



# Helping youth in care succeed: Influence of caregiver involvement on academic achievement

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## ABSTRACT

The current study examined the influence of the placement on academic outcomes in youth receiving out-of-home care. A two-level multilevel model was used to partition variance in youth in care's academic success scores into placement and child-specific levels of influence. Associations between caregiver involvement and academic success in youth in care were also examined. Assessment and Action Record (AAR) data from the Ontario Looking after Children (OnLAC) project were analyzed. The sample included data from 687 youth between 10 and 15 years of age ( $M$  age = 12.99 years,  $SD$  = 1.68), with slightly more boys ( $n$  = 389) than girls ( $n$  = 298). While individual differences in academic success were primarily attributable to child-specific effects (85%), 15% of the variance can be attributable to differences between placements. Results also suggested that caregivers who provided more academic support at home and a more positive literacy environment were also more likely to care for youth with higher levels of academic success. Surprisingly, caregiver school-based involvement was not significantly associated with academic achievement in youth in care. Lastly, higher levels of caregiver expectations within the placement and youth's own differential experience were both associated with more academic success. These results suggest that academic outcomes of youth in care may be influenced by the placement in which they live.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Helping children in care succeed: Understanding the influence of foster caregivers on academic outcomes

Annually across Canada, approximately 67,000 children and adolescents (youth) experience out-of-home care (Mulcahy & Tromé, 2010). Although youth in care show increased problems on a range of developmental outcomes, of particular concern is their difficulty with school (for a review see Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008). Relative to children residing with their biological families, youth or young persons in care are not only more likely to score significantly lower on standardized tests (Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993; Leiter & Johnsen, 1997), but they are also more likely to experience grade retention issues, expulsions, suspensions and absenteeism (for a review, see Stone, 2007). In fact, when examined over time, a significant relationship between maltreatment and worse academic outcomes has been noted (Leiter & Johnsen, 1997). The disproportionate number of youth in care who are failing to meet appropriate academic milestones is concerning, particularly since academic

success is predictive of higher levels of later well being and success (e.g., Attar-Schwartz, 2009; Schiff & Benbenishty, 2006; Tylor, Johnson, & Brownridge, 2008).

The extent to which youth experience academic success varies across individuals, with some demonstrating higher levels of achievement than others. To date, a number of child-specific and placement characteristics have been found to relate to higher academic success in youth in care. With respect to child-specific factors, youth in care with better impulse inhibition (e.g., Pears, Bruce, Fisher, Kim, and Yoerger, 2010) and emotion regulation (Schelble, Franks, & Miller, 2010), reduced externalizing behaviors (e.g., Bennett, Weigel, & Martin, 2002), higher language ability (e.g., Slade & Wissow, 2007), higher intelligence (e.g., Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, & Egolf, 1994) and higher levels of academic engagement (Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001) are more likely to show higher levels of academic success. Similarly, type of maltreatment is also associated with academic outcomes of youth in care. Relative to those classified as neglect alone or sexually abused alone, youth with the experience of physical abuse are more likely to experience school-related suspensions or discipline (e.g., Eckenrode et al., 1993). However, for children with a history of neglect alone, they appear to be at a heightened risk for general deficits across multiple domains of academic success (e.g., Eckenrode et al., 1993; Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996). Lastly, associations between placement and school transfers and academic achievement are inconclusive where some studies have cited a significant

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association (e.g., Zima et al., 2000) whereas others have not (e.g., Conger & Rebeck, 2001).

Aside from child-specific attributes and experiences, academic achievement may be influenced by placement characteristics. Specifically, there is some emerging evidence to suggest that placement type may be related to academic outcomes of youth in care. Relative to those placed in group care, youth in kinship or family-based foster care are more likely to demonstrate better academic outcomes (e.g., Berrick, Barth, & Needell, 1994; for a review see Stone, 2007). Specifically, youth living in therapeutic foster placements or group homes have been found to be three times more likely to repeat at least one grade when compared to those in kinship placements (Zima et al., 2000).

### 1.2. Understanding academic outcomes in children in care from a multilevel perspective

In sum, it appears that academic success in youth in care is influenced by both child placement and service factors. These observations challenge us to understand how these factors operate together to influence academic performance in youth in care. Perhaps this can be best understood through an ecological perspective where development occurs within a multilevel framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The ecological model theorizes that children are directly and indirectly influenced by various reciprocal influences that are embedded within multiple layers of influence. Factors that are located in layers closest to the child have a more direct effect on development and therefore, have a stronger influence relative to those located in layers further away. Through a multilevel perspective, we can gain a better understanding of the extent to which youth in care cluster on academic achievement within foster care placements. Specifically, it can help us identify the extent to which differences between placements, can explain why youth in care show different patterns of academic achievement.

