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Educational neglect: Understanding 20 years of child welfare trends

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ABSTRACT

Educational neglect is an understudied phenomenon that is difficult to define and also to address. While it is clear that attending to children's academic needs is important to child development, few studies focus on educational neglect and therefore little is known about its associated risk factors and the outcomes following this form of maltreatment. The purpose of this research was to (a) determine the rate at which child welfare service providers investigate educational neglect in Canada and identify any trends in rates over time, (b) better understand educational neglect and its distinction from other types of neglect and truancy, and (c) understand how child welfare services respond to allegations of educational neglect. Data from five cycles of the Ontario Incidence Studies of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect were examined. A trend analysis was conducted followed by a mixed-method examination of educational neglect investigations. Results indicate that rates of investigated educational neglect in Ontario have been consistently low over time. However, these investigations are significantly more likely to be substantiated and to be transferred to ongoing child welfare services compared to investigations of other subtypes of neglect. Educational neglect investigations involving younger children are more likely to note risk factors for caregivers whereas those involving adolescents are more likely to note functioning issues for youth. The findings are discussed in relation to international trends in educational neglect and policy and practice implications are explored.

1. Introduction

Educational neglect is an understudied phenomenon that is difficult to define and also to address. It is considered a form of child maltreatment in many jurisdictions, and it usually involves a parent or other caregiver actively or passively neglecting the learning and educational needs of a child, which results in harm to the child's development and well-being. Among adolescents, educational neglect is closely tied to truancy as greater responsibility is placed on the young person to be engaged in education and learning. The neglect of children's educational needs can be devastating to child development. Children who have experienced educational neglect are more likely to take remedial classes and have problems in school (Chapple & Vaske, 2010). These children are also more likely to live with individual, family, and community problems. School absences, particularly when chronic, are associated with children's internalizing and externalizing problems (Iverson, French, Strand, Gotch, & McCurley, 2016; Jaafar et al., 2013), and family poverty, mental health issues, homelessness, substance abuse, crime, and a lack of basic necessities (Blackmon & Cain, 2015). Attending school is associated with better outcomes, including a higher likelihood of individuals achieving full time work, a lower likelihood of experiencing poverty in adulthood, and greater language fluency (Oreopoulos, 2005).

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In the United States, it is estimated that between 30 percent (Mennen, Kim, Sang, & Trickett, 2010) and 47 percent (Sedlak et al., 2010) of neglected children experience educational neglect (NIS-4). Approximately 4.9 per 1000 children in the United States have experienced educational neglect according to the latest available statistics, and there was no significant change in the rates of educational neglect in the United States over time from 1986 to 2006 (Sedlak et al., 2010). Although few estimates are available, European countries also report high rates of neglect overall and high rates of educational neglect (e.g., May-Chahal & Cawson, 2005). In the Netherlands, educational and emotional neglect together accounted for over half of the 22,661 substantiated cases of maltreatment reported to child welfare agencies in 2010, and child protection agencies experienced a 253% increase in reports of educational/emotional neglect from 2005 to 2010 (Euser et al., 2013). By 2010, greater than 18 per 1000 children in the Netherlands experienced educational or emotional neglect (Euser et al., 2013). In Romania, an estimated 34% of adolescents report experiencing educational neglect (Browne, 2002). The high rates of educational neglect reported in these studies warrants the examination of rates in other jurisdictions in order to allow for international comparisons.

While it is clear that attending to children's academic needs is important to child development, few studies focus on educational neglect and therefore little is known about its associated risk factors and the outcomes following this form of maltreatment. This creates challenges in addressing neglectful behaviors among parents and poor school attendance and performance among children and youth. It is critical to better understand the incidence and characteristics of educational neglect in order to design effective interventions to meet the needs of children who experience this type of maltreatment and their families. The objective of this paper is to understand trends in the incidence and characteristics of child welfare investigations focused on educational neglect over the past 20 years in the Province of Ontario (Canada). The incidence of educational neglect will be compared using five cycles of cross-sectional child welfare data collected in 1993, 1998, 2003, 2008, and 2013. The latest available data will then be used to examine current trends in the characteristics of children and families involved in educational neglect investigations and the typical child welfare service response to these families.

