The Academic Functioning of Youth in Residential Care

University of Nebraska – Lincoln
Center for At-Risk Children's Services

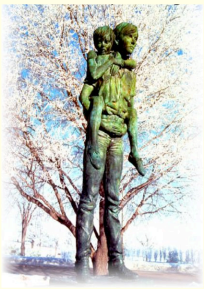
Alexandra Trout, Jessica Hagaman, Katy Casey, & Annette Griffith

Discussant - Betsy Farmer, Ph.D., Penn State University

1

Partnership

- Boys Town
  - Nonprofit, nonsectarian organization
  - Serves over 740 children and youth
  - Continuum of services
  - Full service home campus
- CACS/BT
  - Objective evaluation of programs/services to promote short and long-term child outcomes



2

Guiding Questions

What is Known…

- Mental health and behavioral characteristics
  - Elevated behavioral and mental health problems
  - Family instability
- School related characteristics
  - More likely to have an identified disability
  - High rates of mobility
  - Poor parent/school collaboration
  - Overall, poor educational outcomes

What is Unknown…

- Specific Functioning
  - Academic
  - Behavioral
  - Mental health
- Limitations of the current knowledge base
- Differences between subpopulations
- Predictors of academic success

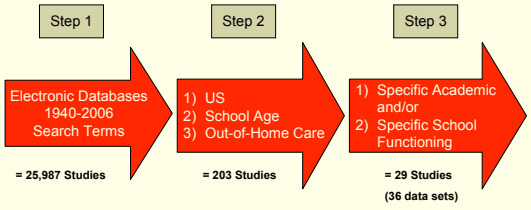
3

Literature Review: Purpose

- Identify the academic status of youth in out-of-home placements
  - Characteristics
  - Academic functioning
  - School functioning
  - Quality of the articles

4

Method: Selection of Articles



5

Method: Variables Coded

- Demographics
  - Gender, race, special education
- Academic Areas
  - Grades, academic achievement, effect size
- School Functioning
  - Attendance, number of schools attended, retention

- Research Quality

6

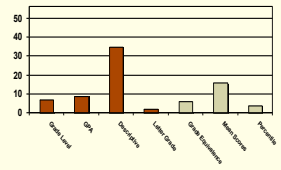
Results: Demographics

- Quality
  - Several participant and setting characteristics were consistently reported (e.g., gender, age)
  - Some important demographic variables were not reported (e.g., SES, previous placements)
- Results
  - Participants were primarily male, Caucasian, and roughly 13 years old
  - High involvement in special education
  - Low average on measures of IQ

7

Results: Academic

Quality



Results

- Youth performed below grade level
- Scored in low-to-low average range
- Teacher ratings identify these youth as "academically at-risk"

8

Results: School Functioning

- Quality
  - Reported in 33% of data sets
  - Inconsistent reporting
- Results
  - Frequent school changes
  - High grade retention
  - Elevated school drop-out

9

Overall Quality of the Research

- Academics not reported consistently
  - Standard scores
  - Grade equivalents
  - Teacher ratings
  - GPA
- Area being assessed/measured not clearly described or defined (e.g., reading, number of schools attended)
- Interventions
- Effect sizes could not be calculated

10

Conclusions

- Children in out-of-home care are a population at risk of school failure.
- Little information known about the specific areas of academic and school functioning strengths and limitations.
- Little evidence on how children in care compare to the general population.
- Virtually no studies conducted on sub-groups of children in care, or on children in different levels of restrictiveness across the continuum.

11

Academics Study

- Year One
  - Academic status of youth at entry
  - School functioning variables
- Year Two
  - Youth academic status after one year in care
  - Functional academics
  - Language

12

Purpose: Year One

- To describe youth as they enter care in the following domains:
  - Demographic characteristics
  - School functioning
  - Academic strengths and limitations

13

Method

- Participants
  - 127 youth entering Boys Town
- Data Sources
  - Intake Files
    - Demographics (e.g., race, gender, court involvement, behavior, mental health)
    - School functioning (e.g., special education status, number of schools previously attended, IQ)
  - Academics
    - Woodcock-Johnson Test of Achievement, 3rd Edition (WJIII)

14

Results: Demographics (*N* = 127)

	n (%)	M (SD)
Male	74 (58%)	
Caucasian	67 (53%)	
Court Involved	65 (51%)	
Ward of State	42 (33%)	
MH Diagnosis	69 (54%)	
Special Education	36 (28%)	
Age at Admission		15.3 (1.53)
School Attended		5 (1.98)
Externalizing Behavior		68.92* (8.83)
IQ		95.3 (11.78)

15

Results: Academics (*N* = 127)

Woodcock Johnson III: Tests of Achievement (WJ-III)

