



Context matters: Experimental evaluation of home-based tutoring for youth in foster care



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ABSTRACT

A large body of work has documented significant educational delays and other challenges among children in foster care. In response, child welfare agencies have developed different policies and practices to help monitor, support, and advocate for foster children's educational needs. An important example of these efforts is tutoring programs for children in foster care. The current study uses random assignment to evaluate the impact of an individualized, home-based tutoring program on the academic performance and educational outcomes of a group of adolescent foster youth in Los Angeles County, CA. Data were collected via multi-wave, in-person interviews of 465 foster youth. No statistically significant impacts are found on any included measures of academic ability or other educational outcomes. Substantial proportions of both control and program groups report receipt of tutoring from school, which may partly account for the finding of no effect.

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1. Introduction

A large body of work has documented significant educational delays and other challenges among children in foster care (i.e., substitute care). Studies have found that many foster children perform academically below grade level, and experience higher rates of learning disabilities and special education participation, than their non-foster-care peers (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Burley & Halpern, 2001; Castrechini, 2009; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora et al., 2005). Foster children have also been found to experience relatively higher levels of school-related behavior problems, including suspensions and expulsions (Castrechini, 2009; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003; Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004; Smithgall, Matthew, Yang, & Goerge, 2005; Zima et al., 2000).

Partly as a result of the residential instability that accompanies placement into foster care, foster children have likewise been found to experience higher levels of school mobility and absenteeism (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Castrechini, 2009; Conger & Rebeck, 2001; Frerer, Sosenko, Pellegrin, Manchik, & Horowitz, 2013; Smithgall et al., 2004; Zorc et al., 2013), which can affect foster children's educational progress directly, by virtue of missed school time, or indirectly, by attenuating social, educational, and behavioral supports (Obradovic et al., 2009; Reynolds, Chen, & Herbers, 2009; South, Haynie, & Bose, 2007). Not surprisingly, foster children have been found to experience higher levels of grade retention, and lower rates of high school graduation, than non-foster children (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Blome, 1997; Burley & Halpern, 2001;

Castrechini, 2009; Courtney et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2006; Smithgall et al., 2004; WA DSHS, 2001; Zima et al., 2000).

The long-term consequences of these educational deficits for youth emancipating from care can be significant. Indeed, evidence suggests that emancipated youth experience lower rates of college enrollment, lower levels of income and higher rates of unemployment, and higher rates of poverty and homelessness, than their same-age peers (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2009; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Dworsky, & Courtney, 2000; Goerge et al., 2002; Mangine, Royse, Wiehe, & Nietzel, 1990).

As evidence of the scope and impact of foster children's educational deficits has become clearer, child welfare agencies have developed different policies and practices to help monitor, support, and advocate for foster children's educational needs (Sommer, Wu, & Mauldon, 2009).¹ An important example of these efforts is tutoring programs for children in foster care.

In the current paper, we first briefly describe several important dimensions of tutoring program models. We then summarize the respective bodies of research concerning the effectiveness of tutoring programs among the general population of at-risk children and children placed in foster care. Finally, we describe and discuss the findings from a random-assignment evaluation of an individualized, home-based tutoring program for foster youth in Los Angeles County, CA.

¹ Examples include dedicated staff positions to monitor and facilitate foster children's education (e.g., educational liaisons), court-based educational advocates, specialized programs operated in partnership with local schools, and administrative policies and processes designed to encourage information sharing and service coordination between schools and child welfare agencies (Sommer et al., 2009).

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1.1. Typology of tutoring

Tutoring programs serving the general population of youth (i.e., not differentiated by foster care status) can be characterized along several different dimensions. First, programs vary with respect to the objectives and focus of their curricula. For instance, many programs are targeted to specific developmental stages or subject areas. Also, programs can be individualized in response to students' broader academic needs (e.g., Keller, 1968) or, conversely, designed specifically to support children's contemporaneous school curriculum and assignments (i.e., instructional tutoring). A third model, known as strategic tutoring, uses elements of both the individualized and instructional tutoring models, while also focusing on helping students to develop classroom and study skills (Hock, Pulvers, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2001; Hock et al., 1995).

The second feature differentiating tutoring programs is the tutoring modality, or setting. For example, although many programs are based on a one-to-one tutor–student model, which may help to make tutoring more responsive to students' needs, the relatively high cost of the one-to-one model has led to the development of group-based tutoring programs (Harper & Schmidt, 2012; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). Another important aspect of the tutoring milieu is the physical context in which tutoring is provided. For example, tutoring programs can be provided in a student's home, which can facilitate collaboration with a student's parents (Gordon, 2009; Gordon, Morgan, Ponticell, & O'Malley, 2004), or outside a student's home; examples include tutoring programs delivered during school time or within the context of broader after-school programs (Halpern, 2002; Lauer et al., 2006; Sandler & Stalters, 2008).

