



Preliminary effects of a group-based tutoring program for children in long-term foster care

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 3 February 2012

Keywords:

Direct instruction
Out-of-home care
Academic achievement
Tutoring

ABSTRACT

Background: Children in foster care are frequently behind in educational achievement (Flynn, Ghzal, Legault, Vandermeulen, & Petrick, 2004) and perform below grade level (Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008 for a review).

Objective: This study evaluated the effectiveness of a direct instruction literacy and math program ("Teach Your Children Well"; TYCW) in a small-group format to educationally disadvantaged foster care children.

Method: In the first year of this two-year study, 68 children in long-term foster care, between grades 2 and 8 inclusive, participated in this randomized control trial intervention. One-half of the children were randomly assigned to the 25-week experimental TYCW condition, while the other children served as waitlist controls. Children were assessed at baseline and post-intervention on reading decoding, spelling, sentence comprehension, and mathematic skills using an academic measure of functioning, the Wide Range Achievement Test Forth Edition (WRAT4).

Results: Based on preliminary year one data, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) demonstrated a statistically significant increase in standard scores on reading decoding and spelling skills for those in the tutoring condition, but statistical group differences were not obtained for mathematics or sentence comprehension. Meaningful effect size differences, in the small-to-moderate range, were found in favour of the tutoring intervention with respect to reading, spelling, and mathematics skill development. Discussion: Implications of the findings for improving the educational outcomes of foster children are provided.

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1. Introduction

As foster care is intended to protect children and has the potential to remediate areas of deficit and poor functioning, it is essential to evaluate whether this can be successfully accomplished within the existing resources of the child welfare system. One, among several, important areas of functioning in foster care children that requires further study is the viability of correcting and rehabilitating commonly found deficits in academic functioning in this vulnerable population. The focus of this paper will be to evaluate the preliminary year one data regarding the effectiveness of a group-based direct instruction (DI) tutoring program, Teach Your Children Well (TYCW), for children in long-term foster care. First, however, the academic needs of children in foster care will be described. This will be followed by a description of the common types of learning problems found in children and academic instruction programs that have been developed to remediate academic deficits. The evaluation of one such academic intervention program, TYCW, for children in long term foster care

will be further described. As the DI program implemented was group-based and delivered by volunteer students, the importance of each of these components as they relate to successful remedial interventions will be discussed. Finally, given that over 75% of the children referred to the study were Aboriginal Canadian, the importance of culture as it relates to the effectiveness of tutoring, specifically DI, will be elaborated and justified.

1.1. Academic deficits of children in foster care

Children and adolescents in foster care are at a disadvantage in educational achievement relative to their same-age peers in the general population (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008). Research findings indicate that anywhere from 33% to 67% of foster care children experience poor academic achievement and require remedial assistance (Trout et al., 2008). Trout et al. (2008) conducted a systematic review of the academic functioning of children and adolescents placed in out-of-home care in the United States, and consistently found that these youth perform below grade level and in the low to low-average range on academic achievement measures. Furthermore, children in foster care also exhibit higher rates of learning disabilities, grade retention (Casey

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et al., 2008), and special education placement (Trout et al., 2008), with fewer foster children completing high school (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001).

Flynn et al. have conducted a number of studies examining the problem of low educational achievement among foster care youth in out-of-care placements in Canada. Flynn and Biro (1998) found that children in foster care reported higher rates of suspensions and grade retention relative to same aged peers. More recently, results indicate that 80% of youth between the ages of 10 and 15 scored within the same range as the lowest third of the general Canadian population on measures of reading, spelling and math (Flynn, Ghazal, Legault, Vandermeulen, & Petrick, 2004). For younger children between five and nine years of age, a similar high percentage of foster care children (i.e., 78%), scored in the same range as those in the lowest third of the general Canadian population based on subjective parental ratings (Flynn et al., 2004). Research conducted in the United States has found similar results to those previously reported in Canada (Burley & Halpern, 2001). The evident delays in academic achievement skills and school success for children in foster care highlight the importance of using effective remedial programs to ameliorate these weaknesses.

1.2. Remedial programs

Different types of remedial programs have been designed to address educational deficits for children in the areas of reading, writing and math. Those programs that target phonological awareness tend to demonstrate better outcomes than those that target context or whole word reading approaches (Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 1997), with this effect particularly apparent for children with existing weak phonological abilities (Felton, 1993; Torgesen, Morgan, & Davis, 1992). Reinforcing the importance of phonological instruction, a recent meta-analytic study found direct instruction (DI) to be one of the top 3 effective models for urban and low-performing schools (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003). Furthermore, DI was the only program of the three that could be implemented outside of school hours, and did not require a school-wide curriculum or multisystem approach (Borman et al., 2003). DI is conceptualized as a complex skill set whereby children are taught each component skill needed to achieve a target behaviour (Ryder, Burton, & Silberg, 2006), including instruction on phonetic skills. DI was found to be one of the top three interventions because it demonstrated strong effectiveness, generalizability, and a positive effect size ($d = +0.21$) over other interventions (Borman et al., 2003).

