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An exploration of placement-related psychosocial influences on school engagement among adolescents in foster care

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ABSTRACT

There is ample evidence that experiencing foster care in childhood often predicts grim outcomes in adulthood, including under-education and resulting poverty and dysfunction. However, little is known about the exact mechanisms through which foster care corrodes academic trajectories, specifically. The current study uses a nationally representative sample of adolescent foster youth (i.e., NSCAW II) to test a model of the influences of placement-related factors on school engagement – namely, foster youth's perceptions of security in their foster placements, their reports of education-specific involvement by foster caregivers, and the mediating potential of adolescents' expectations for their future. Results indicate that adolescents' feelings of "placement security" were linked to their future expectations of positive life outcomes and, ultimately, school engagement. Results also suggest that while educational involvement by foster caregivers was not important for future expectations or social school engagement, it may be related to the more explicitly cognitive aspects of school engagement (i.e., assignment completion, effort, etc.). These findings offer insight into relations between foster care-specific factors and school engagement – a known predictor of academic achievement and eventual educational attainment. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

1. Introduction

Each year, hundreds of thousands of youth are removed from abusive and neglectful homes and served by the U.S. foster care system, and these numbers have steadily risen – from 638,041 in fiscal year 2013 to 690,548 in 2017 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Unfortunately, however, evidence suggests that the adult lives of these children are not spared. Studies have found that by their mid-twenties, nearly half of former foster youth (also called "foster care alumni", "alumni of care", or "alumni", for short) are unemployed or severely under-employed (e.g., Okpych & Courtney, 2014), and many report significant financial hardship (e.g., Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). Those who are employed make significantly less than their non-fostered peers each year, on average (Courtney et al., 2010), and are less likely to have full-time positions or jobs that carry benefits, such as paid vacation or health insurance (Courtney et al., 2007). Over 80% of male alumni are arrested in adulthood and over 60% are convicted of a crime, compared to 17% and 10% of males in the general population, respectively (Courtney et al., 2007). Over 70% of female and 30% of male alumni receive need-based public assistance – a number that jumps to nearly 90% for custodial parents – and all are more likely than their peers to experience homelessness (Courtney et al., 2010; Pecora et al., 2006). Further, about 10% of children born to former foster youth will enter foster care themselves, perpetuating this ruinous cycle (Courtney et al., 2010).

In attempting to discern *why* outcomes for former foster youth are often grim, extensive literature points to educational deficits as one primary factor exacerbating life-course risks. Large representative studies have indicated poor educational outcomes for children in foster care (e.g., Programs, 2005; Courtney et al., 2010). Further, these studies have deemed former foster youth an educationally vulnerable population, reporting alarming numbers without a high school diploma or GED (20–50%), and a mere 7% with two years of college education (Courtney et al., 2007, 2010; Pecora et al., 2006). Decades of research reinforce the many benefits of higher levels of education, which include lower reliance on public assistance, increased earning power, lower chances of incarceration, and better overall health (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). A large-scale study of older youth transitioning from foster care found that a four- or even two-year degree predicted sizable benefits for earnings and employment, and obtaining even just a high school

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diploma predicted greater earning power (Okpych & Courtney, 2014). Despite this knowledge and despite the large investments in interventions for foster children, the literature to date has largely failed to identify the mechanisms behind these dismal educational outcomes. While prior efforts have implicated lower educational attainment as a likely culprit for poor outcomes for alumni of care, and have even suggested foster placement to be an additional risk factor for maltreated children, these studies do not tell us *why* these educational deficits exist or *how* they occur. The present study takes an important step toward addressing this gap by exploring two potential sources of these deficits in foster youth: foster caregivers' education-specific involvement and foster youths' feelings of security in foster placements. Further, we explore the potential for adolescent's expectations of positive life outcomes (i.e., academic and economic success in adulthood) to mediate associations between these placement-related influences and school engagement – a reliable and malleable predictor of educational success.

1.1. Foster placement and educational outcomes

Prior studies of foster home characteristics have deemed foster placement an additional risk factor for already-vulnerable children (e.g., Bruskas, 2008; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). Compared with their peers, foster youth often exhibit lower grades and test scores, more absences, and greater chances of being placed in special education classes (e.g., Kirk & Day, 2011; Wiegmann, Putnam-Hornstein, Barrat, Magruder, & Needell, 2014). While studies have found that 70–95% of foster youth say they hope to go to college (McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003; Rassen, Cooper, & Mery, 2010), only about 10% of former foster youth enroll in post-secondary institutions at all, with a smaller percentage leaving with a degree (Courtney et al., 2010).

