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Educational Experiences of Children in Foster Care

Meta-Analyses of Special Education, Retention and Discipline Rates

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ABSTRACT The educational achievements of children in foster care have been determined to be below average in individual studies. In the present investigation, 31 studies were examined via four meta-analyses to answer questions regarding the educational status of children in out-of-home placements in multiple countries. Data analysis encompassed the following variables: special education eligibility rates, grade retention rates and disciplinary rates. Exploratory meta-analyses uncovered conclusive results in this project, illuminating common educational challenges faced by children living in foster care across countries. Students living in out-of-home care are disproportionately represented in special education. They are prevented from moving to advanced grade levels at alarming rates. In addition, these students are disciplined frequently in the school setting. Implications for serving fostered youth include promoting pre-referral interventions and positive behavioural supports.

KEY WORDS: discipline; expulsion; foster care; grade retention; meta-analysis; out-of-home care; special education; suspension

Children are placed outside their parents' homes for myriad reasons. These include physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, various types of neglect and other circumstances which prevent parents from adequately caring for their children. Approximately one million cases of abuse and neglect are substantiated in the USA yearly (Horton and Cruise, 2001) and about half that number of children are referred to live in out-of-home placements (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Unfortunately, it is difficult to track cumulative international statistics regarding looked-after children due

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to the range of methods and quality of recordkeeping. Thus, the information from the USA provides a mere glimpse of this situation globally.

Given the large number of children living in foster care, school psychologists must be concerned with the effects of such circumstances on students' educational progress. Fanshel and Shinn (1978) conducted one of the earliest and most frequently cited longitudinal investigations of outcomes for fostered children. Most children improved academically during their time in foster care. Many moved out of special education placements, for example. These findings indicate children may fare better in the academic arena while in foster care than in their original homes when severe dysfunction exists.

As Fanshel and Shinn (1978) recognized, one way to assess the educational experiences of students in foster care is to examine special education qualification and service provision. A large proportion of children in care receive special education services (e.g. Pecora et al., 2003; Zetlin et al., 2003). Many evidence challenged intellectual and emotional functioning, which frequently makes them eligible for special education. One of the most extensive related investigations integrated computer databases from the Illinois State Board of Education and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (Goerge et al., 1992). Researchers compared the educational experiences of three groups: (a) children living in foster care; (b) children receiving special education services and (c) children in both situations. Following an initial decrease after kindergarten, the percentage of youth in the foster care plus special education group increased steadily as children aged. Approximately 32 percent of school-age children living in foster care were receiving special education programming, compared to 14 percent of students not living in foster care who were receiving special education services. Further, this study found fostered children participating in special education programming were more likely than their peers in the non-fostered special education population to possess disabilities of emotional disturbance and mental retardation.

On a smaller scale, Sawyer and Dubowitz (1994) examined the educational status of children living in out-of-home placements with their relatives, arrangements known as kinship care. The authors noted the number of students living in kinship care and participating in special education programming was 3.5 times the US average. The disability rates for fostered youth reported in both this and the Goerge et al. (1992) projects were alarming when considered in relation to rates for youth not in placement and to national averages. Relatively similar percentages have been reported in more recent projects (e.g. Pecora et al., 2003; Zetlin et al., 2003).

In addition to special education, grade retention rates can be examined as indicators of educational outcomes. It has been estimated that 15 percent of all students in the USA are held back from advancing to the next chronological grade level annually (National Association of School Psychologists, 2003). Fox and Arcuri (1980) examined the placement records of fostered children and determined that 23 percent of them had been retained for one or two grades. Many received special education programming as well. Special education and grade retention are contraindicated. Students with disabilities require specialized educational programming, not simply repetition of general education lessons. Also concerning, Sawyer and Dubowitz (1994), found 45 percent of their sample had experienced grade retention, with higher numbers at older ages and at advanced grades. Specifically, 63 percent of the adolescents had repeated grades. The below average aptitude and achievement of fostered youth is indicated by the results of these studies.

