



EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF FOSTER CHILDREN IN FLANDERS

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CONTENT

Background

Methods

Results

Discussion



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Background

INTRODUCTION

- Research has documented an important gap between educational outcomes of children in care and their peers across many countries (Berridge, 2012; Dill et al., 2012; Goddard, 2000; Scherr, 2007; Trout et al., 2008)
- Raising educational attainment is an important strategy to interrupt the negative life trajectories of young people with care experiences (Buehler et al., 2000; Dregan et al., 2011; Dregan & Gulliford, 2012; Forsman et al., 2016; Gypen et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2009; Vinnerljung & Hjern, 2011)
- However, little is known about the educational status of Flemish foster children
- In this study and educational gap is operationalized as:
 - Referral to special education
 - Being grade retained during school career

CHILD CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH EDUCATIONAL GAP

- Poor attention span, reduced inhibition, ... have a negative influence in school performance
- Learning or emotional disorder (Zetlin et al., 2004), developmental disorder, mental issues, sleeping problems (Buser et al., 2014; Kobau et al., 2011; Lehmann et al., 2013; Pecora, 2012), physical disabilities and health problems (O'Higgins et al., 2017) are associated with lower grades and/or special education
- Youngsters entering care at later age have less favorable educational outcomes (O'Hare et al., 2023; O'Higgins et al., 2017)
- Not being accepted or excluded is a threat for foster children's educational success (McClung & Gayle, 2010).
- Absenteeism as a result of low school engagement and truancy, and being suspended is associated with poor academic functioning (Zorc et al., 2013).

BIRTH PARENT CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH EDUCATIONAL GAP

- A positive association between contact with birth parents and academic performance was found (Rees, 2013)
- More maltreatment events is associated with a higher likelihood of educational underachievement (O'Hare et al., 2023.)
- Although pre-care experiences have an important influence on the educational problems of children in care, the influence of the kind of abuse children experienced is not clear (O'Higgins et al., 2017; Zorc et al., 2013)

FOSTER PARENT CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH EDUCATIONAL GAP

- Foster parent's involvement in their foster children's schoolwork largely predicts educational success (McClung & Gayle, 2010; Wise et al., 2010).
- The larger foster families are (including biological children, other foster children), the slower foster children make progress at school (Dubowitz and Sawyer, 1994).
- However, many studies do find no difference between non-kinship and kinship foster families (Iglehart, 1994; O'Hare et al., 2023; O'Higgins et al., 2017; Scannapieco et al., 1997; Winokur et al., 2014).

PLACEMENT CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH EDUCATIONAL GAP

- In turn, children perform better at school when they expect their stay in a foster family to be permanent (O'Higgins et al., 2017).
- A negative correlation between the number of school changes and academic results exists (Höjer et al., 2018; Washington et al., 2021)
- Zima et al. (2000) found increased odds of academic skills delay with each additional placement
- Extra support for the foster child and/or the foster parents are associated with better school functioning (O'Higgins et al., 2017).

AIM OF PRESENT STUDY

- Identify what variables are associated with Flemish foster children's educational status, and in particular the educational gap
 - being in regular or special education
 - Being grade retained (expressed in number of didactic months lagging behind peers)

METHOD

PROCEDURE

- 490 case files
 - of Flemish foster children
 - in short term or long-term foster care
 - at least 1 year in foster care
 - going to school (3-18 or +18 and going to school)
 - selected at random from four out of five foster care agencies were analyzed
- Casefiles were analyzed using a coding scheme consisting of questions regarding the educational status, and child, birth parents, foster parents and placement characteristics
- Variables with more than 5% of missing data were excluded from analysis: IQ of the child, quality of contact of the child with peers, and age, educational level, civil state, occupation and mother tongue of biological parents
- Assessment of interrater reliability of included variables was done by four researchers, based on 44 randomly selected files. κ 's varied from .48 to 1, showing moderate to excellent agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977), ICC of the CBC total score was .68, showing moderate agreement.

RESULTS

CHILD CHARACTERISTICS

Child characteristics	M(SD)/n(%)	Range
Gender		
female	252 (51%)	
male	228 (49%)	
Age	13.05 (3.38)	6-22
Age at first placement	4.71 (4.05)	0-17
Main language		
Dutch	436 (89%)	
other	54 (12%)	
Foreign roots	101 (21%)	
Learning or developmental disorder	91 (19%)	
Psychiatric problems	56 (11%)	
Health problems	30 (5%)	
Physical disability	19 (4%)	
Contact with peers outside of school	425 (87%)	
CBC total score (0-26)	3.55 (3.95)	0-19
School type		
primary school	203 (41%)	
secondary school	287 (59%)	
Type of education		
regular	407 (83%)	
special	83 (17%)	
Grade retention (in months) (n = 407)	3.86 (6.44)	0-30
Grade retention > 10 months (n = 407)	124 (31%)	
Truancy problems	29 (6%)	
Suspensions	12 (2%)	
Being bullied	44 (9%)	
Number of school changes	1.11 (1.29)	0-7
Number with more than 1 school change	293 (60%)	

