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Educational neglect: Understanding 20 years of child welfare trends

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ABSTRACT

Educational neglect is an understudied phenomenon that is difficult to define and also to address. While it is clear that attending to children's academic needs is important to child development, few studies focus on educational neglect and therefore little is known about its associated risk factors and the outcomes following this form of maltreatment. The purpose of this research was to (a) determine the rate at which child welfare service providers investigate educational neglect in Canada and identify any trends in rates over time, (b) better understand educational neglect and its distinction from other types of neglect and truancy, and (c) understand how child welfare services respond to allegations of educational neglect. Data from five cycles of the Ontario Incidence Studies of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect were examined. A trend analysis was conducted followed by a mixed-method examination of educational neglect investigations. Results indicate that rates of investigated educational neglect in Ontario have been consistently low over time. However, these investigations are significantly more likely to be substantiated and to be transferred to ongoing child welfare services compared to investigations of other subtypes of neglect. Educational neglect investigations involving younger children are more likely to note risk factors for caregivers whereas those involving adolescents are more likely to note functioning issues for youth. The findings are discussed in relation to international trends in educational neglect and policy and practice implications are explored.

1. Introduction

Educational neglect is an understudied phenomenon that is difficult to define and also to address. It is considered a form of child maltreatment in many jurisdictions, and it usually involves a parent or other caregiver actively or passively neglecting the learning and educational needs of a child, which results in harm to the child's development and well-being. Among adolescents, educational neglect is closely tied to truancy as greater responsibility is placed on the young person to be engaged in education and learning. The neglect of children's educational needs can be devastating to child development. Children who have experienced educational neglect are more likely to take remedial classes and have problems in school (Chapple & Vaske, 2010). These children are also more likely to live with individual, family, and community problems. School absences, particularly when chronic, are associated with children's internalizing and externalizing problems (Iverson, French, Strand, Gotch, & McCurley, 2016; Jaafar et al., 2013), and family poverty, mental health issues, homelessness, substance abuse, crime, and a lack of basic necessities (Blackmon & Cain, 2015). Attending school is associated with better outcomes, including a higher likelihood of individuals achieving full time work, a lower likelihood of experiencing poverty in adulthood, and greater language fluency (Oreopoulos, 2005).

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In the United States, it is estimated that between 30 percent (Mennen, Kim, Sang, & Trickett, 2010) and 47 percent (Sedlak et al., 2010) of neglected children experience educational neglect (NIS-4). Approximately 4.9 per 1000 children in the United States have experienced educational neglect according to the latest available statistics, and there was no significant change in the rates of educational neglect in the United States over time from 1986 to 2006 (Sedlak et al., 2010). Although few estimates are available, European countries also report high rates of neglect overall and high rates of educational neglect (e.g., May-Chahal & Cawson, 2005). In the Netherlands, educational and emotional neglect together accounted for over half of the 22,661 substantiated cases of maltreatment reported to child welfare agencies in 2010, and child protection agencies experienced a 253% increase in reports of educational/emotional neglect from 2005 to 2010 (Euser et al., 2013). By 2010, greater than 18 per 1000 children in the Netherlands experienced educational or emotional neglect (Euser et al., 2013). In Romania, an estimated 34% of adolescents report experiencing educational neglect (Browne, 2002). The high rates of educational neglect reported in these studies warrants the examination of rates in other jurisdictions in order to allow for international comparisons.

While it is clear that attending to children's academic needs is important to child development, few studies focus on educational neglect and therefore little is known about its associated risk factors and the outcomes following this form of maltreatment. This creates challenges in addressing neglectful behaviors among parents and poor school attendance and performance among children and youth. It is critical to better understand the incidence and characteristics of educational neglect in order to design effective interventions to meet the needs of children who experience this type of maltreatment and their families. The objective of this paper is to understand trends in the incidence and characteristics of child welfare investigations focused on educational neglect over the past 20 years in the Province of Ontario (Canada). The incidence of educational neglect will be compared using five cycles of cross-sectional child welfare data collected in 1993, 1998, 2003, 2008, and 2013. The latest available data will then be used to examine current trends in the characteristics of children and families involved in educational neglect investigations and the typical child welfare service response to these families.

1.1. Defining educational neglect

Educational neglect has been defined differently depending on the developmental stage of the child. In very young children, researchers have defined it as a lack of parental involvement in learning and literacy activities, such as learning the alphabet, numbers, colors, shapes, as well as reading to the child (Chapple & Vaske, 2010). Other researchers have developed universal definitions regardless of child age, and have more narrowly defined neglectful behaviors to focus on parents' failing to ensure that their children regularly attend school, and failing to promote their children's school success (Goodvin, Johnson, Hardy, Graef, & Chambers, 2007). These actions may include passively letting a child stay home from school for a certain number of days in a given time period without adequate reason (e.g., illness or family emergency), actively keeping a child out of school, failing to intervene when an adolescent is chronically truant, moving frequently and failing to maintain a child's school enrolment, encouraging a child to drop out of school, or failing to enroll a child in school whatsoever (Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1993; English and the LONGSCAN Investigators, 1997). These behaviors are in line with the generally agreed upon conceptualization of neglect as a parental failure to meet a child's basic needs in a way that results in current or future harm (Maughan & Moore, 2010). Educational neglect may occur simultaneously or sequentially with other forms of neglect and abuse. One study examined substantiated maltreatment investigations and found several examples of educational neglect co-occurring with physical abuse and more general caregiving problems, such as substance misuse (Mennen et al., 2010).

1.2. Educational neglect and truancy

Educational neglect in older children and youth tends to overlap with truancy, which is considered a status offence in many jurisdictions and sometimes criminalized as a problematic youth behavior (Ovink, 2011). Truancy is a legal term defined by most jurisdictions as a specific number of unexcused absences from school over a specific period of time (Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010).

Compulsory school attendance laws define the minimum length of time children and youth must spend in school before they are legally allowed to leave (Oreopoulos, 2005). Such laws emerged in the United States in the early 20th century (Larson, Zuel, & Swanson, 2011) while interest in compulsory schooling arose in the late 19th century in Canada (Oreopoulos, 2005). Compulsory attendance laws rest on the assumption that young people and society as a whole benefit from children staying in and progressing through school (Oreopoulos, 2005). Today in Canada, parents who neglect to send their children to school, or who refuse to let them go, can be charged for their child's truancy, while adolescents age 12 and over who regularly skip or refuse to go to school can be charged with truancy themselves under the youth criminal justice system (Canadian Foundation for Children, Youth and the Law, 2013). Compulsory attendance laws also exist in Europe, with most European education systems requiring full-time education for children for approximately 10 years (European Commission, 2016). School starting ages vary from three to seven years across various European countries and leaving ages vary from 14 to 19 years (European Commission, 2016).

There is conceptual confusion surrounding educational neglect and its distinction from truancy and the violation of compulsory attendance laws. The problem is typically labeled educational neglect when unexplained absences are viewed as a result of family distress and functioning problems, particularly among young children (Larson et al., 2011). While truancy is generally viewed as a problem influenced by a variety of individual, family, and community factors (Blackmon & Cain, 2015), it is unclear whether the child welfare system distinguishes between truancy and educational neglect, and how often these overlapping issues are identified as child protection issues versus child behavioral challenges.

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