Although relatively sparse, there is some preliminary evidence to suggest that academic outcomes of youth in care can be conceptualized within a multilevel framework. In a sample of 4069 Israeli youth between 6 and 20 years of age, Attar-Schwartz (2009) demonstrated that approximately 12% of the variance in youth's academic achievement scores can be explained by differences between care institutions while the remaining 88% of the variance can be explained by differences between youth themselves. More importantly, youth from placements that are more short-term in nature, have higher levels of peer violence, and offer fewer after-school activities are more likely to care for youth with lower levels of achievement. The inclusion of these predictors accounted for approximately 39% of the variance at the institution level.

Taken together, it appears that differences between institutions can to some degree, account for why some youth receiving out-of-home care show better academic outcomes than others. This suggests that some of the variance in academic outcomes occurs because of differences between placements (i.e., youth in care cluster within placements and some placements have much higher rates of academic success than other placements). Arguably, then, policies and programs that target placement-level processes may have a noticeable effect on academic outcomes of youth in care. However, much of our understanding of placement factors is limited to structural characteristics, and is based on correlational data rather than studies that test the effects with randomized control trials or similar rigorous designs. What remain relatively unclear are aspects of everyday life that relates to higher levels of academic success of youth in care. In other words, our understanding of why youth in care from certain placements demonstrates better academic outcomes is limited. Understanding the processes that can help facilitate better academic outcomes is particularly useful, especially when implementing prevention and intervention strategies.

To date, it has been suggested by some that differential patterns of academic achievement of youth in care may be reflective of differences in caregiver capacity to respond appropriately to youth's academic needs (Stone, 2007). Indeed, there is some evidence from community samples to suggest this finding. For instance, significant associations between parental involvement and academic success have been consistently reported across studies, both from a cross-sectional (e.g., Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994) and longitudinal perspective (Hill et al., 2004). More importantly, these observations have been corroborated by numerous meta-analyses that have all reported a small to moderate effect of parental involvement on academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2003; Jeynes, 2007).

### 1.3. Influence of caregiver involvement with academics and academic achievement in youth in care

Evidently, it appears that caregiver involvement is crucial for academic success. Surprisingly, despite interest from educators, child-welfare practitioners and researchers alike, relatively little is known about how caregiver involvement influences academic outcomes of youth in care. To our knowledge, there has only been one study that has examined the influence of caregiver involvement on academic outcomes of youth in care. In a sample of 85 maltreated youth placed in out-of-home care and 56 matched, non-maltreated community youth, Pears et al. (2010) compared academic and social-emotional competence across the two groups. Findings suggest that across both domains, maltreated children lagged significantly behind their non-maltreated counterparts. Interestingly, despite finding some evidence to suggest that the effect of maltreatment on social competence is mediated by caregiver involvement with school-related activities, a similar mediating effect of caregiver involvement on academic competence was not found. Rather, children's own inhibitory control abilities explained why the experience of maltreatment is related to academic competency.

Based on findings from Pears et al. (2010), it is puzzling that the indirect effect of caregiver involvement on maltreatment and academic achievement was non-significant, particularly since research has consistently documented the positive effects of caregiver involvement (e.g., Hill & Tyson, 2009). Perhaps this finding reflects the possibility that caregiver involvement is a multidimensional construct where some aspects have not been mentioned previously. According to Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994), parental involvement includes parental involvement with school-related activities, providing a positive home literacy environment (e.g., access to books, visits to the library), and expectations they hold around the value and utility of education. Extending Grolnick and Slowiaczek's theory, several researchers have also suggested that parental involvement with school-related activities can include behaviors that occur within the family to reinforce learning at home (e.g., Epstein, 1987). Thus, school-based involvement refers to parents' interactions with schools that promote academic success and can include strategies such as volunteering at school and involvement in school governance. Home-based involvement however, refers to parental reinforcement of learning at home and includes activities such as helping with homework and discussing school progress.

#### 1.3.1. Caregiver school- and home-based involvement

Although the conceptualization of parental involvement may vary across studies, there is some evidence to suggest that these dimensions have independent effects on academic achievement. With respect to parental involvement with school and home, aside from the study by Pears et al. (2010), research examining the influence of these domains on academic outcomes of youth in care is relatively sparse. However, significant associations have been demonstrated in community-based samples. For instance, for both parental home- and school-based involvement, more involvement predicted better

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