing and trust-rebuilding foster children need.

This study examines fictional accounts of superficial care in foster care found in the novels *One for the Murphys* by Lynda Mullaly Hunt and *Home Girl* by Alex Wheatle, to explore how tokenism affects the well-being and development of foster children. The emotional impact of this fictional story, told through the eyes of the protagonists, Carley and Naomi, the hurt of temporary placements, emotional disconnection and identity distress are the realities that a lot of kids feel if they are in the care system. These stories bring to light the disconnect, so often overlooked, between symbolic displays of support and the emotional realities of foster youth.

This study, by reviewing the emotional disconnection of foster youth in the safety of the



home, demonstrates the criticality of trauma-conscious and emotionally invested caregiving. The studies seek to highlight the line between providing care as an obligation rather than supplying genuine care with emotional investment and present a cry for systemic changes where foster children are not merely catered for but genuinely supported to heal and be nourished.

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is used to analyse Carley's experiences in order to gain a deeper understanding. The theory highlights the importance of a variety of levels of impact on a person's development, from closest relationships to more general societal structures. In Carley's situation, every tier of Bronfenbrenner's model—the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem—contributes to her conceptions of care, trust, and identity.

Analysing the novel *Home Girl* using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory brings in multilayered implications for the child's emotional and psychological development as affected by the changes in the foster care system. Naomi's struggles illustrate how every system around her, from her immediate environment to the larger social structures surrounding her, reinforces her feelings of alienation, mistrust, and displacement. The microsystem fails her through inconsistent relationships and unstable placements.

The mesosystem reinforces her detachment by providing conflicting interactions between school, foster care, and social services. The exosystem highlights how institutional policies prioritise bureaucracy over genuine care. The macrosystem exposes racial and social biases that further complicate Naomi's experience. The chronosystem reveals how past trauma dictates Naomi's present and future behaviours.

Research Objectives

- To explore surface-level caregiving patterns in the foster care system that do not meet the emotional and psychological needs of children. The goal is to understand how symbolic support affects the child's feeling of safety, trust, and belonging.

- To explore the short- and long-term consequences of unreliable and impersonal foster care on children's emotional, educational, and social development. This involves comprehending the way this kind of care influences their development during childhood and adulthood.
- To suggest valid and sustainable reforms directed toward the consolidation of emotional support and developmental care in foster placements. The emphasis is placed on guaranteeing foster children receive significant, uninterrupted, and integrated care at every stage of life.

Methodology and Research Framework

This study is qualitative and literary-analytical in approach, using close textual analysis to investigate how a significant theme of superficial care is presented in foster-care narratives. It looks at two Young Adult texts—*One for the Murphys* by Lynda Mullaly Hunt and *Home Girl* by Alex Wheatle — and studies how the fictional portrayal of foster children interacts with real-world considerations of emotional neglect, instability, and identity crises in care systems. The study analyses characterisation, narrative construction, and major themes to present a nuanced view of how literature responds to the caregiving practices and their emotional-psychological outcomes.

The study is supported theoretically by Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which provides an interpretation of the multiple influences affecting the protagonists. The model assists in viewing the complications of interactions between the individual and the systems — microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem — that influence the developmental pathways of foster children. An understanding of this care, in its best or worst form, at different levels, will provide a clearer insight into the emotional and social experiences of Carley and Naomi.

Discussion

Fakeness in Kindness and Care

One prominent issue that is common to *One for the Murphys* and *Home Girl* is the neglect and deprivation of care, love and emotional safety. The two protagonists, Carley and Naomi, find themselves



in the foster care system, in which they are looked after with a bit of affection shown here or there. Their first instinct is distrust and emotional withdrawal. It is not because they feel that they don't owe due respect to these against-their-will events; they were accustomed to equating care with conditionality, brief attention span, and performativity. Emotional trauma has taught them to view kindness with suspicion and as a mere act of duty that has to be retracted eventually. Much of the tension, both real and emotional, underscores the fact that symbolic caregiving (care without genuine emotional investment) turns out to be traumatic.

In *One for the Murphys*, Carley is placed with what initially seems to be one of the best foster homes by her social worker. The mother of the Murphy household, Julie Murphy, is heartfelt in her kindness, caring, and openness. Carley, however, initially rejects Julie's warmth and responds with sarcasm. This cannot be taken for contempt; rather, it is emotional self-defence. Carley begins to wonder whether Julie is truly nice or whether she is just doing what she is supposed to do as a foster parent. Her fear of abandonment causes her to "want to build walls", even though she craves the love she has never really received. Because Julie is consistent with her kindness, Carley wonders if it is true. From the long line of superficial care, Carley has been deeply wounded emotionally. As observed in the novel through Carley's words, "I have been drawn to her more, but I'm more afraid, too. Careful not to get too close" (Hunt 65).