Disciplinary actions taken by schools against students in out-of-home care have been reported in the literature as well. Suspensions and expulsions negatively influence educational outcomes for many students and can be considered reflections of children's academic standings with relative accuracy (Rausch and Skiba, 2004). It appears disciplinary actions, which typically remove students from educational settings, occur disproportionately among children living in foster homes. Festinger (1983) surveyed young adults emancipating from care. An average of 35 percent of these young people reported having been suspended at some point during their academic lives. More recently, Kortenkamp and Ehrle (2002) reported 32 percent of a sample of fostered youth, compared to 13 percent of children living in their original homes, had been suspended or expelled from school in the previous year.

Although results of the existing patchwork of research examining the educational status of children in foster care indicate these youth constitute a population at serious risk, methods of unifying the body of literature have been inadequate. Traditional literature reviews have methodological flaws, including the fact that they are not typically subjected to statistical analysis. Hence, they do not provide the confidence necessary to draw definitive conclusions to inform practice and guide further research reliably and validly (Lipsey and Wilson, 2001).

Meta-analysis, conversely, is a powerful statistical tool for clearly identifying outcomes. Schools have been charged with the responsibility of providing the least restrictive, most appropriate learning environments for all children (Jacob and Hartshorne, 2003). To accomplish this, school personnel need to understand the challenges confronting students in out-of-home care. With this information,

practitioners will be able to better intervene on behalf of these children, whose voices are often unheard. Accordingly, two specific questions were addressed by this meta-analytic project:

(1) What is the educational status of children in foster care internationally?
(2) How does the educational status of students in foster care compare to that of their peers not living in out-of-home placements?

Methods

Published and unpublished primary resources as well as secondary resources, such as reviews, were solicited for the initial accumulation of studies. Twenty-four research databases, including PSYCHInfo, ERIC, Education Abstracts and Dissertation Abstracts were searched via computer. Several keywords and combinations were used, but often the pairing of 'foster care and education' resulted in the most hits. Further, 55 websites representing organizations affiliated with related projects were searched for additional reports. Alternately, experts involved with these projects and agencies were contacted via email and asked for copies of reports and for further input.

Inclusion criteria

Educational status. Educational status can be measured by numerous variables and researchers have approached this problem in different ways. Therefore, any factors which could logically contribute to, or constitute, educational status were included in the initial gathering of studies. A broad approach was taken so as many variables as possible could be considered in the exploratory meta-analyses. As the process continued, it became clear certain variables were analysed most frequently and systematically, lending themselves to meta-analysis. These included special education eligibility, grade failures/retentions and suspensions/expulsions. Special education eligibility was operationalized as, 'data describing the proportion of students in foster care who were eligible for, or received, special education services at some point during their time in out-of-home care'. Grade retention was operationally defined as, 'having failed or repeated one or more academic grade levels'. Disciplinary actions were operationalized as, 'the proportion of children who had been suspended or expelled at least once during their time in school'. Educational status was not addressed using the three identified indicators in 26 of the studies acquired, so they were rejected.

Research participants. Youth were defined as children aged birth to 21 years to encompass current legislation and trends for foster care and special education service provision. Accordingly, participants had to be

youth who were up to 21 years of age and living in foster care at the time of data collection or during the time period under consideration for data collection purposes. 'Foster care' described situations in which children had been legally removed from the homes of their birthparents and placed elsewhere for any length of time. Care arrangements included non-relative family foster homes and kinship placements with friends or family members. For this investigation, ≥ 50 percent of a particular sample population had to be living in foster homes, kinship homes or some combination at the time of data collection. Group homes, residential treatment centres and detention facilities were not accepted criteria for this investigation. Often youth in such facilities manifest more complicated psychological needs and cannot be maintained in less restrictive environments. Thirty of the initial studies collected were rejected due to the compositions of their sample populations.

