



# Academic engagement and performance: Estimating the impact of out-of-home care for maltreated children



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 5 December 2012

Received in revised form 14 February 2013

Accepted 15 February 2013

Available online 27 February 2013

### Keywords:

Foster care

Education

Maltreatment

Out of home care

Achievement

Engagement

## ABSTRACT

Using data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being II, the authors examined whether being placed in foster care was associated with school engagement and performance. The authors used propensity score matching to compare children who had similar demographic characteristics, maltreatment histories, and prior levels of school engagement. Children who were in foster care at wave 2 were found to have higher levels of cognitive engagement in school compared to children who were maltreated but never removed from their homes. It is recommended that children who are maltreated but remain in their familial home receive additional intervention related to their educational engagement.

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## 1. Introduction

The link between child maltreatment and poor academic outcomes has been widely studied, with numerous studies suggesting a link between abuse and neglect and negative academic outcomes (Coohey, Renner, Hua, Zhang, & Whitney, 2011; Crozier & Barth, 2005; Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993; Jonson-Reid, Drake, Kim, Porterfield, & Han, 2004; Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996; Kinard, 1999; Kurtz, Gaudin, Wodarski, & Howing, 1993; Leiter, 2007; Leiter & Johnsen, 1994, 1997; Perez & Widom, 1994).

Over 400,000 maltreated children are currently under the supervision of state or local child welfare agencies (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2012), and there has been widespread recognition that children in foster care academically underperform their peers. Compared to non-foster youth, children in foster care are more likely to be placed in special education, to repeat a grade or be suspended or expelled, and less likely to graduate or attend college (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004; Pecora et al., 2006; Wolanin, 2005). The recognition of the poor educational outcomes for children in foster care has resulted in the creation of such programs as Independent Living Programs and Educational Vouchers under the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. This legislation was intended to help youths who were aging out of the foster care system get access to services to help them transition to independence. Such services

include additional education or training, housing assistance, counseling and other services. Yet, it remains unclear whether poor educational attainment among foster youth is primarily attributable to foster care itself, or to the precipitating abuse and neglect that led to foster care placement and other correlates thereof. No studies to date have used a national sample to compare the academic outcomes of children who are in foster care to those who are maltreated but remain in their homes.

In the current study, we use data from the second cohort of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being to estimate the effect of being placed in foster care on school engagement and performance. We seek to answer two primary questions: (1) Do children who are placed in foster care have differential rates of school engagement and performance compared to children who are maltreated but not placed in foster care?; and (2) Do these findings remain significant after considering prior foster care placement, demographic characteristics, and prior school engagement levels? To answer these questions, we use propensity score matching and logistic regression to estimate the effect of foster care on school engagement and performance. In the absence of the option of a random assignment mechanism, an unbiased estimate of causal effect is unattainable; however, propensity score matching (PSM) provides a superior estimate compared to standard (unmatched) regression. While both standard regression and PSM analyses attempt to account for the variables associated with the treatment selection mechanism, PSM ensures that there is sufficient overlap on those variables between the treatment and control groups, thus providing groups that are statistically equivalent on all measured characteristics.

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## 2. Background

Childhood abuse and neglect is associated with a host of negative academic outcomes, including: lower test scores and GPA (Coohey et al., 2011; Crozier & Barth, 2005; Eckenrode et al., 1993; Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996; Kinard, 1999; Kurtz et al., 1993; Leiter, 2007; Leiter & Johnsen, 1994, 1997; Perez & Widom, 1994), absenteeism (Leiter, 2007; Leiter & Johnsen, 1997), grade retention (Eckenrode et al., 1993; Kinard, 1999; Leiter & Johnsen, 1997), behavioral problems (Eckenrode et al., 1993; Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996; Leiter & Johnsen, 1997), and entrance into special education programs (Jonson-Reid et al., 2004; Kinard, 1999; Leiter & Johnsen, 1997). The association between maltreatment and poor performance in school has been explained by some as a second order effect stemming from the impact of maltreatment on children's social, cognitive and emotional development. Specifically, maltreatment is linked to increased behavioral problems (English et al., 2005) and inability to concentrate while in class (Pollack, Vardi, Bechner, & Curtin, 2005), both of which can affect school outcomes.

Children who are maltreated and subsequently removed from their homes and placed in foster care may be at an increased risk for poor academic outcomes for several reasons. First, of all the children who come into contact with the child welfare system, children placed in foster care are likely to be those experiencing the most severe abuse or neglect or living in the highest risk environments. Thus, the impact of maltreatment on foster children's academic performance may be more severe because they experienced more severe maltreatment. Second, unlike the majority of maltreated children who remain in their homes, children in foster care experience a disruption to their living situations, which coincides with a potential loss or reduction in family support, and a higher likelihood that they will move schools (Blome, 1997; Burley & Halpern, 2001; Pecora et al., 2006). However, children in foster care are more likely to receive services, such as counseling or mental health treatment, to address the effects of maltreatment than are children who are maltreated but remain in their homes. Thus, foster care placement may improve school performance, indirectly through the accompanying service provision.