Through this work, *One for the Murphys*, Lynda Mullaly Hunt attempts to discuss the internal and external conflicts of foster children's experience and their quest for identity in society. She argues that when kindness and care are withheld for extended periods, it impacts a child's emotional development and builds up a psychological barrier that can leave the child unable or unwilling to recognise or accept honest affection they later receive. This hesitance is a reflection of a much deeper distrust among foster children, based on their experiences with neglect and instability in the past. Hunt draws attention to the conflict and how it impacts a child's capacity to experience quality relationships, perpetuating the notion that early emotional neglect has a permanent effect on their understanding of love, safety, and value.

In *Home Girl*, Naomi's experience differs but echoes the same underlying issue. She travels from one foster placement to another and observes how some foster carers put on a show of compassion but remain emotionally unavailable or culturally disconnected. Her cynicism originates in knowing that her placements are often more about paperwork than about emotional healing. After years inside systems where care is institutional and nameless, her resistance to further commitments is understandable. Naomi lashes out at or mocks caregivers because she sees the artificiality of so many placements; deep down, however, she longs for stability.

This portrayal points to a deeper flaw within foster-care systems in all contexts: the absence of emotionally secure, consistent, and culturally empathetic relationships. It is not enough to merely say that material needs are taken care of or that basic duties are fulfilled. Children like Carley and Naomi need care, but not just surface-level care. This kind of care requires patience, time, and willingness to stay even when the child pushes away. Failure to recognise this need causes foster children to reject kindness, misread affection, and internalise the belief that they do not deserve love.

Homelessness, Temporary Placements and Cultural Identity Crisis

Instability in the foster care system is one of the most significant challenges that foster children face. Frequent changes in placement usually arise from administrative errors, lack of proper training by caregivers, mismatched homes, or misinterpretations of behaviour. For children like Naomi from *Home Girl*, instability means another cycle of disruption: shuffled from one temporary home to another without any emotional closure or clarity. Each move diminishes her trust in the system and reinforces the idea that nothing in her life is permanent. This instability carries a cumulative emotional toll as it fosters an inherent sense of being uprooted, making it more and more difficult for foster children to develop long-term connections or envision themselves with a secure future.

In contrast, Carley in *One for the Murphys* experiences a relatively stable placement, yet her sense of impermanence persists. Despite Julie



Murphy's consistency in love and care, Carley keeps reaffirming that she does not belong in the Murphy household premises. This can be witnessed from the lines "I stand in a place with no space . . . I don't belong here" (Hunt 12-13). The intrusive thought that there would be a time when she had to go back to her biological mother seemed to hover over every moment of relief. This very fear prohibits her from courageously retreating into the arms of those who have been kind to her.

Not even in a "good" placement can the threat of removal or disruption discount an individual's feeling of security. It shows how even the best-designed placements will feel temporary and emotionally unsafe to children unless a long-term trust is built upon through commitment and communication. An article from the Record Journal by Staff Writer Cris Villalonga-Vivoni reports that the number of children entering foster care in Connecticut has decreased by 30 per cent in recent years, but officials say the need for more families remains as they struggle to place the children (Villalonga-Vivoni 2024).

The story of Naomi in *Home Girl* most forcefully communicates the tension between the identity of a White girl and the predominantly Black environments she finds herself being placed into. She wrestles not only with the status of being fostered but also is culturally alienated—the discrimination of hair, unfamiliarity of food, and absence of common language or experience. These foster homes, though well-intended, are mostly unable to foster her cultural development, which leaves Naomi feeling even more alone and misunderstood.

In order to highlight the harsh realities of racism and racist ideologies, Wheatle interjects Martin Luther King's speech between Tony's (foster father of Naomi) and Milton's (Tony's father) arguments. He asserts that the words of King remained a strong support system to the people who were termed 'Black'. Milton urges Tony to read King's writings, which he was forced to preach when he was a young boy. However, Tony tells him, "I know it off by heart. Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children. That's what he said, Dad. Are you listening to me? To all of God's children. Black, white, whatever. Maybe you should read it again" (Wheatle 216).

Cultural mismatches in foster placement might well have lifelong effects. If a child is raised in a household in which her racial, ethnic, or religious rights are ignored or erased, she may develop a conflict within herself about who she really is and where she truly belongs. Lack of cultural continuity is more than just discomfort; it is an interruption of identity that cripples emotional growth and confidence.

Educational Disruption and Academic Gaps

Education is often presented as a stabilising force for children in care, yet in practice, foster children frequently face disrupted schooling, inconsistent support, and lowered expectations. Proper and consistent education is often a distant cry for children in foster care. In *Home Girl*, Naomi's academic life in *Home Girl* is fragmented by her constant relocations. Each move means a new school, new teachers, and new peers, leaving her with little continuity in her learning. Teachers were generally oblivious to her background and interpreted her behaviour as disobedience rather than a response to suffering. Hence, contradictions to feelings cement Naomi's conviction that education systems, much the same as foster systems, are not made for people like her.

