



Interventions aiming to improve school achievements of children in out-of-home care: A scoping review

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ABSTRACT

The educational underachievement of children in out-of-home care has been known for decades. In this scoping review, we compiled and analyzed – with a narrative approach – evaluated interventions that aimed to improve foster children's school achievements. Despite a comprehensive searching strategy, only eleven relevant studies were found, indicating that little has been done in intervention research to improve educational outcomes for children in public care. Nine out of the eleven interventions reported some positive results. Literacy was improved in most studies, while evaluated attempts to enhance numeracy skills yielded mixed results. Positive results came from a range of different interventions, e.g. tutoring projects and structured individualized support. We conclude that most focused interventions seem to improve foster children's poor academic achievements, but tutoring projects have so far the best empirical support from evaluations with rigorous designs. Also there's a definite need for more intervention research.

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1. Introduction

For decades, research from many countries has consistently reported that children placed in out-of-home care perform poorly at school and have high excess risks (compared to majority population peers) of entering adulthood with only compulsory school education (e.g., Barth, 1990; Blome, 1997; Bohman & Sigvardsson, 1980a, 1980b; Cashmore & Paxman, 1996; Cheung & Heath, 1994; Christoffersen, 1993; Clausen & Kristofersen, 2008; Cook, 1994; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Dumaret, 1985; Egelund et al., 2008; Festinger, 1983; Jackson, 1994; Ottosen & Christensen, 2008; Pecora et al., 2006; Runyan & Gould, 1985; Social Exclusion Unit, 2003; Stein & Carey, 1987; Stone, 2007; Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008; Veland, 1993; Vinnerljung, 1996; Vinnerljung, Öman, & Gunnarson, 2005; Weiner & Weiner, 1990). A recent series of Swedish national cohort studies (focusing mainly on children in long term out-of-home care), and one intervention study, have painted a more detailed, but darker picture:

- Foster children have lower school performance than peers with similar cognitive capacity, that is they perform below their potential (Tideman, Vinnerljung, Hintze, & Aldenius Isaksson, 2011; Vinnerljung, Berlin, & Hjern, 2010).
- Considerably fewer go on to secondary and post-secondary education, compared to peers with similar cognitive capacity – and

compared to peers with similar school achievements in primary school (Vinnerljung, Berlin, & Hjern, 2010). This is in stark contrast with the situation for internationally adopted children in Sweden. They perform better in primary school, and have better educational attainment in young adulthood than non-adopted peers with similar cognitive capacity – independently of the adoptive parents' education (Dalen et al., 2008; Lindblad, Dalen, Rasmussen, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2009; Vinnerljung, Lindblad, Hjern, Rasmussen, & Dalen, 2010).

- It is not uncommon for carers, social workers and teachers to have pessimistic expectations on foster children's school performance, expectations that do not rhyme with the children's actual cognitive capacity when tested (Tideman et al., 2011).
- There are strong links between foster children's poor school achievements and unfavorable outcomes later in life, after controlling for birth parental characteristics, time in care and age at placement. Youth that have spent at least a third of their formative years in state care have very high excess risks, compared to general population peers, for e.g. suicidal behavior, severe criminality, substance abuse and welfare dependency in young adulthood. In regression models, roughly 50% of these excess risks can be statistically "explained" by poor school performance in primary school (Berlin, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2011; Vinnerljung, Berlin, & Hjern, 2010).

In spite of all international research efforts, and the dismal and alarming results that have been consistently reported, there seems to be surprisingly few examples of evaluated attempts to do something about foster children's poor school achievements. Intervention

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studies are scarce, and often difficult to locate since some have been reported only in “grey literature”. Tideman et al. (2011) found only three such studies after a non-systematic literature search.

In this paper we report the results from a scoping review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) on evaluated interventions aiming to improve foster children's school achievements, a review that yielded eleven such studies. The review focused on three questions:

1. What has been done in the field of intervention research, targeting school achievements of children in out-of-home care?
2. Which interventions have shown positive results, and which has not?
3. What characterized those interventions that reported positive results?