While prior studies have explored relations between characteristics of foster placements and foster children's academically-threatening behavior, the links between foster placement-specific factors and educational outcomes for foster youth remain unclear (Orme & Buehler, 2001). Correlational research has suggested that foster children's educational outcomes are affected by mid-school-year moves, the inability to transfer credits between schools, reduced attendance due to court dates and adjustments to new homes, and disjointed school experiences (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Bruskas, 2008; Kools & Kennedy, 2003; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005) – all of which may lead to general dissatisfaction or disengagement with school. While these disruptions caused by movement between placements are prevalent and problematic for foster youth, experiences within foster placement settings are also important to understand, as, of course, youth typically spend more time in placements than moving between them (Orme & Buehler, 2001).

1.2. Educational involvement by caregivers

Investigations into the predictors of children's academic success have long found caregivers' educational involvement to be critical in promoting learning and positive school-related adjustment (e.g., Day & Dotterer, 2018; Fan & Williams, 2010; Henderson, 1987; Hill, Tyson, & Bromell, 2009; Lee & Smith, 1999). Caregivers' education-specific involvement includes actions such as helping with homework, having conversations about school and assignments, or even being involved with school programming. Prior research has found that caregivers with various demographic characteristics (i.e., race, level of education, and socioeconomic status) exhibit differing levels of educational support and involvement in their children's schooling, and have even found these differences to factor into achievement gaps among elementary school children (e.g., Lee & Bowen, 2006). While there has been much less work investigating the effects of educational involvement among foster parents specifically, existing work suggests that foster parents' educational involvement may help to buffer against the negative effects of foster care to support educational functioning for foster youth (e.g., Bass, 2017; Wells, 2006). Further supporting this point is a series of small qualitative studies of college-educated or enrolled adults who experienced foster care as children or adolescents. Many of these alumni attributed their educational achievements (and overall adjustment) to support and structure provided by foster caregivers (Morton, 2015; Rios, 2009; Schofield, 2002). Unfortunately, studies of foster families have often reported uniquely complex family dynamics that are often largely authoritarian or rigid, possibly due to frequent turnover of household members (i.e., foster children) and the many and unique needs (i.e., emotional, behavioral, or financial) of children in the home (Garcia, Pecora, Harachi, & Aisenberg, 2012; Orme & Buehler, 2001). Overall, however, little has been done to explore the roles of temporary foster caregivers in shaping educational achievement among the foster youth in their care.

1.3. Placement security

Despite the poor environments that might lead to the removal of a child from his or her family of origin, being separated from primary caregivers and placed in foster care can be, on its own, incredibly stressful and disorienting. As such, foster children are prone to problematic emotional and behavioral expressions that can interfere with adjustment and progress – both in their foster placements and in school settings (Sawyer, Carbone, Searle, & Robinson, 2007; Van Andel, Grietens, Strijker, Van der Gaag, & Knorth, 2012). Multiple studies of foster youth well-being have shown better educational and overall adjustment in foster youth with greater placement stability, and among those placed in supportive, child-centered home environments (Clemens, Klopfenstein, LaIonde, & Tis, 2018; Orme & Buehler, 2001; Pecora et al., 2006). Studies of foster family functioning report developmental consequences of weak attachments to foster caregivers, frequent placement disruptions, and unsupportive or authoritarian home environments – all of which can be considered forms of placement-related insecurities (Garcia et al., 2012; Orme & Buehler, 2001). These studies find that children who report low levels of security in their foster placements (i.e., are threatened with being moved, feel as though their placement is temporary, do not feel like part of the family, or do not feel cared for by their foster caregivers) show higher levels of academically-threatening problem behaviors (i.e., internalizing and externalizing behaviors).

The authors of a meta-analysis of placement-related interventions for foster children concluded that it is important that children feel welcome, secure, and well-understood in their foster placements, and that it is vital to address feelings of uncertainty related to permanency of placement (Van Andel et al., 2012). While the aforementioned studies are not necessarily specific to educational outcomes, they suggest that feelings of insecurity specific to foster placements have negative impacts on adjustment in general. Further, college-educated alumni have reported that feelings of belonging and family membership were highly important to their adjustment in long-term foster placements (Schofield, 2002), offering evidence for the importance of placement security in long-term adjustment and eventual educational attainment. These findings are consistent with the propositions of the emotional security hypothesis of Davies and Cummings (1994) – namely, that the overall adjustment and long-term well-being of children are contingent upon feeling secure in important contexts of their social ecology, including in relationships within their families and households.

1.4. School engagement and future expectations

Promoting educational attainment requires a thorough understanding of the constructs that present in school-aged children and lead to eventual educational attainment as adults (i.e., high school credential and post-secondary degrees). For foster youth in particular, who typically experience frequent moves and repeated grades, and whose school performance records are often incomplete or even incorrect