Sufficiency standards. Studies addressing educational performance of fostered youth, as well as those examining related differences between children in foster care and their peers living in their original homes, were sought to answer the two major research questions for this meta-analytic investigation. All published and unpublished studies which met the inclusion criteria were included. Journal articles, books, technical reports, unpublished reports and conference presentations were gathered. Further, only articles that were available in English were used due to the difficulty of acquiring translations. No restrictions on methodological quality were applied. This procedural rule has received wide support in the literature regarding meta-analytic techniques for multiple reasons (Glass et al., 1981; Hunter and Schmidt, 1990; Lipsey and Wilson, 2001). Selected studies contained enough information to calculate effect size (ES), the meta-analytic statistic representing the outcomes under examination. Accepted studies included univariate statistics because meta-analytic techniques have not advanced enough to handle multivariate statistics (Lipsey and Wilson, 2001). Qualitative investigations were not considered because they could not contribute to statistical analyses. Based on these parameters, 87 studies were discarded because they lacked statistics specific to the selected variables, they contained data unamenable to meta-analysis or they cited secondary statistics from others' work.

In all, 174 articles and reports with various relationships to the topic of education and youth in foster care were located during the search process. Surprisingly, no prior meta-analyses specific to this topic were found. When selection criteria were applied, 143 papers were rejected. Thirty-one studies were used in the final analyses. The majority were published or written in the 1990s (45 percent) and 2000s (36 percent). Most were professional journal articles (52 percent) or reports

from organizations (32 percent). Further, most projects took place in the USA (77 percent). The remaining studies were generated by researchers in Australia, Canada, France and the United Kingdom.

Data analysis

To facilitate data analysis, a coding form and manual were created. The form and manual were designed to help ensure reliability of coding. Two studies were coded to pilot them and alterations were made prior to coding of the remaining studies. The two pilot studies were re-coded using the edited form and instructions.

A software program specifically designed to analyse data for meta-analyses was used for the quantitative analysis of data from the coding forms. *Comprehensive Meta-Analysis Version 2* was capable of computing ESs for one-variable relationships (Biostat, 2004). These surfaced in the form of proportions of foster youth who were in special education, retained or suspended or expelled in given studies. To meaningfully summarize the data generated in previous steps of the study, the ESs (i.e. proportions) from the individual studies were combined as long as they represented the same operationalized variable. Then, inverse variance weights were applied to ensure ESs contributed to the final analyses at levels consonant with their sample sizes and related sampling error. Final mean ESs for each of the three outcome variables resulted. Confidence Intervals (CI) at the 99 percent level were determined and formed the basis of the statistical significance tests of the various mean ESs. If the critical value at an alpha of 0.05 for each statistic was within its corresponding CI, the ES was deemed statistically significant. Homogeneity analyses were also conducted to determine which statistical model, fixed, random or mixed, was most appropriate.

Results

The educational status of children living in foster homes internationally was determined based on special education eligibility, grade retention and disciplinary actions as a function of the state of the current literature. Comparison data between students in foster care and their peers were rarely provided. Four meta-analyses were completed.

Special education eligibility

Eligibility for special education services was the outcome most frequently cited in the studies sampled, which also lent itself to meta-analysis. Twenty-four studies were analysed for this variable. Their combined sample size was 25,692 students living in foster care.

Using a mixed effects model, it was estimated about 31 percent of foster youth qualified for or received special education services. With 99 percent certainty, the actual proportion lies between 27 percent and 35 percent. This ES was statistically significant, $z = 10.69$, $p < 0.001$, indicating this proportion was highly unlikely to have occurred by chance. Interestingly, from the 1980s into 2000, the percent of foster children who qualified for special education services steadily increased from approximately 18 percent to approximately 36 percent. Weighted mean ES proportions for each study and their 99 percent CI, are illustrated in Figure 1.