In *One for the Murphys*, Carley gets admitted into Smith Middle School on the sixth day of her stay in the Murphy household. The school makes her feel a sense of solitude. She is new to this environment as her own mother never encouraged her to get a proper education. However, her trauma continues to affect her self-confidence and academic performance. Her ability to concentrate, trust authority, and interact with peers is all impacted by her inner emotional turmoil. From a constructive point of view, Carley's learning is lagging not by any lack of capacity but rather due to psychological exhaustion and instability. This necessitates schools becoming trauma-informed complexes that understand and accommodate the special needs of children in care.

Both novels illustrate how foster children are set up to fail academically, not because of a lack of potential, but because of inconsistent support. Missed days of school, emotional distress, and a chaotic home environment are an ideal recipe for wreaking havoc on learning. Besides, children



in care are hardly ever offered any customised educational plans, even though their situation calls for them. The system expects them to perform at par with their fellow kids, but does not bother to address the obstacles in front of them.

A blog post titled “Educational Needs of Foster Youth: New Study Examined Existing Disparities and the Usefulness of Mentoring” (2025) by Ryan and colleagues explored the intersection of foster care placement, special education needs, and behavioural difficulties. This study wove together qualitative narratives from children in foster care and mapped the influential key stakeholders—social workers, school administrators, teachers, and court-appointed advocates—who affect the educational outcomes of foster youth. Their findings underscored the educational disruption experienced by foster youth and made a strong case for the necessity of trauma-informed education.

What is required is not simply access to schools, but access to educational systems that are empathetic, secure, and adaptable. Schools must work in liaison with foster agencies, including psychological counselling, and prepare teachers to identify trauma-related behaviour. Naomi and Carley are intelligent and resilient, yet without an appropriate environment, there will be obstacles to their achievement. When a child is being moved around and forced to start a new school, it means school disruption, which is one of the few adverse effects of placement. Education disruption is, therefore, not simply a consequence of foster care but a reflection of how deficient institutions are at handling emotionally complex learners.

Conclusion

The study proves the effects of superficial care on the development of foster care children. Children with permanent placements are found to show less trauma than children with multiple placements. Multiple placements in certain instances made the child develop resilience, as in the case of Naomi. While in some others, it made the kid lose faith and courage. Such placements also lead to changes in the behaviour of the children, leading to the development of anger and frustration towards their surroundings and society. Kindness and care are

often viewed as restricted or neglected traits among the children in care. They were neither ready to accept genuine kindness nor ready to trust their foster parents during the initial days. This clearly reflects the trauma the child might have faced during her journey in the foster care system. Neither Carley nor Naomi was ever ready to accept kindness and care from their foster parents. They distained trust and only exhibited frustration and trust towards their foster parents. Homelessness is a common reason for the frustration and anger exhibited by foster kids. This makes them feel a sense of abandonment and alienation towards society. Though they were provided with temporary shelter by the foster care system, they cannot completely accept it to be their own home. They expect permanence rather than immediate care, which the foster system fails to provide. The frustration towards not having a home is shown by both Carley and Naomi through their reluctant behaviour. Educational systems frequently fail to recognise and address the unique challenges of foster children. Instead of mentoring, they consider the trauma responses of the kids to be behaviour problems. The deprivation of proper education is yet another cause for the children in care to indulge in informal practices like smoking, fighting, and bullying. Peer relationships among foster children can provide crucial support but may also reinforce maladaptive coping mechanisms, as demonstrated by Naomi’s relationships with Kim and Nats. Linguistic patterns within the educational settings, including Naomi’s use of inappropriate language, reflect deeper struggles with cultural identity and belonging within foster settings. Resilience, hope, and courage are the common traits found in the children who are subjected to fostering. Hope encourages these children to maintain a belief in better possibilities despite disappointments. The adversity faced by the children makes them develop such traits during their journey in the foster care environment. These traits make the foster children develop vulnerability in order to fit into the society. The children also learn to adapt quickly, process complex emotions, and rebuild their sense of security repeatedly. The journey through foster care thus shapes individuals who possess remarkable strength alongside profound sensitivity. In exploring the concurrent lives of foster



children through literature and theory, one can see that superficial care, despite the tendency to conceal it with good intentions, is left with deep emotional deficits. Through performative kindness, repeated displacements, cultural dissonance, scholastic precariousness, or unresolved psychological trauma, the lives of Carley and Naomi illustrate the long-lasting effects of poor caregiving. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory builds upon the way such challenges are not exceptional events but a part of a web of systems that influence a child's development. Both immediate and institutional levels of influence must collaborate to allow foster care to be a healing environment, rather than one of mere holding. To go beyond the symbolic actions, the system has to embrace a more holistic, emotionally grounded, and child-sensitive model that understands the foster children not as stopgap cases, but as children with real needs for care, belonging, and development.

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