

# Implications of Involvement in Formal Care Systems for Young People's Education

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## Introduction

Formal care systems are defined as out-of-home based settings such as foster care, residential care, or group home care (Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal, 2011). Typically, young people enter a formal care system when they have been removed from their family home to protect them from neglect and abuse (Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal, 2011). Although many young people are eventually able to return home and live with their parents or other family members, just over 40% of young people who enter formal care are not able to be reunified with their family (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). Instead, these young people will spend their childhood and adolescence growing up in formal care.

## Research Context

Published research demonstrates that young people who grow up in formal care settings experience distinct education-related developmental challenges. For example, in comparison to their non-care peers, young people in formal care demonstrate less school engagement (Pears, Kim, Fisher, & Yoerger, 2013), receive lower grades (Berlin, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2011), and perform lower on standardized tests (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). Young people in formal care have also been found to repeat grades twice as often (Burley & Halpern, 2001) and to be suspended and expelled at higher rates than their non-care peers (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004). In light of this information, perhaps unsurprisingly, it has also been found that young people involved

in formal care are less likely to graduate high school (Blome, 1997; Courtney et al., 2011) and less likely to pursue a postsecondary education (Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2006).

Furthermore, even those who successfully begin a postsecondary education are more likely to drop out prematurely (Courtney et al., 2011; Day, Dworksy, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011) than their non-care peers.

These disheartening educational outcomes, which dominate the literature on the topic of young people in-care and their educational experiences, raises some important questions: (a) What are the environmental influences that exist in these young people's lives that contribute to their problematic educational experiences? and (b) How do these environmental influences negatively impact these young people's educational outcomes? Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST) to provide an organizing framework, this paper addresses these questions by exploring the existing literature base.

### **Ecological Systems Theory**

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), a young person's development is greatly affected by the systems that exist within their environment and the interrelationships that occur among these systems. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory suggests that, when complications unfold in a young person's life, it not only may be related to their immediate environment, but further, it may be related to the comprehensive ecological context in which the young person exists. Indeed, EST provides a useful structure to begin thematically organizing the environmental influences experienced by young people involved in formal care, and creates a conceptual framework to explore how these environmental influences may be affecting their educational development.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposes there are five systems of

environment to consider: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem includes a young person's most immediate surroundings that directly impact their lives, such as their family, friends, and school. The mesosystem consists of the interactions that occur among different aspects of a young person's microsystem, such as an interaction between a young person's parent and teacher. The exosystem includes environmental aspects which indirectly effect a young person, such as a young person's parent being laid-off from their employment. The macrosystem consists of the larger cultural environment in which the young person exists, such as the economy, politics, and culture in which the young person is living. Finally, the chronosystem addresses the temporal dimension of development, and includes events and changes that occur during a young person's lifespan (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, it is important to note that chronosystem influences will be excluded from the present discussion because no distinct event can be solely conceptualized by the chronosystem, and the research questions which guide this paper are designed to explore particular events and investigate how these events may impact the educations of young people in formal care.

### **Microsystem Influences**

**Childhood maltreatment.** The leading reason that young people enter the formal care system, is due to experiencing abandonment, neglect, or abuse (Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Pecora et al., 2006). Among a sample of 659 young adults who had been placed in formal care during their childhood or adolescence, 93% reported experiencing childhood maltreatment by their birth family, and 64% reported their experience of maltreatment led to them being placed into care (Pecora et al., 2006). Furthermore,

among a sample of 141 young adults who had been placed in formal care during their childhood or adolescence, over one-third reported experiencing neglect, 13% reported experiencing physical abuse, and 2% reported experiencing sexual abuse during their time in formal care itself (Courtney et al., 2001).

The experience of childhood maltreatment has been found to have negative influences on a young person's education. Hildyard and Wolfe (2002) report that childhood maltreatment has a negative effect on young people's cognitive, social, and behavioral development, which, in turn, adversely impacts their academic performance. Further, McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, and Thompson (2003) find that childhood maltreatment is associated with school grade repetition and school grade failure. Additionally, Buys, Tilbury, Creed, and Crawford (2011) demonstrate that childhood maltreatment, experienced either before entering formal care or during young people's time in-care, negatively effects young people's capacity to focus on their schoolwork and, consequently, leads to academic difficulty and impaired future academic opportunities.

### **Mesosystem Influences**

**Relationships between caregivers and school.** Research demonstrates that family involvement in a young person's education has a positive effect on their academic achievement (Ma, Shen, Krem, Hu, & Yuan, 2016). However, it is typical that young people in formal care either have no relationship or a limited relationship with their family. Instead, young people in formal care may identify a non-family formal caregiver, such as a foster parent or group home worker, as their primary source of educational support (Tilbury, Creed, Buys, & Crawford, 2011).

