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Foster Care and Academic Achievement: The Effects of Foster Care on Adolescents and Their Academic Achievement

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Abstract

Adolescents in foster care are a vulnerable population and face instability. Young people in foster care can be at high risk of academic failure, special education placement, and increased dropout rates, among other poor health outcomes. Identifying and understanding the potential relationships between adolescents in foster care and a range of health outcomes, including academic achievement, can be an important step in creating interventions to help foster kids thrive. This study examines these relationships. Data came from a survey of middle and high school students (N = 13,851) attending public school in mid-Atlantic state. An independent sample T-Test analyzed whether or not there was a significant difference in GPA between adolescents living or not living in foster care. Several other health outcomes were analyzed and will be presented in the poster session. GPAs of adolescents living in foster care (M= 4.128, SD=.974) were not significantly different compared to adolescents not living foster care (M=4.186, SD=.915). Implications for public health policy and practice will be discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Young people in foster care can be at high risk of academic failure, special education placement, and increased dropout rates, among other poor health outcomes. Identifying and understanding the potential relationships between adolescents in foster care and a range of health outcomes, including academic achievement, can be an important step in creating interventions to help foster kids thrive. This study examines these relationships. Data came from a survey of middle and high school students (N = 13,851) attending public school in mid-Atlantic state. An independent sample T-Test analyzed whether or not there was a significant difference in GPA between adolescents living or not living in foster care. Several other health outcomes were analyzed and will be presented in the poster session. GPAs of adolescents living in foster care (M= 4.128, SD=.974) were not significantly different compared to adolescents not living foster care (M=4.186, SD=.915). Implications for public health policy and practice will be discussed.

BACKGROUND

According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, in 2018 there were 437,283 children in the foster care system (Adoption & Foster Care Statistics, 2019). The reason for a child to be placed into the foster care system is due to maltreatment, such as neglect, sexual, or physical abuse, all of which are traumatizing events for developing children that can have negative effects on many aspects of their lives (Bruskas, 2008). Children in foster care face many obstacles, especially in their educational experiences, compared to adolescents who are not in the foster care system. One of the main reasons for this is because of the frequent moves. Moving during the school year forces a child to miss school days. It is also a challenging transition for young people to start a new school with new procedures, expectations, and often different levels or types of coursework. An additional challenge associated with changing schools, is the loss of school records, which is common in the transition of foster children (Bruskas, 2008), and can result in credits not transferring over. Other research discusses the obstacles adolescents in foster care face and how they become barriers to academic achievement. They found that only 20% of the students records were readily available and about 75% of their records contained incorrect data (Zetlin, Weinberg & Kimm, 2004).

Other factors that may contribute to poor academic achievement outcomes include early life adversity, living in poverty, and as mentioned above instability. Not only do these adolescents face academic disadvantages and shortcomings, they also are likely to struggle with mental health issues, behavior problems, and poor developmental outcomes (Bruskas 2008). Due to the rising number of kids in foster care every year, it is important for social workers and educators to understand the educational risk factors and the reality of the achievement gaps foster care kids face to be able to implement and also give kids the best interventions to close the gaps (Erickson, 2018). There is a vast number of factors that lead to these achievement gaps so there is a wide range of interventions created to tackle the issue. Three interventions that have been implemented include: residential school interventions, book gifting interventions, and tutoring interventions.

The current study looked at a novel sample (Appalachian adolescents) to assess whether or not there was a significant difference in academic outcomes for young people who were participating (or not) in the foster care system.

PUBLIC HEALTH ACADEMIC RESEARCH POSTER

METHODS

Participants:

Data came from a survey of middle and high school students (grades 5-12) in 15 public schools in 3 counties from a mid-Atlantic state (N = 13,851, middle school response rate 84.2%, high school response rate 74.0%). Fifty-one percent of participants self-identified as a boy (49% as a girl) and 63% identified as white. The 3 counties were purposefully selected; with one county representing rural, one county representing urban, and one county representing suburban communities.