Only two of these studies included data which compared proportions of students in foster care receiving special education services to those of their peers not in out-of-home placements (i.e. Flynn and Biro, 1998; Goerge et al., 1992). Although this is the minimum number of studies possible for inclusion in a meta-analysis, the large sample sizes made analysing them worthwhile. A total of 14,757 fostered youth were compared with 1,796,516 children living in their original homes. Following application of a random effects model, an Odds-Ratio (OR) statistic of 4.90 emerged. This is more likely than what would be expected by chance alone, $z = 2.35$, $p = 0.02$. In other words, youth in foster care were almost five times as likely as their peers to be identified as needing special education assistance. With 99 percent certainty, the actual ratio lies between 0.86 and 27.97. Although the OR was statistically significant, this wide range within the CI reflects the need for more studies of direct comparisons of special education proportions between students in foster care and their fellow classmates in order to determine a specific odds-ratio with greater certainty.

Grade retention

Grade retention rates were the next most frequently reported educational outcome statistic which could be implemented in a meta-analysis. Sixteen studies addressed this issue with appropriate primary data. The combined sample size included 9,950 students. A random effects model was applied. Figure 2 reflects proportions and CI for each study included.

According to the resulting overall proportion ES, 33 percent of students in foster care had been retained at least once during their school careers. It can be stated with 99 percent CI the actual proportion is between 24–45 percent. The proportion of retained students living in foster homes is higher than would be expected by chance alone, $z = -3.66$, $p = < 0.001$. In the 1980s and 1990s, retention rates for foster youth peaked at 45 percent and 41 percent, respectively. So far, in the current decade, they have decreased to about 22 percent. This trend warrants monitoring.