WJIII Subscales	*M* (*SD*)	*ES* (*d*)
Reading Fluency	91.11 (13.33)	.63
Math Calculation	91.38 (12.21)	.63
Spelling	98.68 (14.28)	.09
Writing Fluency	94.40 (15.67)	.37
Passage Comprehension	91.14 (11.61)	.67
Applied Problems	90.96 (8.82)	.76
Academic Knowledge	86.56 (12.18)	.99

M = 100, *SD* = 15

16

Conclusions: Year One

- Results of the academic measure indicate these youth to be at-risk
- Nearly 30% of youth are diagnosed with a disability and attend multiple schools
- Academic deficits can impact development of functional life skills
- Other deficit areas are likely present

17

Purpose: Year Two

- Evaluate academic progress of youth since admission
- Assess functional academic skills of youth at admission to care
- Determine language skills of youth at admission to care

18

Additional Measures

- Functional Academics
  - Kaufman Functional Academic Skills Test
- Language Assessment
  - Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals Fourth Edition Screening Test

19

Academic Follow-up (*n* = 52)

Woodcock Johnson III: Tests of Achievement (WJ-III)

WJIII Subscales	Year One *M* (*SD*)	Year Two *M* (*SD*)	*ES* (*d*)
Reading Fluency***	91.58 *(14.45)*	96.17 *(16.20)*	1.38
Math Calculation**	92.79 *(12.17)*	96.48 *(13.21)*	.82
Spelling*	98.83 *(15.01)*	100.79 *(13.22)*	.61
Writing Fluency*	94.65 *(16.01)*	98.42 *(14.40)*	.72
Passage Comprehension	91.54 *(11.89)*	93.42 *(12.39)*	.53
Applied Problems	91.90 *(9.12)*	92.10 *(9.75)*	.07
Academic Knowledge***	85.27 *(13.65)*	88.56 *(12.01)*	1.01

M= 100, *SD*= 15

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

20

Functional Academics (*n* = 39)

Kaufman Functional Academic Skills Test (K-FAST)

Subtest	*M (SD)*
Reading	91.49 *(12.69)*
Math	91.69 *(13.86)*
Composite	90.54 *(12.48)*

M = 100, *SD* = 15

21

Language Screener

Clinical Evaluation of Language (CELF)

- 39 youth completed screener
- 20 (57%) require additional assessment
- Will begin assessing youth using the full CELF battery

22

Year 2: Preliminary Findings

- WJIII follow-up indicates youth have improved during their time in care
- Similar to WJIII, youth are nearly one standard deviation below the mean in functional academics at admission
- Over half of the youth require further language assessment

23

Concluding Thoughts…

- Youth are presenting academic deficits at entry that impact a broad range of skills
- Critical to continue assessment of youth strengths and weaknesses related to academic functioning
- Service providers play an important role in providing academic supports necessary for positive school outcomes

24

Working Together to Assess the Academic Functioning of Youth at the Time of Entry to Residential Care: Lessons Learned

- Establishing a good relationship
- Use of an advisory board
- Working with the IRB
- Working with youth in care
- Future Directions

25

Establishing a Good Relationship

- The partnership between CACS and BT is one that has truly been collaborative
- Ownership of projects from both sides
- Establishing strengths and capitalizing on those
- Frequent & regular meetings at all phases of research

26

Use of an Advisory Board to Help Develop Lines of Research

- Comprised of 6 experts in children's mental health, child welfare, and education
- Work with BT and CACS to:
  - Identify key areas of research
  - Apply for external sources of funding
  - Collaborate on research projects and manuscripts

27

Working with Youth in Care

- High mobility
  - Within program
  - Length of stay
- Enrollment fluctuations
- Child rights
  - In settings with strict rules

28

Future Directions

- Plan to continue to work together to build the research partnership between BT and CACS
- Continue the academic studies
  - Expand the questions asked
    - Youth at entry, during care, and at departure
    - Differences between subgroups
    - Predictors of academic functioning

29

Contact Information

- Presenter Information
  - Alexandra Trout, Ph.D. – atorkelson-trout2@unl.edu
  - Jessica Hagaman, M.A. – jhagaman1@bigred.unl.edu
  - Katy Casey, M.S.E. – kcasey3@bigred.unl.edu
  - Annette Griffith, M.A. – griffith@unlserve.unl.edu
- Center Information (CACS)
  - Center for At-Risk Children's Services – www.unl.edu/cacs/
- Boys Town Information
  - www.boystown.org
- Betsy Farmer, Ph.D. – emf13@psu.edu
- Doctoral Training Opportunities
  - UNL Graduate Opportunities in Special Education http://www.unl.edu/cacs/grad/index.shtml

30