



What are the factors associated with educational achievement for children in kinship or foster care: A systematic review



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ABSTRACT

Children in care lag behind their peers on a number of outcome measures, including education. Interventions have been developed to help them close the gap with their peers but these have had limited success to date. One possible reason for this may stem from our lack of understanding about underlying processes and mechanisms.

This paper presents the findings of a systematic review of the factors associated with educational outcomes for children in foster and kinship care. It aims to inform the literature on risk and protective factors and inform the development of future interventions.

Eight major databases and websites were searched between 1990 and 2016 using a combination of mesh terms. Studies were included if they tested the statistical association between any variable and educational outcomes for school age children in foster or kinship care in high-income countries. Children in other placement types were excluded. Titles and abstracts were screened for 7135 studies identified through searches. Full texts were obtained for 298 and 39 were retained for inclusion.

Over 70 factors were identified. For the purposes of the narrative synthesis, factors were categorised into spheres of influence adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework. The findings reveal significant heterogeneity. Male gender, ethnic minority status and special educational needs were consistent predictors of poor educational outcomes, while carers' and young people's aspirations appeared to predict greater success. The findings are discussed with implications for future research and practice.

1. Introduction

Low educational attainment of children in care is a problem which cuts across borders and time (Dill, Flynn, Hollingshead, & Fernandes, 2012; Goddard, 2000; Sebba et al., 2015). Indeed research has documented an important gap between the educational outcomes for children in care and their peers across many geographical contexts (Berridge, 2012; Goddard, 2000; Scherr, 2007; Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008). There are children in care who enjoy academic success (Jackson & Martin, 1998; Rees, 2013), but too many are struggling to keep up and the majority eventually fall behind their peers. Research has also documented that care experienced people are more likely to experience poor mental and physical health, high unemployment and be involved with the criminal justice system (Blome, 1997; Buehler, Orme, Post, & Patterson, 2000; Centre for Social Justice, 2015; Dregan, Brown, & Armstrong, 2011; Dregan & Gulliford, 2012; Forsman, Brännström, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2016; Harris, Jackson, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2009; Vinnerljung & Hjern, 2011). Greater educational success has been linked to better long-term outcomes, so raising educational attainment is an important strategy to

interrupt these negative life trajectories (Forsman et al., 2016; Gorard, Beng, & Davies, 2012).

Recent research has provided useful overviews of the academic attainment of children in care. In a systematic review (limited to literature from the USA), Trout et al. (2008) found that a third or more of children in care performed in the “low to average” or “low” range. There was very little evidence of children in care performing above average. The review also found frequent school changes, high numbers of students repeating a grade, multiple absences and high exclusion¹ rates. A meta-analysis examining the educational experiences of children in care found that they were disproportionately represented in special education, had high rates of grade retention and experienced exclusion at higher rates than their peers (Scherr, 2007). Two other reviews on maltreated children and educational outcomes reached similar conclusions, though these were not limited to children in care nor systematically conducted (Romano, Babchishin, Marquis, & Fréchette, 2014; Stone, 2007).

The reasons for the low attainment of children in care, however, have not been well characterised. Recent reviews have approached the problem from a different perspective, looking principally at

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¹ We use the English term exclusion, to describe all exclusions, suspensions and expulsions from school.

interventions to help raise the attainment of children in care, rather than studying the factors associated with poor educational outcomes. Systematic reviews have assessed the effectiveness of specialised service provision compared to standard out of home placements, with the specialised treatment being either kinship care (Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2014) or multidimensional treatment foster care (MTFC) (MacDonald & Turner, 2008). These reviews report on several outcomes, including education. Only MacDonald and Turner (2008) found a statistically significant effect, which was improved school attendance for girls in MTFC. Three other reviews (Brodie, 2009; Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012; Liabo, Gray, & Mulcahy, 2012) examine the effectiveness of a range of interventions targeting poor educational outcomes for children in care. These report mixed results. Importantly, the reviews make scant mention of the characteristics and care histories of participants and do not to explore whether the results are moderated by age, length of time in care or reason for entry. Review conclusions also suggest that the interventions, with the exception of tutoring, may lack an explicit theory of change and in some cases a strong evidence base. It is therefore critical to gain a more in-depth understanding of key predictors underlying poor academic performance in order to develop sound theories of change and strengthen the evidence base for interventions for this population.