Ecological theory stipulates that children develop within multiple, interdependent systems, and that the immediate family system, that in which the child has relationships with caring adults, is the most important for a child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Children who are in foster care may be at additional risk for having low school engagement and performance because of the disruption in their family system, causing them to withdraw from other systems. On the other hand, to the extent that the relationships with caring adults the child has established are with teachers or other school personnel, the child may not be as affected by a foster care placement, or may rely more heavily on such connections subsequent to the placement.

A number of studies have documented the negative academic outcomes of children in foster care. Children and youth in foster care have lower achievement scores (Burley & Halpern, 2001), drop out of high school at a higher rate (Blome, 1997; Burley & Halpern, 2001), are less likely to have completed a GED or be in a college preparatory high school track (Blome, 1997), are more likely to receive special education and to repeat grades (Burley & Halpern, 2001), and have more discipline problems in school (Blome, 1997). Yet, these studies have some important methodological limitations that must be considered. Specifically, these studies compare foster youth to the general student population and have been limited in their ability to control or match students on key confounding variables. Most of the existing research on foster care and education compares children in foster care to other students in their classroom or national standards (Stone, 2007). Children in foster care are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have already suffered the trauma of maltreatment, both of which are associated with poorer academic outcomes. Thus, while prior findings provide a valuable description of the academic performance of foster youth, they cannot provide insight into the effect of foster care placement.

To account for the disadvantaged backgrounds, three prior studies utilize matching techniques to match children in foster care to similar peers (Berzin, 2008; Blome, 1997; Buehler, Orme, Post & Patterson, 2000). However, Blome (1997) matches children based on age, gender, and race and Buehler et al. (2000) match adults who retrospectively report they were in foster care to other adults based on race, gender, parent's educational attainment, and the presence of a stepparent. Berzin (2008) matches on multiple factors related to the child (race, sex, health, disability status), socioeconomic status, and the home environment, including variables regarding conflict within the household. Berzin (2008) finds that the risk factors for entering foster care, and not the placement itself, account for the associations between foster care and educational outcomes that were identified in past research. Although this study comes closer to matching on maltreatment status, it does not have a specific measure for child maltreatment. Additionally, the study uses a relatively small sample ( $n = 136$ ), and may not have sufficient power to detect differences between the groups. Since none of the existing studies match on factors related to maltreatment, the associations between foster care status and educational outcomes are likely confounded by the presence of maltreatment.

Only a few studies have considered the unique role that foster care placement might play in academic outcomes (Coohey et al., 2011). Two studies indicated that a change in parents was associated with poorer academic outcomes for children (Boden, Horwood, & Fergusson, 2007; Coohey et al., 2011). While Coohey et al. (2011) used a sample of all children who had contact with child protective services and specifically examined children who were in out of home care, Boden et al. (2007) used a birth cohort study and included a variable for changes in parents which included "separation/divorce, reconciliation, fostering, remarriage, or death" (pg. 1105). Changes in parents related to separation/divorce, reconciliation, remarriage, and death likely have very different impacts for children than parent changes resulting from placement in foster care.

Successful adaptation in school is an essential component of individual development (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). For some children, school is the first environment in which a child is expected to function in an environment that does not include their immediate family. A child's ability to engage in this environment, including aligning himself or herself with a peer group, succeeding academically, and being motivated to participate and achieve in the school context are all important components to this developmental task (Alexander, Entwisle, Blyth, & McAdoo, 1988). The term "school engagement" has been used in the research literature to encompass three dimensions: "Behavioral engagement draws on the idea of participation; it includes involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities...Emotional engagement encompasses positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school...Cognitive engagement draws on the idea of investment; it incorporates thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills" (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004, p.60). Children who are maltreated may have lower engagement in their schools because of the high rates of absenteeism, and the social and emotional challenges associated with being maltreated. The experience of foster care may have an additional effect on school engagement above and beyond the effect of maltreatment. Children in foster care are more likely to move between schools than children who remain in their homes, increasing the challenges of finding a peer group to associate with, and teachers to form connections with, and maintaining associations with extra-curricular activities. On the other hand, as mentioned previously, children in foster care are more likely to receive services which may potentially increase school engagement by addressing preexisting academic and social struggles.

School engagement has been found to be a precursor for academic success (Finn, 1989; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Therefore, engagement is potentially an important intervention opportunity — understanding

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