Procedures:

Data was collected during the school day with present students using a paper-and-pencil and/or on-line format, based on school preference. Teachers assisted a county study coordinator to administer the survey. The IRB at a major research university approved the study.

Measures:

Academic achievement was measured by averaging self-reported grades in English and Math on a 4 point GPA scale.

Foster Care Participation was measured by the question "Who do you live with at home?" Participants could check several options including Mother, Father, Grandpa, Aunt, etc. These response options included Foster Mother and Foster Father. If either Foster parent option was selected, participants were grouped as Foster Care Participants. All other participants were placed in the Non Foster Care Participant Group

Data Analysis:

An independent sample t-test was conducted to assess if differences exist on a dependent variable (GPA) by an independent variable (Adolescent living or not living in foster care). The assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were assessed. Normality assumes that the scores are normally distributed (bell-shaped) and were assessed using the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Homogeneity of variance assumes that both groups have equal error variances and were assessed using Levene's Test for Equality of Error Variances.

RESULTS

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare adolescents living in foster care, adolescent not living in foster care, and GPA. There was not a significant difference in the scores for Adolescent living in foster care (M=4.13, SD=.97) and adolescents not living in foster care (M=4.19, SD=0.92) conditions; $t(10719)=-.74, p < .05$. These results suggest that adolescents living in foster care does not have an effect on GPA.

DISCUSSION

In the present study, I was interested in finding if there was a significant relationship between adolescents living in foster care and academic achievement. Because adolescents in foster care already face negative life events early on, it is important to understand and evaluate the factors that could put adolescents at risk of academic failure.

After accounting for demographics and other relevant factors, it was found that there was not a significant relationship between adolescents living in foster care, adolescents not living in foster care, and GPA.

This study did not find a significance difference between adolescents living in foster care and GPA. These findings were not consistent with other research findings, many other studies found correlation in negative life events and academic failure, foster care placement being one of the negative life events (Jacob & Ryan, 2018). Further studies should investigate this relationship.

Creating and implementing programs that are hands on and community involved such as direct instruction tutoring (DIT) and residential schools may constitute as effective intervention components. Interventions like these programs can help disadvantaged children fill in the gaps they are missing in their education outside of the classroom and home. An alternative intervention would be to implement a program that is similar to The Letterbox club, where disadvantaged children are sent packages with educational books, games, and work that could potentially give them the resources they need to fill in the educational gaps that they did not have access to before.

LIMITATIONS

This study did not find any significant difference in the relationship between adolescents living in foster care and GPA, but this could be due to the limitations of this study. The first limitation of this study was the simplicity of the variables. There are many other factors that children in foster care face that could be the cause of academic failure that were not able to be modeled in this study due to the fact that we were limited by the data that had been collected. Additionally, available data were not able to capture the phenomenon that many foster care children experience, which is moving multiple times from home to home. This could exacerbate negative outcomes, such as their academic achievement.

Another limitation is only looking into children in foster care and not looking into other forms of out of home care, such as kinship care, group homes, respite care, and more. Where the study was conducted, a popular form of out of home care is kinship care, and looking into that could have possibly changed the results.

Finally, it would be good to assess how long young people were in foster care situation and this was not possible to assess given the the cross sectional nature of this study.

Although there were limitations to this study and the results of the study found no significance, it provides some information about academic outcomes and adolescents who participate in foster care.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although the present study is valuable because it assesses the potential connection between foster care participation and academic outcomes, there are many important considerations to include in future studies. For instance, some research has indicated that race effects, neighborhood effects, school effects and other such factors can have a strong influence on the relationship between foster care and academic achievement. Particularly given the fact that children of color are disproportionately represented in foster care settings.

Future studies should assess the potential impact of other variables on foster care participation and tease out the nuanced relationship that could exist between foster care participation and academic outcomes.

Future studies should also investigate more long term effects, assess how long young people participate in the foster care system, and the consistency of placement (how many moves they make while placed in foster care).

