

Addressing poor educational outcomes among children with out-of-home care experience

Studies on impact, pathways, and interventions

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Abstract

Children with out-of-home care (OHC; foster family/residential care) experience is a high-risk group for future adverse outcomes. With an ambition of supporting the design of effective preventive child welfare measures targeting children in OHC, the overall aim of this thesis is to examine education as a possible intervention path for improving their development and overall life chances.

The thesis consists of four interrelated empirical studies that address different aspects of poor educational outcomes among children with OHC experience by means of analyses of longitudinal survey and register data, and evaluations of two interventions aimed at improving their basic academic skills.

Study I examined the hypothesized causal effect of poor school performance on adverse outcomes in young adulthood among children with OHC experience. The results showed that poor school performance has an impact on later psychosocial problems net of observed and unobserved factors, suggesting that the estimated effects allow for causal interpretations.

Study II explored educational outcomes at different stages in the educational career, and pathways to varied educational outcomes for children with OHC experience and their peers. The results showed that the OHC group had lower educational outcomes across the life course. Yet, by large, their educational pathways did not differ significantly from their peers – cognitive ability and previous school performance had the largest associations with the outcomes in both groups. However, the influence of these factors were weaker in the OHC group whilst the influence of the birth family's attitude towards higher education was stronger.

Study III aimed at furthering our understanding of the book-gifting program the Letterbox Club's potential impact on foster family children's reading skills. The results showed that participation in the program was associated with small improvements. In general, the program was well received by children and carers, and could result in increased reading. The study furthermore suggested that promotion of carer involvement may improve its potential impact.

Study IV explored the process of conducting a structured paired reading intervention involving foster family children and their carers. Findings showed that it is possible to engage carers in interventions targeting the education of children in OHC, but that this is no automatic process – carers need a rationale for getting involved, and support in delivering the intervention.

In sum, this thesis shows that improving the educational outcomes of children in OHC may be a viable intervention path in supporting their life course development, a path that historically has been overlooked. The thesis furthermore shows examples of promising interventions which may improve the basic academic skills of children in OHC. The results also point out that the child welfare system should provide early and continuous educational support, and highlight the importance of addressing adults' attitudes, expectations, and involvement in these children's education.

Keywords: *child welfare, out-of-home care, educational outcomes, impact, pathways, interventions, longitudinal, evaluation.*

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