School may be the key to improvement for children in social care

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Children in social care have poorer mental health and perform worse in school than other children. But they have trust in the school staff and perform better after individual assessment at school. These are findings in a doctoral thesis from Linköping University.

Every year, the social services assume the care of more than 10,000 children and adolescents, who for various reasons are not able to live at home. In 2018, for instance, 39,000 children and adolescents lived in foster families or at various types of homes. Previous research shows that these children constitute a risk group in terms of poorer health, abuse and developing drug addiction. Additionally, they have worse prospects at school and on the labor market.

Rikard Tordön's experiences as a psychologist spurred him to make his own contribution to the research into children in state and municipal care.

"When I worked as a psychologist in the foster care sector, I discovered that it is guided by values and political decisions, not by knowledge. I saw a lack of research about what actually works. My thesis shows that initiatives in school can help the children perform better. And these initiatives must be implemented," says Rikard Tordon, psychologist and new Ph.D at Linköping University's Department of Biomedical and Clinical Sciences. His previous roles include national coordinator for Skolfam, a program aimed at increasing the school results of children in foster care.

More vulnerable and less trust in adults

Rikard Tordön's doctoral thesis consists of four studies, published in different scientific journals.

The first study confirms that abuse and mental illness are more common among final-year upper secondary pupils in out-of-home care (OHC). It also found that these children, compared to their non-OHC peers, are less inclined to disclose abuse, in particular to police and social services.

The doctoral thesis' second study shows that on the whole, pupils in OHC have less trust in the adults in their (foster) homes, compared to non-OHC pupils. Of pupils in OHC, one in five reported that it is difficult to turn to their foster parents, although they trust teachers, school nurses and healthcare professionals.

"It's positive that children in OHC trust professionals. This means we've found a channel for reaching these children," says Rikard Tordön.

School results suffer, but this can be remedied

The results from study three show that the intelligence of children in foster care is affected by their insecure situation. An assessment of 856 children in elementary school shows that children in foster care have lower values on tests of, e.g.,
literacy and mathematical skills. They have difficulty with text decoding, literacy and mathematics. However what surprised Rikard Tordön was not that intelligence was affected, but how much it was affected. Children in OHC had a mean value of 91 points, compared to 100 points for children who live with their parents.

But the good news is that this can be remedied. 475 of the children in the previous study took part in a second mapping, following individual intervention according to the Skolfam model. After a two-year individual training plan, the children performed better, in e.g. mathematics and literacy, so-called higher-order executive functions. However, lower-order executive functions and affective functioning, such as text decoding and impulse control, did not change. Moreover, intelligence increased from 91 to 95 points, as mean values, after the first two years of the intervention.

"It is possible to help these children do better in school, and school has a protective effect in the long-term. Now we have to start to measure, systematically, how good we are at helping our vulnerable children, so that we discover what works, and what doesn't work."


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