BIRTH PARENT CHARACTERISTICS

Birth parent characteristics		
Birth family contact		
	no	123 (25%)
	sometimes	216 (44%)
	often	151 (31%)
Abuse in the birth family		
	physical	73 (15%)
	emotional	39 (8%)
	sexual	14 (3%)

FOSTER FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

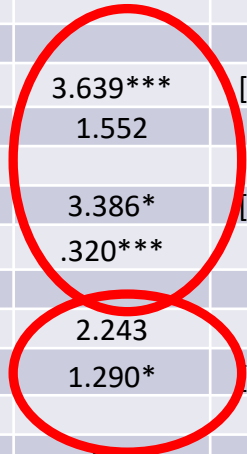
Foster parent characteristics	M (sd)/N(%)	Range
Foster family type		
non-kinship	234 (48%)	
kinship	256 (52%)	
School involvement foster mother		
not involved	206 (42%)	
monthly	8 (2%)	
weekly	122 (25%)	
daily	140 (29%)	
missing	14 (2.9%)	
Number of other children in foster family	1.57 (1.47)	0-9

PLACEMENT CHARACTERISTICS

Placement characteristics	M (sd))/n(%)	Range
Court-ordered (yes/no)	323 (66%)	
Foster care type		
short-term	17 (4%)	
long-term	473 (96%)	
Duration of stay in current foster family (years)	8.13 (3.87)	1-17
Number of prior placements	.70 (.98)	0-8
School involvement foster care worker (yes/no)	46 (9%)	
Support courses (extra for foster child) (yes/no)	247 (50%)	

LOGISTIC REGRESSION SPECIAL EDUCATION

Variables	Univariately		Final model		95%CI
	Wald	OR	Wald	OR	
<i>Child characteristics</i>					
Gender	3.397	1.566			
Age time research	.395	1.023			
Age at first placement	.006	1.002			
Foreign roots	3.225	.528			
Language FC	.194	.570			
Learning or developmental disorder	29.917	4.261***	15.375	3.639***	[1.908;6.940]
Psychiatric problems	14.582	3.272***	1.301	1.552	[.729;3.304]
Health problems	1.400	1.788			
Physical disability	5.086	3.032*	5.084	3.386*	[1.173;9.776]
Social contacts	22.903	.247***	11.956	.320***	[.168;.610]
truancy	.216	.774			
suspensions	7.806	5.208**	1.445	2.243	[.601;8.377]
School changes	19.434	1.454***	5.77	1.290*	[1.048;1.588]
bullying	.053	1.099			
Behavior problems	20.532	1.137***	.003	.998	[.922;1.079]
<i>Birth family characteristics</i>					
contact	.196	.931			
Physical abuse	.305	1.197			
Emotional abuse	1.306	.538			
Sexual abuse	.072	.813			
<i>Foster parent characteristics</i>					
School involvement foster mother	7.097	1.297**	.010	.989	[.788;1.241]
Foster family type	1.103	.776			
Number of children	1.987	.883			
<i>Placement characteristics</i>					
Court-ordered	.306	1.154			
Number of prior placements	9.675	1.405**	3.363	1.277	[.983;1.658]
Extra support foster child	3.822	1.615			
Duration of placement	.427	1.021			
Involvement school social worker	1.311	.571			



contact with peers outside of school (0 = no, 1 = yes);
suspensions (0 = no, 1 = yes); foster family type (0 = non-kinship, 1 = kinship).

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

LINEAR REGRESSION GRADE RETENTION

	Univariately		Final model		95% CI
	B	β	B	β	
Child characteristics					
gender	.958	.074			
Age time research	.667	.351***	.433	.228**	[.213;.637]
Age at first placement	.426	.266***	.122	.076	[-.083;.309]
Foreign roots	1.467	.095			
Language FC	1.533	.075			
Learning or developmental dis	1.839	.099			
Psychiatric problems	1.863	.082			
Health problems	-.956	-.030			
Physical disability	3.753	.099			
Social contacts	-2.273	-.104			
truancy	5.692	.212**	2.096	.078	[-1.636;5.859]
suspensions	11.309	.212**	85.417	.102†	[-.593;11.537]
School changes	1.336	.256***	.604	.116	[-.084;1.318]
bullying	1.863	.082			
Behavior problems	.279	.161**	.135	.078	[-.029;.318]
Birth family characteristics					
contact	-.566	-.066			
Physical abuse	.444	.024			
Emotional abuse	.156	.007			
Sexual abuse	-.540	-.014			
Foster parent characteristics					
School involvement foster mother	.289	.058			
Foster family type	1.608	.125**	1.064	.082	[-.185;2.429]
Number of children	-.094	-.021			
Placement characteristics					
Court-ordered	-.132	-.010			
Number of prior placements	.653	.093			
Extra support foster child	.394	.031			
Duration of placement	.020	.083			
Involvement school social worker	2.780	.130*	1.464	.069	[-.685;3.958]

contact with peers outside of school (0 = no, 1 = yes);
suspensions (0 = no, 1 = yes); foster family type (0 =
non-kinship, 1 = kinship)