The DI model is associated with three basic principles: (a) language is broken down into components and taught in isolation with no context, (b) instruction is directed by the teacher, and (c) minimal input is obtained from the student on instructional content (Stahl, Duffy-Hester, & Stahl, 1998). In essence, DI utilizes explicit teaching to promote reading mastery (Shippen, Houchins, Steventon, & Sartor, 2005). As well, many programs have complemented DI instruction with behavioural management strategies. Remedial instruction programs that have combined DI with contingency management strategies in the form of a token economy, have been found to be effective at improving academic outcomes for children with disabilities, those judged to be at risk for school failure, and a general population of middle school students (Dolezal, Weber, Evavold, Wylie, & McLaughlin, 2007).

A recent quasi-experimental study investigated the differential effects of DI reading programs for 55 seventh grade students performing 2 or more years behind in reading and thus considered to be struggling in school (Shippen et al., 2005). This study found that after six weeks of DI, students showed gains in reading efficiency, reading rate, reading accuracy, and reading fluency (Shippen et al., 2005). These results, however, produced moderate effect size for pre-post outcome measures $d = .40$ (Shippen et al., 2005). The effectiveness of the DI program was also studied in second grade students

across a two year time period with what the authors termed “basal reading programs” (Ashworth, 1999). The basal reading programs encompassed reading programs typically encountered in academic settings with a particular focus on meaning and whole word recognition (Ashworth, 1999). Those who received the DI intervention displayed between 5% and 13% higher achievement scores in areas of vocabulary (13%), Comprehension (8%) and language (5.4%) when compared to those who received a meaning reading program (Ashworth, 1999). Other studies support the efficacy of DI interventions on reading and achievement across different grades and ethnicities (Dowdell, 1996). Dowdell (1996) investigated DI among an entire minority sample of sixth grade students, and found a statistically significant difference as the experimental group had a mean increase of 1.06 on the reading achievement subscale of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, with a change of only .45 by the children in the control group. An important limitation of this study, however, is that the conditions were not randomly assigned (Dowdell, 1996).

A meta-analysis of youth with learning disabilities (Borman et al., 2003), and two randomized control trials, one of young high-risk children (Cole, Dale, Mills, & Jenkins, 1993) and the other of children in foster care (Flynn et al., 2012–this issue), support the efficacy of DI programs for improving academic achievement for students. However, as evidenced by the literature, there is a limited focus on the effectiveness of DI for children in foster care populations. Moreover, the research which has been done tends to focus on an individual delivery format of DI. The DI model, however, can be delivered in either an individual or group format. Given the economies of resources and potential ability to reach more children within a group format, it is important to not only consider which intervention program is used but also the modality in which it is given.

1.3. Group-based remedial programming

Several meta-analytic studies have been conducted to explore the effectiveness of tutoring programs as a supplement for classroom teaching. Generally, one-to-one tutoring has been empirically validated for students considered at risk for school failure or those identified with a learning disability (Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, & Moody, 2000). One-to-one tutoring has been provided by a variety of individuals including teachers, volunteers, and college students (Elbaum et al., 2000). However, very few studies exist that directly compare one-to-one tutoring programs with potentially more cost effective small group interventions.

The meta-analytic study of Elbaum et al. (2000) found two studies in the literature between 1975 and 1998 that compared one-to-one interventions with small-group interventions. Both studies focused on the Reading Recovery (RR) program out of New Zealand, which includes the use of DI for directed reading within academic settings (Clay, 1987). The RR program is designed to be an intensive, one-to-one tutoring program for those identified to be at risk for literacy difficulties. However, like other programs, RR is an early intervention program that aims to target those with literacy difficulties within the first-year of schooling (Reynolds & Wheldall, 2007). One such study compared an RR intervention that was implemented for 30 min each school day for the duration of 1 year, against Project READ which is a method that emphasizes phonics (Acalin, 1995). Students in the Project READ condition received instruction in groups of 2 to 5 students for 30 min each school day for 1 year delivered by a resource specialist. Acalin (1995) found no significant difference between those who received one-to-one instruction when compared to those in the group-based intervention. These results parallel those of Evans (1996) who found no advantage for one-to-one interventions compared with group-based tutoring programs.

A more recent study by Vaughn et al. (2003) also emphasized the utility of small group instruction for reading comprehension and fluency. Individual instruction was compared to group-based instruction,

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