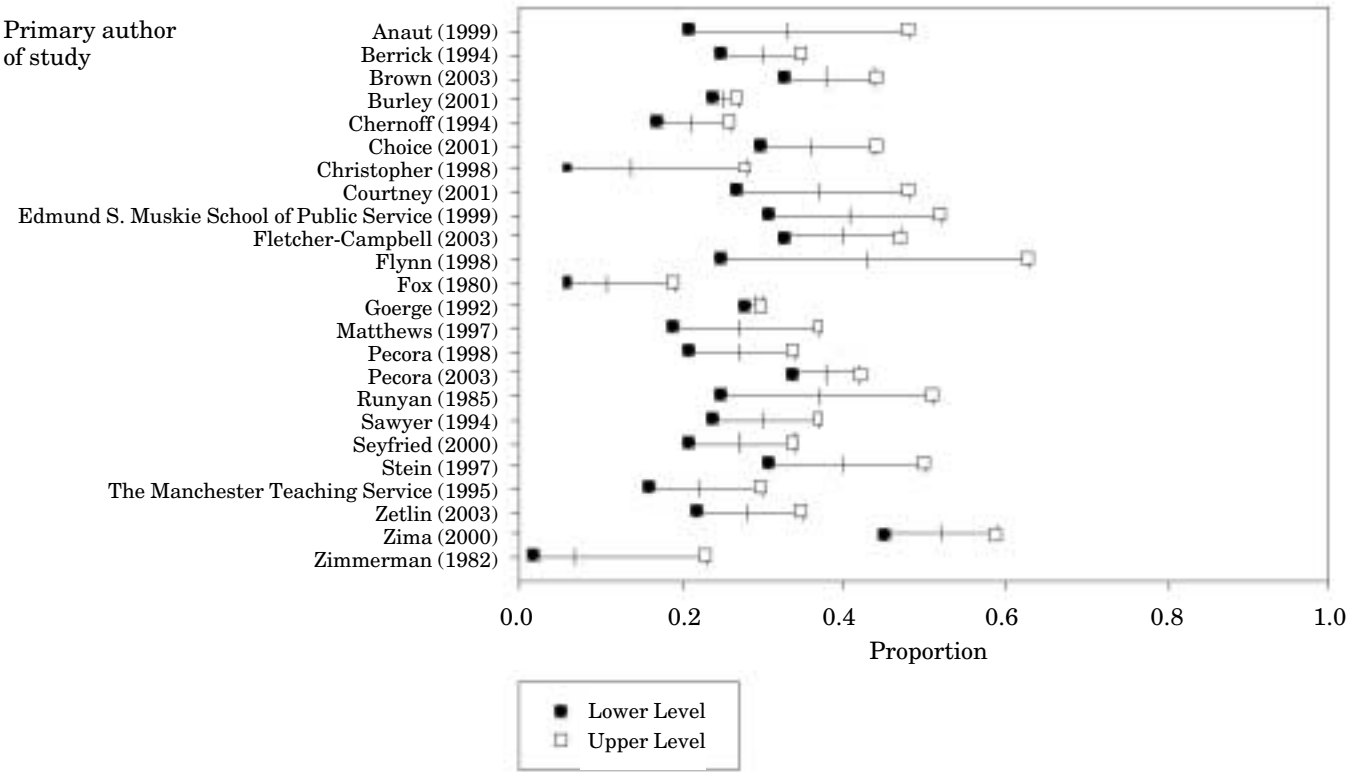

Figure 1 *Weighted mean ES special education proportions by study*

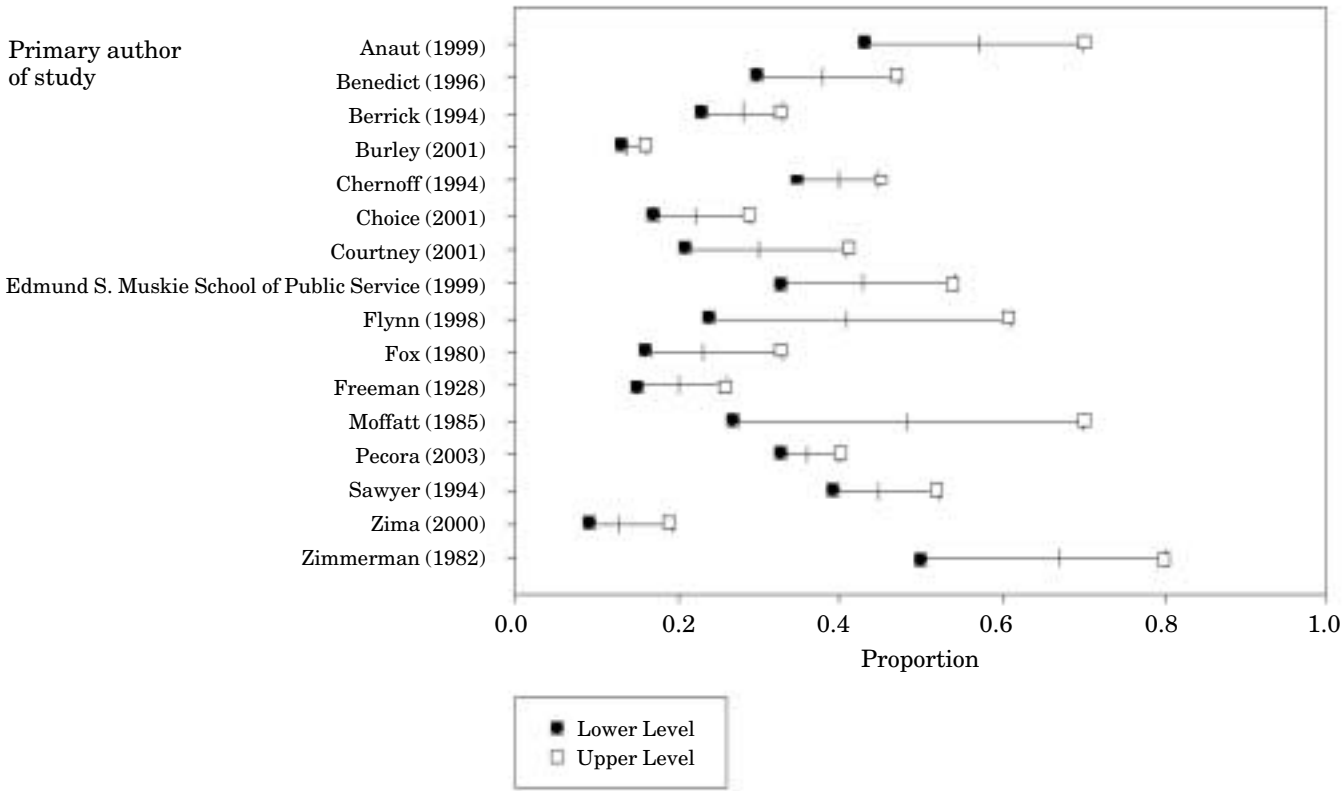

Figure 2 *Weighted mean ES retention proportions by study*

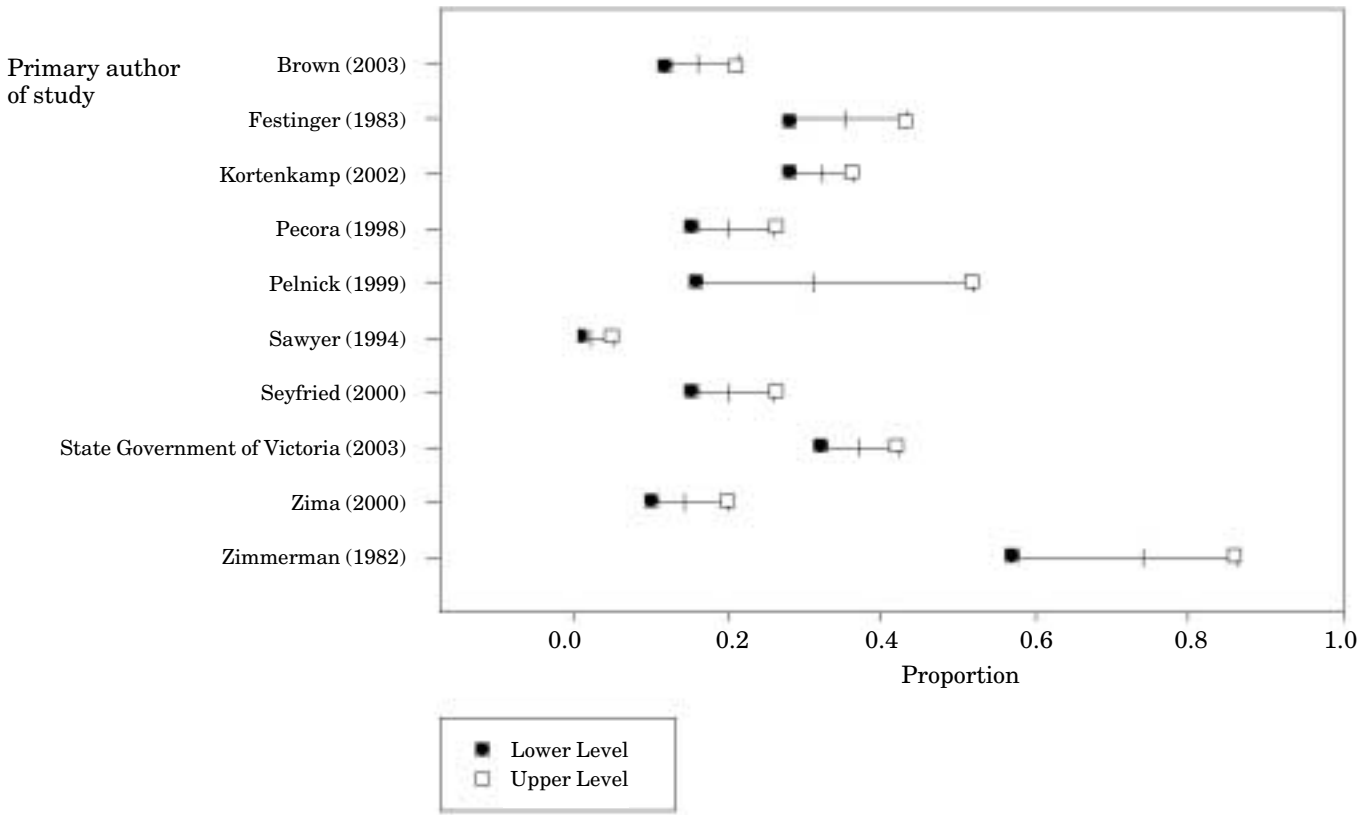

Figure 3 *Weighted mean ES suspension/expulsion proportions by study*

Similar to those dealing with special education proportions, studies handling grade retention rates usually failed to implement comparison groups either at all or in a manner appropriate for meta-analysis. Only one of the studies met these criteria (i.e. Flynn and Biro, 1998). These authors contrasted retention rates for a sample of 43 youth living in foster homes to those of 1,600 students who lived with their families of origin. Forty-one percent of the former group and 9 percent of the latter, had been held back at least once. This translated into a weighted OR of 7.03. Foster children in the study were about seven times more likely to be retained than were other students.

