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Neglect, educational success, and young people in out-of-home care: Cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses

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ABSTRACT

Maltreated young persons in out-of-home care often have poor educational outcomes, heightening their risk of long-term psychosocial disadvantage (Forsman, Brännström, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2016). In their systematic reviews, Romano, Babchishin, Marquis, and Fréchette (2014) and O'Higgins, Sebba, and Gardner (in press) found evidence that neglect was more often linked with low academic achievement, whereas abuse was more likely to be associated with behavioral difficulties. In large samples of young persons in out-of-home care in Ontario, Canada, who had experienced mainly neglect, we investigated risk and protective factors as predictors of educational success. In a cross-sectional hierarchical regression analysis ($N = 3659$, aged 11–17 years), female gender, youth educational aspirations, caregiver educational aspirations for youth, time with current caregiver, internal developmental assets, and positive mental health were associated with better educational success. Neglect, grade retention, special educational needs, ethnic minority status, behavioral problems, and soft-drug use were associated with poorer educational outcomes. Gender significantly moderated caregiver educational aspirations and youth placement type. In a longitudinal analysis of a subsample ($N = 962$, aged 11–15 years at Time 1), covering three years, a large decline in educational success ($d = -0.80$) was observed. Female gender, internal developmental assets, and positive mental health positively predicted, and soft drug use negatively predicted, greater educational success at Time 2. These results point to factors that help or hinder educational success among young people in care and should inform new interventions or improved versions of existing ones that address educational success in the context of neglect.

Research over several decades has documented the poor educational outcomes of many children and youth in out-of-home care (hereafter, “in care”), in relation to their peers in the general population (Doyle, 2013; Scherr, 2007; Sebba et al., 2015; Stone, 2007; Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008). While some young people in care enjoy educational success (Jackson & Cameron, 2010), many leave school with few or no formal qualifications, which puts them at risk of long-term economic and social disadvantage. The latter includes poor physical and mental health, high unemployment, and criminality (Buehler, Orme, Post, & Patterson, 2000; Centre for Social Justice, 2015; Dregan, Brown, & Armstrong, 2011; Dregan & Gulliford, 2012; Forsman, Brännström, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2016; Vinnerljung & Hjern, 2011). Moreover, Forsman et al. (2016), using Rubin's (1974) potential outcomes framework and national register data on 7552 Swedish foster children, found causal evidence of the negative impact

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of poor school performance on psychosocial problems in adulthood at age 30–35 years, including economic hardship, illicit drug use, and mental health problems.

Supporting improved educational success by young people in care is an important strategy for interrupting negative life-course trajectories. To this end, a number of education-related interventions have been developed and evaluated, of which tutoring has shown the most consistently promising results to date (Brodie, 2009; Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012; Flynn, Marquis, Paquet, Peeke, & Aubry, 2012; Harper & Schmidt, 2016; Liabo, Gray, & Mulcahy, 2012; Mooney, Winter, & Connolly, 2016). In their discussion of the limited effectiveness of these interventions, Liabo et al. (2012) suggest that future programs should use a strong theory of change that targets known risk and protective factors. A recent systematic review, however, found that the evidence on risk and protective factors for educational outcomes of young people in care was mixed, with few variables providing clear guidance for interventions (O'Higgins, Sebba, & Gardner, in press). The present paper aims to provide further evidence regarding risk and protective factors in education for large cross-sectional and longitudinal samples of young people in care in Ontario, Canada. In doing so, it hopes to inform the development and fine-tuning of future interventions to improve the educational success of young people in care.

The purpose of the systematic review by O'Higgins et al. (in press) was to identify factors associated with educational outcomes for young people in foster or kinship care and contribute to research on risk and protective factors and underlying mechanisms explaining the frequently poor outcomes of this population. The review included 39 studies and identified 20 categories of factors associated with educational outcomes. The findings revealed significant heterogeneity in the research literature, such that it was not possible to carry out a meta-analysis. Moreover, the review found little consensus on whether factors were associated with a range of educational outcomes, with only male gender and ethnic minority status consistently predicting lower educational attainment. There was also some evidence to suggest that neglect was linked to worse educational outcomes, whereas experience of abuse was more often associated with behavioral problems. This mirrors evidence from another review (Romano, Babchishin, Marquis, & Fréchette, 2014), which indicated that young people who had experienced mainly neglect rather than abuse had poorer academic achievement. (In the present paper, we define *neglect* as follows: failure by the caregiver to provide the child's basic needs, such as adequate food, sleep, safety, education, clothing, medical treatment, supervision, or leaving the child alone. Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2015)

The primary purpose of the present study was to test the often mixed predictive validity of the risk and protective factors of educational success of children in care identified in the systematic review (O'Higgins et al., in press), using a large sample and longitudinal design (as recommended by Stone, 2007). Table 1 shows the 15 of the 20 conceptual categories identified by O'Higgins et al. (in press) for which we had operational measures, and the 19 risk and protective predictors corresponding to these 15 categories (some of which had multiple indicators).

Educational success is a resilience-oriented outcome. Among the various conceptual approaches to resilience available in the literature, we chose Ann Masten's (2014). She is a major contributor to child development and resilience research, with over 170 publications in the field (Masten, 2014), and her 20-year Project Competence Longitudinal Study is a particularly important contribution. She has also written extensively on different models of resilience as well as on topics directly related to the present study, namely, resilience in the spheres of education, foster care, and the international Looking After Children approach to child welfare reform (Masten, 2006, 2014). We therefore chose to use Masten's model of resilience as especially pertinent to the present study, with

Table 1

The predictors of educational success identified by O'Higgins et al. (in press) for which we had a total of 19 operational measures, grouped into four blocks: contextual risk, individual risk, contextual protective, and individual protective.

	Systematic Review (O'Higgins et al., in press)	Present Study
Contextual Risk Factors <i>associated with poorer educational outcomes</i>	Age of entry into care Reason for entry into care School changes/# educ. placements # of placements/placement instability School functioning	Age of first entry into care Neglect as a reason for entry into care School instability Caregiver instability Grade retention
Individual Risk Factors <i>associated with poorer educational outcomes</i>	Age Special educational needs Ethnicity (minority) Behavioral problems Mental health (negative)	Age Special educational needs Ethnic minority status: FNMI Ethnic minority status: African-Canadian Behavioral problems Soft drug use Suicide risk
Contextual Protective Factors <i>associated with better educational outcomes</i>	Characteristics of kin/foster carers Placement type	Caregiver educational aspirations Placement stability Placement type
Individual Protective Factors <i>associated with better educational outcomes</i>	Well-being Gender (female) Aspirations for education (youth)	Internal developmental assets Positive mental health Gender Youth educational aspirations

Note: FNMI = First Nations, Métis, Inuit.

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