The present review seeks to complement and further existing research by identifying and reviewing predictors of educational outcomes for children in care. In so doing, it extends the findings from reviews on the gap between children in care and their peers as well as providing information on risk correlates and risk factors. Understanding risk and protective factors is essential for the development of effective interventions (Fraser, Richman, Galinsky, & Day, 2009; Rutter, 2000). To support such research recent research working definitions of risk factors have been proposed. Risk correlates are variables that are negatively correlated with each other. When a risk correlate occurs prior to the outcome these are defined as risk (or promotive or protective) factors. The term causal risk factor is used where causality has been established (Kraemer, Kraemer Lowe, & Kupfer, 2005; Murray, Farrington, & Eisner, 2009). The study of risk factors is also an area of increasing interest in the foster care field (see for example Oosterman, Schuengel, Wim Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007). For example, a systematic review of risk factors for placement instability for children in care was undertaken by Oosterman et al. (2007); inclusion criteria were deliberately broad to identify as many risk variables as possible, including risk correlates emanating from cross-sectional studies. The present review takes a similar approach and includes evidence from cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, in order to identify risk correlates as well as risk factors for educational outcomes.

The objective of this review is to describe the current best evidence on the predictors of educational outcomes for children in care. In doing so it seeks to expand the evidence on the education of children in care, and contribute to nascent research in social work on risk factors and more specifically risk factors for young people in care, with the ultimate aim of informing interventions for these children. To date no review has undertaken this task. This review also explores the implications of the findings for future research on risk and protective factors for children in care.

2. Methodology

This review sought to answer the following question: what are the factors associated with educational outcomes for school age children in care? The search strategy and methodology are outlined here.

The following databases and websites were searched for references: ERIC, British Education Index, Australian Education Index, International Bibliography of Social Sciences, Scopus, Medline, PsycInfo, Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, Database of Education Research (EPPI Centre), Campbell and Cochrane Libraries, Social Policy and Practice (part of SCIE), Google and Google Scholar, NFER, C4EO, CERUK Plus, SCIE, The Fostering Network, BAAF, NCB, NSPCC, Joanna Briggs Institute, What Works Clearinghouse, Department for Education, Chapin Hall, Office of

Planning, Research and Evaluation in Administration for Children and Families (USA). Children and Youth Services Review was hand searched and several international experts were consulted. Searches were conducted for publications between 1990 to March 2016. The earlier cut off date was selected to reflect important legal and policy changes that occurred in child welfare in the 1980s as well as the changing population of children in care (Dregan & Gulliford, 2012; Elizabeth Fernandez & Barth, 2010).

The following search strings were used: (“foster care” OR “foster home” OR “foster family” OR “foster parent” OR “foster carer” OR “substitute family” OR “family foster home” OR “kinship care” OR “child in care” OR “children in care” OR “out-of-home care” OR “out of home care” OR “looked after” OR “looked-after”) AND (Educat* or school* or class* or college* or teach* or learn* or train* or diploma* or certificate* or tutor* or achiev* or perform* or academic).

Adaptations to the terms and MeSH searching were implemented, depending on the particularities of each database. Additionally, reference and citation lists in published works and grey literature were reviewed.

Inclusion criteria: Studies were included if these tested the statistical association between any given variable and educational outcomes, including test scores, grades or marks, exam results, academic competency scores, cognitive abilities, attendance, grade retention and exclusions, of children in foster or kinship care in high-income² countries. Children in all other placement types, including residential care were excluded because their educational needs and circumstances differ (Knorth, Harder, Zandberg, & Kendrick, 2008; Sinclair, 2010; Whittaker, 2006). Where it was unclear what placement type children were in, authors were contacted for clarification. The review focused on school age children, so only studies in which the outcome was measured between the ages of 5 and 19 were included. Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies were both included to capture a broad picture of the current evidence on predictors of educational outcomes.

Titles and abstracts were screened for 7137 studies identified through searches. Full texts were obtained for 298 studies, which appeared to meet the inclusion criteria based on information provided in the title and abstract. Thirty-nine were retained for inclusion, seven had samples which partly overlapped; these are included here because they test associations for different factors. In preparation of this review, the authors followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) criteria (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & Group, 2009), see Section 3.3. The table in Appendix A provides a list of included studies. Meta-analysis was considered, but heterogeneity was too great to do this as there were too few studies analysing the same factor and outcome that also used a similar methodology (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2010).

3. Description of included and excluded studies

3.1. Description of included studies (see Appendix A for details)

The majority of identified studies were conducted in the USA ($k = 24$). There were five studies from Canada, five from the UK, four from Australia, and one from Sweden.

The 39 included studies comprised a total of 88,775 students. All studies reported on participant age: some included school age children of any age (5 to 18 years), while others focused on a cohort within one grade level or a smaller specified age range. One study did not report on the gender split (Mitic & Rimer, 2002) and one used an all female sample (Pears, Kim, & Leve, 2012). Remaining studies had samples that ranged from 40% to 62% female. Six studies did not provide data on the ethnicity of participants. In the studies that did, it was not reported whether the distribution was representative of the local or national

² Countries were defined by income in accordance with the World Bank classification. Only high-income countries were considered because children's services and foster care operate in broadly similar contexts in these countries.

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