Suspension/expulsion

Ten studies, with a combined sample size of 3,646, were included in the analysis of disciplinary action. According to the mean proportion ES, 24 percent of students in foster care had been suspended or expelled from school at least once. The 99 percent CI was indicated by a range of 15 to 36 percent of students. These results are unlikely to have occurred due to chance factors, $z = -5.03$, $p < 0.001$. A larger proportion of suspensions and expulsions occurred among fostered children in the 1980s than in the 1990s and 2000s. Proportions of fostered students having been suspended or expelled in each study are reflected in Figure 3.

Similar to the other outcomes, only one study assessed proportions of disciplinary actions for fostered youth compared with other students (i.e. Kortenkamp and Ehrle, 2002). The sample size consisted of 819 children living in foster care and 67,865 students living in their original family homes. Thirty-two percent of the former group had been suspended or expelled, contrasted with just 13 percent of the latter group. The resulting weighted OR of 3.15 suggests students from foster homes were approximately three times more likely than their peers to have faced disciplinary actions.

Discussion

The results of the meta-analyses illuminated the educational experiences of youth in foster homes in multiple countries. Many reports offered information regarding one-variable relationships, which contributed to exploratory meta-analyses. These results helped answer the question of what the educational standings of children in foster care are. There was limited information to answer the second question, which asked how students in foster care compare to their peers in terms of educational outcomes. Few comparison studies were conducted and fewer were appropriate for meta-analysis. Some important conclusions can be drawn from the available data, however.

Special education eligibility

A high proportion of students living in foster care were determined to be in need of special education services. Although only two studies made direct comparisons between fostered youth and their peers, it appeared students in foster care were about five times more likely than their peers living in their original homes to be identified as requiring special education assistance. Compared to the USA's special education identification average of 13 percent of all students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), the fostered student average of 31 percent found in this investigation is a source of concern. According to the present meta-analysis, the percentage of students in foster care, who were identified for special education services in the group of countries represented in this project, increased in recent years.

It is possible fostered youth are being appropriately identified for special services. Authors of some studies conjecture many fostered youth who may need services do not receive them (Brown and Coleman, 2003; Choice et al., 2001). A second hypothesis, however, is they have been victimized by gaps in instruction due to the transiency and frequent school changes inherent in their situations. The negative impact of excessive school mobility on academic achievement has been documented consistently (e.g. Mehana and Reynolds, 2004; Temple and Reynolds, 1999). It is questionable whether special education is the appropriate environment for this sort of remediation. It is possible foster youth are being served inappropriately in this regard. The increase may reflect insufficient general education interventions designed to off-set the risks associated with foster home placement.

Grade failure and retention

Retention has been used with fostered students with relative frequency. This investigation determined 33 percent of students living in foster care had failed a grade or been retained at least once during their time in school. According to the National Association of School Psychologists (2003), 15 percent of students in the USA are retained every year, and many are held back multiple times. Between 30–50 percent have been retained one or more times by 9th grade. Given these statistics, fostered youth roughly match their peers. However, more studies with direct comparisons are needed for clearer conclusions to be drawn.

The percentage of fostered youth who were retained across the cumulative Canadian, French, and US samples decreased in the last two decades. This is a hopeful indicator. Professionals may be recognizing the potentially negative impacts of retention (e.g. Jimerson, 2001) and using it more judiciously with this population of students. Regardless, given the ineffectiveness of retention, using it so frequently among any population of students is unwarranted.