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. † = .050

LOGISTIC REGRESSION GRADE RETENTION

variable	Univariately		Final model		95%CI
	Wald	OR	Wald	OR	
<i>Child characteristics</i>					
Gender	2.054	1.459			
Age time research	41.540	1.280***	18.933	1.219***	[1.115-1.333]
Age at first placement	26.399	1.151***	1.928	1.050	[.980-1.125]
Migrant	3.829	1.630↓			
Language FC	2.826	1.716			
Learning or developmental dis	5.474	1.981*	1.531	1.584	[.782-3.210]
Psychiatric problems	5.033	2.208*	2.106	1.886	[.800-4.356]
Health problems	1.319	.476			
Physical disability	4.069	3.326*	1.517	2.580	[.599-11.118]
Social contacts	3.520	.526			
Truancy	7.506	3.147**	3.815	1.533	[.606-3.874]
Suspensions	13.898	-.***			
School changes	18.012	1.455***	2.474	1.179	[.960-1.446]
Bulling	3.542	1.948			
Behavior problems	13.369	1.109***	2.228	1.058	[.983-1.139]
<i>Birth family characteristics</i>					
Contact	1.283	.850			
Physical abuse	.852	1.315			
Emotional abuse	.017	1.051			
Sexual abuse	.173	.755			
<i>Foster parent characteristics</i>					
School involvement foster mother	2.307	1.136			
Foster family type	5.477	1.673*	2.923	1.587δ	[.935-2.694]
Number of children	.649	.941			
<i>Placement characteristics</i>					
Court-ordered	.301	1.134			
Number of prior placements	3.123	1.223			
Extra support foster child	2.945	1.450			
Duration of placement	.003	1.002			
Involvement school social worker	5.365	2.167*	1.084	1.498	[.700-3.206]

suspensions (0 = no, 1 = yes); foster family type (0 = non-kinship, 1 = kinship); .

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. ↓ = .050; δ = .09

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION

- 17% of foster children were in special education. This number is high compared to 4% of the whole primary and secondary Flemish school population in special education (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2021)
- The high number of children in special education is worrisome. Results in foster children less included in regular education, and consequently have a higher risk of exclusion, stigmatization, social inequality, disadvantage and low performance expectations (Eiberg & Olsen, 2022; Hansson et al., 2018; Nicaise, 2000; O'Higgins et al., 2017; Petry, 2015).
- Mostly child characteristics (learning or developmental disorders, physical disability, no contact with peers outside of school) and the number of school changes turned out to be significant predictors for the likelihood of being in special education
- The high number of school changes might indicate that everything is done to keep the foster child in regular education
- This might question the grounds for orientation to special education. When educational problems and gaps are the result of discontinuities of schooling provoked by school changes due to the placement or placement changes, special education is an indicator of the negative impact of foster care placement on the school career of foster children and not necessarily a reflection of the (special) needs of foster children

DISCUSSION

- The involvement of the foster mother is univariately associated with special education suggesting that (1) foster mothers are aware of the difficulties and (2) that involvement and awareness of the difficulties might lead to orienting the child to special education in order to “protect” or “unburden” the child from difficulties in regular education. However, multivariately child characteristics and school changes are more important.

DISCUSSION

- Looking at grade retention about 31% of foster children were lagging behind at least one school year. Again, this number is high compared to 16% of the whole primary and secondary Flemish school population being grade retained (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2022)
- Only 1 child characteristic (age of the child at the moment of the research) was significantly associated with being retained. The older the child was, the bigger the gap.
 - This finding might indicate that foster care is not protective for an educational gap
 - Duration of placement is not (negatively) associated with grade retention suggesting that the placement is not able to reverse the already negative evolution started before placement
- Kinship care is associated with higher likelihood of grade retention. Might be the result of profile of kinship carers. Kinship foster parents are a more vulnerable population They are older, poorer, less educated and are more often single-parent families (Ehrle & Geen, 2002).

DISCUSSION

- The involvement of the foster foster care worker is univariately associated with grade retention suggesting that (1) foster workers are aware of the difficulties, but involvement is not able to reverse
- Foster mothers and foster care workers were little involved in schooling of the foster children
 - Although not significantly associated it can be assumed that higher involvement should lead to better school results

LIMITATIONS

- Only 490 cases analyzed
- Only cases with duration of minimum 1 year were included
- Case files were used to extract data, a methodology that is dependent on the accuracy of records
- Missing out on valuable information might have occurred since a number of variables were excluded due to too much missing data.

CONCLUSION

- Educational status of Flemish foster children is worrisome, given the long-term implications of the educational status (not obtaining a degree, being in special education)
- More attention and more targeted support might improve the educational status

Thank you!



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