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The effects of placement and school stability on academic growth trajectories of students in foster care

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A B S T R A C T

As a result of the Every Student Succeeds Act and its requirement that students in foster care be included in education report cards, states have a renewed sense of urgency surrounding accountability for the academic achievement of this vulnerable group of students. This study examined the effects of placement and school stability on students' academic growth before, during, and after out-of-home placements. The sample consisted of 7674 youth in 4th through 10th grades from one Mountain region state who were also in foster care at any point between 2008 and 2014. The findings from the current study underscore the importance of: (a) supporting "catch-up" growth when students initially enter the child welfare system; (b) considering the detrimental effects of co-occurring placement changes and school moves in case planning for students in foster care; (c) maintaining academic progress for those students who are meeting grade-level expectations; and, (d) implementing supports and services that extend beyond the duration of time that students are in foster care.

1. Introduction

Students in foster care often have large gaps in academic achievement across subject areas and grade levels and, as a result, may require multiple years of successful interventions to catch-up to grade-level standards (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Clemens & Tis, 2016). While researchers acknowledge that the experience of being in foster care may disrupt learning, some researchers have also suggested that students often enter the foster care system already exhibiting low levels of academic proficiency. For example, a comparison of performance on state achievement tests indicated that the largest deficits in reading and math achievement are evident in the months immediately preceding removal from the home (Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes, & Rios-Salas, 2015). It is true that experiences of maltreatment, high mobility, family instability, domestic violence, and poverty, which are prevalent for child welfare-involved youth, are associated with low achievement (Berger et al., 2015; Herbers et al., 2012; Romano, Babchishin, Marquis, & Fréchette, 2015). It is unclear, however, how academic growth year after year is affected when students enter into foster care.

In recent years, researchers and policymakers have demonstrated dramatically increased awareness of the gap in academic achievement for students in foster care. In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) introduced a new requirement that this population of students be included in education agency state report cards (Section 1111.h.1.C.ii; Section 1111.h.1.C.iii.II). Inclusion in state report cards means that the educational outcomes of students in foster care must be disaggregated and visible in the same way as outcomes are tracked for other populations of students. Prior to ESSA, relatively few states tracked educational outcomes for students in foster care (Data Quality Campaign, 2017). As a result, the population of students in foster care was described as having an "invisible achievement gap" (Barrat and Berliner, 2013, p. 1). With the passage of ESSA, we can expect that in the coming years increased attention will be paid to the academic achievement of students in foster care with an eye toward closing this chasm.

The current study elucidates how academic growth is related to factors such as the timing of the first removal from the home and the length of time in the child welfare placement, issues contributing to school instability. The investigation is motivated by the need for child welfare and education agencies to collaborate on improving the educational stability of students in foster care in order to encourage their academic success. This research helps to identify key points in time during which public policies can deliberately support students in foster care to mitigate the adverse impact of mobility events on academic growth. The actionable variables of interest include school moves associated with a home placement change, duration of time in care, and age at first removal. The implications of this study are framed in terms of opportunities for child welfare and education agencies to improve the academic growth of students in foster care.

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1.1. Academic achievement, proficiency, and growth

Academic achievement is typically reported for groups of students based on their level of proficiency using descriptors such as *unsatisfactory*, *partially proficient*, *proficient*, and *advanced.* The distribution of proficiency levels provides insight into how far a subgroup is from meeting grade-level standards. For students in foster care, the distributions are positively skewed compared to their non-foster care peers, meaning that across subject areas and grade level, there are high percentages of foster care students scoring in the lowest proficiency categories and fewer students scoring in the highest proficiency categories (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Clemens & Tis, 2016). This distributional pattern is particularly pronounced in math (Clemens & Tis, 2016).

Achievement gaps are typically defined as the difference between the percentage of students in a subgroup who score at or above grade level on end-of-grade assessments (i.e., meeting or exceeding proficiency standards) versus the scores of students in the state as a whole. According to statewide research studies comparing students in foster care and their non-foster care peers, there is at least a 20 percentage point gap between these groups in math, reading, and writing (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Clemens & Tis, 2016). Similarly, the Washington State accountability data also showed 20+ percentage point gaps across many years, grade levels, and assessment categories (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2017). Washington State is the only state that includes academic achievement data in its state education report cards (Data Quality Campaign, 2017). The size of the gap may serve as a call to action, but does not necessarily inform educators and policymakers on how to approach the problem.