Third, tutoring programs vary with respect to the frequency and duration of tutoring. For example, in a review of volunteer tutoring programs, Ritter, Barnett, Denny, and Albin (2009) describe weekly frequency and duration ranging from three 15-minute sessions to 4-hour-long sessions per week. Program durations varied from four weeks to two years.

Finally, tutoring programs vary with respect to the qualifications and remuneration of tutors. At one end of the spectrum are programs that use adult volunteers who, in addition to volunteering their time, generally do not have any teaching qualifications or professional training (Baker, Rieg & Clendaniel, 2006; Ritter et al., 2009; Schinke, Cole, & Poulin, 2000). At the other end of the spectrum are programs that use certified teachers as tutors (Shanahan & Barr, 1995; Wasik & Slavin, 1993).

1.2. Effectiveness of tutoring among at risk populations

A number of studies have found tutoring to have significant impacts on the academic achievement of at-risk children (Cohen, Kulik, & Kulik, 1982; Lauer et al., 2006; Ritter et al., 2009; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). With respect to the program dimensions described above, the existing empirical evidence is somewhat mixed. Nevertheless, several general conclusions are warranted. In brief, small-group and one-on-one tutoring programs have, in general, been found to be more effective than large-group tutoring programs (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, & Moody, 2000; Posner & Vandell, 1994; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). Among at-risk populations in particular, there is evidence that one-on-one programs are more effective than small- or large-group programs (Lauer et al., 2006). Individualized and strategic tutoring models appear to be more effective than instructional tutoring models (Hock, Pulvers, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2001; Sandler & Stalters, 2008). Also, there is considerable evidence supporting the effectiveness of after-school (i.e., out-of-home) models, especially for at-risk children (Hamilton & Klein, 1998; Lauer et al., 2006; Posner & Vandell, 1994; Schinke et al., 2000). Further, although studies suggest that programs staffed either by volunteers or by paid professionals can be effective, there is also evidence that programs that use certified teachers have larger relative impacts than programs using para-professionals or lay volunteers (Ritter et al., 2009; Shanahan & Barr, 1995; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). Finally, the balance of

evidence concerning the frequency and duration of tutoring programs suggests that the largest impacts are observed where tutoring is provided during multiple sessions per week over a period of about two to twelve months (Cohen et al., 1982; Lauer et al., 2006; Ritter et al., 2009; Wasik & Slavin, 1993).

1.3. Effectiveness of tutoring for children in care

To date, there have been only a very limited number of evaluations of tutoring programs for foster children, with mixed or inconclusive results. Two studies examined the impact of Maloney's (1998) *Teach Your Children Well* model, which is an example of a strategic tutoring program. The first of these studies (Flynn, Marquis, Paquet, Peeke, & Aubry, 2012), examined the impact of a model in which volunteer foster parents delivered tutoring to a primary- or middle-school-age child in their care. The second study (Harper & Schmidt, 2012) examined the impact of a small-group tutoring model using volunteer university students as tutors for primary- and middle-school-age children. The results of these studies suggest positive impacts on a subset of competencies, but not for others. Interestingly, each study found positive impacts for different sets of competencies, suggesting an interaction between tutoring dimensions and competency type. For example, Flynn et al. (2012) reported a positive impact on math computation, but not on spelling. In contrast, Harper and Schmidt (2012) reported a positive impact on spelling, but not on mathematics. A third study (Staub & Lenz, 2000, cited in Hock, Schumaker, & Deshler, 2001), examined the impacts of a strategic tutoring model using trained tutors for foster youth. In contrast to the aforementioned studies by Flynn et al. (2012) and Harper and Schmidt (2012), both of which randomly assigned subjects to tutoring and control groups, the group of youth who received tutoring was matched to a comparison group. Findings suggested modest impacts on achievement test scores and self-reported grade-point averages.

2. Current study

The goal of the current study is to evaluate the impact of an individualized, home-based tutoring program on the academic performance and educational outcomes of a group of adolescent foster youth in Los Angeles County, CA. This evaluation was undertaken as part of a larger multi-site study of programs for foster youth that are funded through the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, which was established by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. In addition to the tutoring program described here, this multi-site study examined three of other programs, including a life skills' training program, an employment support program, and an intensive case-management model. The goal of these studies was to evaluate the impact of typical programs as they were currently operating, not to develop and evaluate new programs, which might have little resemblance to the universe of interventions currently funded by the Chafee program.

3. Program description

At the time of this study, the ESTEP-Tutoring program was administered by the Human Development and Youth Services (HDYS) division of the Community College Foundation (TCCF) through a contract with the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services.² The primary objectives of the ESTEP Tutoring program were to (1) improve the reading and math skills of foster youth, ages 14 and 15, who were one to three years behind grade level in reading or math and (2) empower youth to use other educational services and resources that may have been available to them.

² As a result of budget cuts, the ESTEP Tutoring program was discontinued subsequent to the conclusion of this study.

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