Disciplinary actions

Disciplinary actions were reported in the literature from Australia and the USA. Suspension and expulsion proportions were often combined in the studies, rendering it impossible to separate them for meta-analysis. Approximately 24 percent of foster youth in the overall sample had been suspended or expelled at least once during their time in school. Only one peer-comparison study was eligible for meta-analysis in this project. Results indicated the fostered group was approximately three times more likely than their peers to have encountered disciplinary actions at school. The most recent data available indicate, as of the year 2000, nearly 7 percent of all US students had been suspended or expelled (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Thus, the 24 percent proportion of foster youth in this meta-analysis having been similarly disciplined is concerning. This is especially poignant given the negative effects of suspension and expulsion on academic achievement (e.g. Rausch and Skiba, 2004). Fortunately, disciplinary proportions seem to have dropped slightly for foster youth in recent decades. Perhaps educational personnel are developing more inclusive behavioural supports for these students.

Still, a high proportion of fostered youth are punished severely in the academic environment. Whereas these youth may legitimately have more behavioural difficulties than their peers due to their unfavourable backgrounds, it is equally likely they are being unfairly targeted by unprepared systems. Efforts should be focused on better management of these students within the least restrictive environment with early intervention, positive behavioural supports, functional behaviour analyses and plans and school- and community-based mental health services.

Limitations

No matter how comprehensive the effort, it would be impossible to retrieve all studies addressing the educational status of children in foster care. First, it was especially difficult to retrieve unpublished research reports. Second, statistically insignificant findings are rarely published despite their potentially informative value. Undoubtedly, some studies were not represented in these analyses.

This project only included studies written in English. These guidelines limited generalizability of the findings to those countries with foster care systems similar to those included in the analyses of English studies, most of which were produced by investigators in the USA. Therefore, important information from additional cultures was probably not uncovered.

Summary and future directions

Exploratory meta-analyses revealed information about the educational experiences of fostered youth in multiple countries. These children were found to be placed in special education at higher rates than their non-fostered peers. Conversely, they have been retained at levels comparable to their peers and with indications of a downward trend. Even so, retention rates for all students are problematic due to the lack of evidence-based support. Although a downward trend has been noted regarding suspensions and expulsions of students living in foster care, they have been disciplined at rates exceeding their peers.

The most glaring gap in the literature encompasses explanatory investigations. Narrative comparisons can be made, but more powerful conclusions should be drawn from additional comparison studies on all educational outcomes. Moderating variables should be identified and addressed effectively to facilitate further explanatory meta-analyses as well. For example, the impact of frequent moves and attendance problems on educational outcomes for this particular population should be assessed. Outcomes related to nationality, gender, ethnicity and other demographic variables are worthy of exploration also. If factions of the foster care population at greatest risk of academic underachievement can be identified, preventative services could be most effectively provided. Currently, most reports do not isolate foster care populations according to specific characteristics, presumably because accurate data regarding this group are difficult to collect, especially in large quantities.

As Kavale and Forness (2000) astutely acknowledged, meta-analyses provide the most appropriate research methodology upon which to base suggestions for policy change. Accordingly, implications for serving fostered youth emerged from this project. To address high special education eligibility, early identification and pre-referral interventions which target the unique risk status of children in foster placement should be created. Similarly, students' responses to such interventions need to be monitored and related data should contribute heavily to special education eligibility decisions. School psychologists recognize the futility of grade retention under most circumstances and must promote and apply this knowledge to fostered youth, who may evidence wide gaps in their educational backgrounds. Other less socially and emotionally damaging interventions would undoubtedly serve these at-risk children better than retention over time. Various forms of tutoring could be implemented. More specifically, programs which train foster parents to work collaboratively with school personnel in the area of academic support could be designed. Regarding high discipline rates, consideration of least restrictive environment should be made. Early intervention, including positive behavioural supports, functional

behaviour analyses and plans and mental health services, should be enacted. School psychologists have the responsibility to advocate for appropriate educational opportunities for all students. Those living in foster care are no exception to this expectation.

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