2. Method

We followed as far as possible the general guidelines of a systematic review, that is to say we strived to identify, appraise and roughly synthesize all the relevant studies (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). But it would be an inflated claim to call our paper a “systematic review, since e.g. this paper does not contain systematic assessments of inter-rater reliability or risk of bias. This review is better characterized as a “scoping review”, taking a broader approach and including not only studies with experimental and quasi experimental design (as outlined by Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Since intervention research in this field appeared to be scarce – judging from other publications (e.g. Tideman et al, 2010), this approach seemed appropriate.

2.1. Inclusion criteria

For studies to be included in the review they had to meet the following criteria:

- The study is an evaluation of an intervention aiming to improve school achievements
- The intervention is targeting children in primary school age (6–15 years), placed in out-of-home care
- Outcome measures are school achievements, measured with grades, age standardized measurements or teacher assessments in a longitudinal design
- The intervention is evaluated with either
 - Randomized controlled trial (RCT) with pre- and post-intervention measures
 - Quasi-experimental design with pre- and post-intervention measures
 - Pre- and post-intervention measures with age standardized assessment instruments, without a comparison group
- The study is published in English or in a Scandinavian language (Swedish, Danish, Norwegian)

If a study did not fulfill all criteria, it was excluded from the review. Due to the dearth of studies, we included:

- Studies regardless of year of publication
- Unpublished studies/“grey literature”, that is studies that had not been published in scientific journals after a referee process, e.g. government/agency reports (Hart, 2004).
- Studies that used pre-post measurements without a comparison group, but had used age and national population standardized assessment instruments. These studies have a lower evidence value than more rigorous designs (e.g. RCT's), and are therefore usually not included in systematic reviews with meta-analyses (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). But considering the dearth of studies that had been previously reported we included interventions that had been evaluated also with this “softer” design, although more susceptible to bias (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Subsequently, this review has no conclusive claims.

2.2. Search strategy

Systematic searches were made in the electronic databases SocIndex and ERIC (see appendix for a detailed documentation of the search strategy). With the help of an information specialist, a broad approach was taken, linking several search terms for *outcome* (school achievements) and *population* (children in out-of-home care). *Supplementary searches* were made in the electronic databases Cochrane Library, Campbell Library and NHS Evidence as well as in Ebsco, ProQuest and Google Scholar. The search terms used were the same as above, combined with keywords related to interventions such as: *interven**, *improv**, “*school program**”, *tutor** and “*carer involvement**”.

We also *contacted experts* in the field (seven different researchers from Scandinavia and North America) via e-mail with an inquiry for copies of relevant reports or other input. Efforts were made to track down unpublished reports, by *searching websites* representing already known intervention programs and organizations associated with improving looked after children's school achievements. To locate additional relevant studies, all relevant *references from identified studies were examined*.

2.3. Data charting and analysis

The reviewed studies were classified into categories of study design, population, intervention program, outcome measure and main results. A systematic literature review often results in a meta-analysis (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). However, due to variability in study design and outcome measures, a meta-analysis was not suitable for this review. Therefore the synthesis is by definition *narrative* and descriptive, rather than statistical (Pawson, 2002; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).

When the studies reported effect sizes, we include these statistics in the presentation. We have also – when possible – estimated effect sizes (Hedges' *g* since most studies are based on small samples) for statistically significant results reported in the studies, using information included in the articles/reports. Most effect sizes are time effects, not treatment effects, since five of nine studies reporting some form of positive results have a pre/post design without a comparison group, and since one quasi-experimental study had a comparison group whose baseline differed substantially from the intervention group. Three studies did not report standard deviations, henceforth effect sizes could not be estimated.

3. Results

The searches in electronic databases yielded 413 unique citations, which were screened for topic relevance in a two-stage process. After the initial screening (based on title and abstract) 32 studies were retrieved in full text and examined against the inclusion criteria. This process narrowed the sample to four relevant studies. Contact with experts resulted in two new publications that were included, one more study was identified after searching websites, and additionally four relevant studies were located after examining references from identified studies. The current review is thus based on eleven primary studies. Fig. 1 below gives a detailed description of the search and selection process.

3.1. Overview of the included studies

In Table 1, we summarize the studies. Out of the eleven, four are British, three from Canada, three from the US and one is from Sweden. A majority has been published the last three years. Five intervention programs had been evaluated without the use of comparison group (pre-post measurements with standardized instruments), three in a quasi-experimental design and three in a RCT-design. Only two out

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