Although young people in formal care may identify non-family caregivers as a source of educational support, research

demonstrates this support may not be equivalent to the support non-care peers receive from their family. Specifically, Blome (1997) demonstrated that, in comparison to natural parents, non-family caregivers were less likely to monitor homework, visit the young person's classroom, attend parent-teacher conferences, or volunteer at their young person's school. Blome (1997) also found that non-family caregivers provide significantly less financial support for their young person's educational endeavors and academic aspirations than natural parents provide for their birth children.

### **Exosystem Influences**

**Placement instability.** Placement instability is one of the largest problems experienced by young people in formal care. When young people in formal care change placement settings, it not only involves relocating to a new residence, but it typically also involves moving to a new community, adapting to a new school, adjusting to new caregivers, creating new friendships, and forming a new peer network. Placement changes are characterized by the experience of loss of an environment the young person had likely only recently acclimated to, as well as the distress of being uprooted into a new and unknown environment. Even though placement instability has been widely linked to greater issues in psychological, emotional, and social functioning among young people in formal care, it continues to occur at alarmingly high rates (Courtney et al., 2001; Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Pecora et al., 2006; Reilly, 2003; Rice et al., 2017). For example, within Pecora and colleagues' (2006) sample of 659 young adults who had formerly been in-care, participants reported moving placements an average of 1.4 times per year. To further complicate things, Calvin (2001) documents that it typically requires four to six months for a young person in formal care to

recover academically from the disruption of moving placements. When information from these two studies is considered together, it must be concluded that many young people in-care are still in the process of settling into a new environment and recovering from the academic disruption of their previous relocation when they are on the move yet again.

Research also reveals that placement instability has a negative effect on the educational outcomes of young people in formal care. Among a sample of 65 young people in formal care, Buys and colleagues (2011) found that placement instability was linked to issues related to settling into school, forming social relationships, engaging in day-to-day planning, and participating in future-oriented planning. Among a sample of 329 young people involved in formal care, Scannapieco, Smith, and Blakeney-Strong (2016) found an inverse relationship between the number of placement moves young people experienced and their level of academic achievement. Similarly, among a sample of 87 young people who had formerly been in-care, Kufeldt (2003) found an inverse relationship between participants number of school moves and later educational outcomes.

### **Macrosystem Influences**

**Care status stigma.** Many young people in formal care express feeling ashamed of their in-care status, believing this label characterizes them as being somehow different and inferior to their non-care peers. Consequently, many of these young people report experiencing feelings of low self-confidence and believe others hold a negative perception of them (Buys et al., 2011). Among a sample of 65 young people in formal care, Buys and colleagues (2011) found that related to the stigma of being in-care, many believed they were treated inequitably at school because academic authority figures saw them as “trouble-makers.”

Additionally, these young people also reported experiencing bullying by both peers and teachers in relation to their in-care status. Many who endure the consequences of the negative stigmatization related to being in-care also report that this negative treatment compounds issues they experience in school related to being able to focus on their schoolwork, which, in turn, negatively affects their school grades and academic achievements (Buys et al., 2011).

Moreover, although this previously mentioned research is presented through the perspective of young people in-care, another body of research, taken from the perspective of academic authority figures, supports the veracity of these young people's beliefs. For example, Powers and Stotland (2002) report that some teachers are less likely to feel a sense of commitment toward the educations of young people involved in formal care because they hold the belief that these students will only be in their classroom for a short period of time. Additionally, Powers and Stotland (2002) also document that some teachers do, in fact, believe that young people in formal care are less educationally capable than their non-care peers. Furthermore, among a sample of school-based guidance counsellors who have experience working with young people in formal care, Tilbury and colleagues (2011) found these professionals expressed pessimism toward the potential academic outcomes of young people in-care.

## **Conclusions**

Reflecting on the implications of involvement in formal care systems for young people's education, one unmistakable conclusion is that professionals working with this vulnerable population must substantially improve the services they provide. Specifically, educators and counsellors need to better understand how to provide young people involved in formal care with

appropriate and adequate support to meet their educational needs. Based on the literature explored in this paper, three recommendations for professionals working with this population can be made. Educators working with children and adolescents in formal care would benefit from: (a) becoming informed of the historic and on-going experiences that can affect the academic performance of these young people, (b) challenging and breaking down the stereotype that these young people are somehow inherently less capable than their non-care peers, and (c) making additional efforts to encourage the academic potential of young people in-care. Although these measures will not prevent young people from experiencing circumstances and life events that will have a negative impact on their education, they can mitigate the influence of these experiences and may possibly provide counterbalancing and supportive influences for young people who find themselves involved in the formal care system.

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