Students with particularly low levels of proficiency in a subject area may require multiple years of successful interventions to catch-up to grade-level standards. For this reason, one promising focal point in these efforts involves analyzing academic growth trajectories. Academic growth describes the amount of progress students make in a given subject area (e.g., math, reading, writing) in the span of a year. Academic growth scores can be considered a leading indicator of progress toward grade-level standards for populations of students who tend to score well below their peers on achievement tests. The current study will analyze and describe longitudinal academic growth trajectories for students in foster care, which can be used by child welfare and education agencies to set targets for interventions aimed at accelerating students' academic growth in reading, writing, and/or math.

2. Placement and school instability

The existing literature base regarding students in foster care tends to highlight the negative consequences of either placement instability or school instability (Fawley-King, Trask, Zhang, & Aarons, 2017). However, less is known about the combined effect of these changes on students' academic progress (Berger et al., 2015). Recently, researchers have begun to investigate the connection between placement changes and school moves (e.g., Clemens, Klopfenstein, Tis, & Lalonde, 2017). Some scholars have suggested that adjusting to new caregivers and home-based routines may stifle academic progress, even when students remain in their school of origin, due to the stress and disruption of the placement (Berger et al., 2015). Only once these combined effects are understood can effective solutions be further developed and clear expectations set for measuring progress.

Researchers have argued that placement instability is among the greatest threats to the well-being of child-welfare-involved youth (Moore, McDonald, & Cronbaugh-Auld, 2016; Waid, Kothari, Bank, & McBeath, 2016). The initial removal is a highly stressful and potentially traumatic event (Baugerud & Melinder, 2012) that may "disrupt children's emotional, relational, psychological, and cognitive development" (Conners-Burrow et al., 2013, p. 1830). Once part of the foster care system, studies have shown, anywhere from 22% to 70% of youth experience a placement disruption each year (Blakey et al., 2012). Findings also suggest that lack of integration into the new out-of-home placement increases the likelihood of further placement disruption in the future (Leathers, 2006). The anticipation of a child welfare placement change, as well as uncertainty about the duration of a placement, can be constant sources of distress and fear for youth (Unrau, Chambers, Seita, & Putney, 2010). Researchers studying the effect of placement instability describe emotional consequences, which include feelings of rejection, lack of control, and insecurity (Hébert, Lanctôt, & Turcotte, 2016; Munford & Sanders, 2015).

Placement instability can sometimes translate into school instability. In one Mountain state, 31% of initial home removals resulted in a school move (Clemens, Klopfenstein, et al., 2017). When a subsequent placement change occurred, school moves occurred for 42% of transitions between family-like settings, and they occurred 50% of the time when the transition was from congregate care to a family-like setting (Clemens, Klopfenstein, et al., 2017). When a change in child welfare placement is associated with a school move, youth are faced with the difficult challenge of simultaneously adjusting to a new living situation and a new school.

Regardless of whether the school move is associated with a placement change, educational researchers acknowledge that students who move schools during an academic year may experience discontinuity of course content, variations in teachers' instructional styles, and differences in school culture, all of which may disrupt student learning (Cutuli et al., 2013; Herbers et al., 2012; Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990; Mehana & Reynolds, 2004; Temple & Reynolds, 1999). Theorists suggest that each time a child experiences a school move, the school-based relationships that support learning may also be disrupted (Coleman, 1988). In a qualitative study, youth described the need for educational stability, a sentiment captured in a poignant statement by one participant:

> Stability is the biggest issue, because that's your main issue in life and that's the biggest [thing] that you desire. And school is like the most normal it gets for stability… (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis, 2017, p. 72)

Additional research is needed to determine how the interplay between child welfare placement changes and school moves relate to academic growth.

3. Child welfare placement type and length of time in care

The types of placement and length of time students are in out-of-home care are particularly relevant to academic growth trajectories. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2016), appropriateness of placement involves consideration of both placement stability (i.e., "two or fewer placement settings in a single foster care episode") and types of placement settings (p. 27). Family-like settings, rather than congregate care settings with more than six children, are typically considered the most appropriate placements, especially for children age 12 or younger (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

Like appropriateness of placement, shortening the time it takes to achieve permanency for children in out-of-home-care (e.g., reunification, living with other relatives, legal adoption, etc.) is supported by research and federal policy (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The national data demonstrate that length of time in care is associated with differing amounts of placement and school stability. According to a recent report to Congress regarding nationwide child welfare outcomes, in 2014 the majority of children (median = 85.4%) in out-of-home care for < 12 months had no more than two placements (Children's Bureau, 2017). However, only 66% of youth in care for 12–24 months and 35.3% in care for > 24 months experienced no more than two placements. These national statistics