1.1. Defining educational neglect

Educational neglect has been defined differently depending on the developmental stage of the child. In very young children, researchers have defined it as a lack of parental involvement in learning and literacy activities, such as learning the alphabet, numbers, colors, shapes, as well as reading to the child (Chapple & Vaske, 2010). Other researchers have developed universal definitions regardless of child age, and have more narrowly defined neglectful behaviors to focus on parents' failing to ensure that their children regularly attend school, and failing to promote their children's school success (Goodvin, Johnson, Hardy, Graef, & Chambers, 2007). These actions may include passively letting a child stay home from school for a certain number of days in a given time period without adequate reason (e.g., illness or family emergency), actively keeping a child out of school, failing to intervene when an adolescent is chronically truant, moving frequently and failing to maintain a child's school enrolment, encouraging a child to drop out of school, or failing to enroll a child in school whatsoever (Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1993; English and the LONGSCAN Investigators, 1997). These behaviors are in line with the generally agreed upon conceptualization of neglect as a parental failure to meet a child's basic needs in a way that results in current or future harm (Maughan & Moore, 2010). Educational neglect may occur simultaneously or sequentially with other forms of neglect and abuse. One study examined substantiated maltreatment investigations and found several examples of educational neglect co-occurring with physical abuse and more general caregiving problems, such as substance misuse (Mennen et al., 2010).

1.2. Educational neglect and truancy

Educational neglect in older children and youth tends to overlap with truancy, which is considered a status offence in many jurisdictions and sometimes criminalized as a problematic youth behavior (Ovink, 2011). Truancy is a legal term defined by most jurisdictions as a specific number of unexcused absences from school over a specific period of time (Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010).

Compulsory school attendance laws define the minimum length of time children and youth must spend in school before they are legally allowed to leave (Oreopoulos, 2005). Such laws emerged in the United States in the early 20th century (Larson, Zuel, & Swanson, 2011) while interest in compulsory schooling arose in the late 19th century in Canada (Oreopoulos, 2005). Compulsory attendance laws rest on the assumption that young people and society as a whole benefit from children staying in and progressing through school (Oreopoulos, 2005). Today in Canada, parents who neglect to send their children to school, or who refuse to let them go, can be charged for their child's truancy, while adolescents age 12 and over who regularly skip or refuse to go to school can be charged with truancy themselves under the youth criminal justice system (Canadian Foundation for Children, Youth and the Law, 2013). Compulsory attendance laws also exist in Europe, with most European education systems requiring full-time education for children for approximately 10 years (European Commission, 2016). School starting ages vary from three to seven years across various European countries and leaving ages vary from 14 to 19 years (European Commission, 2016).

There is conceptual confusion surrounding educational neglect and its distinction from truancy and the violation of compulsory attendance laws. The problem is typically labeled educational neglect when unexplained absences are viewed as a result of family distress and functioning problems, particularly among young children (Larson et al., 2011). While truancy is generally viewed as a problem influenced by a variety of individual, family, and community factors (Blackmon & Cain, 2015), it is unclear whether the child welfare system distinguishes between truancy and educational neglect, and how often these overlapping issues are identified as child protection issues versus child behavioral challenges.

Table 1
Sample Size Information for Five Cycles of OIS.

	OIS-1993	OIS-1998	OIS-2003	OIS-2008	OIS-2013
# Sampled agencies	15	13	16	23	17
# Sampled child maltreatment-related investigations (unweighted)	2447	3050	7172	7471	5265
Weighted # of Investigations	46,860	64,658	128,108	128,748	125,281

1.3. Present study

The purpose of this research was to (a) determine the rate at which child welfare service providers investigate educational neglect in Canada and identify any trends in rates over time, (b) better understand educational neglect and its distinction from other types of neglect and truancy, and (c) understand how child welfare services respond to allegations of educational neglect. Data from five cycles of the Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (OIS) were examined. A trend analysis was conducted and a mixed-method approach was then employed to understand the child demographics, child functioning issues, and caregiver risk factors identified during child welfare investigations focused on educational neglect, and to explore how educational neglect is distinct from, and overlaps with, other forms of neglect and truancy. This analysis also focused on identifying the typical child welfare service response to investigations of educational neglect by examining several key services including the delivery of ongoing child welfare services, referrals to specialized service providers, and placement in out-of-home care.

2. Methods

Data from five cycles of the OIS were analyzed to examine trends in educational neglect from 1993 to 2013 (Trocmé, 1998; Trocmé et al., 2002; Fallon et al., 2005, 2010, 2015). The OIS aims to capture information about children and their families as they come into contact with child welfare services. A comparable multi-stage sampling design was used across the five cycles of the study, in which representative samples of child welfare agencies were selected to participate, and then cases were sampled within these agencies over a three-month sampling period. OIS data are weighted with a regionalization weight and an annualization weight in order to develop provincial annual estimates for each year of the study. The weights are developed based on Census and service statistics. Please see Table 1 for information on the unweighted and weighted sample sizes across the five cycles of the OIS.

Participating child welfare workers within the sampled agencies were asked to complete a three-page data collection instrument that was developed to capture the information typically gathered during a child welfare investigation. The instrument – which maintained enough consistency over time to be able to assess trends in child welfare investigations – collected information about the child (e.g., age, sex, functioning level), the family (e.g., risk factors, socioeconomic status, previous contact with child welfare services), the allegation of maltreatment (e.g., type, duration, substantiation), and the child welfare services provided following the investigation (e.g., ongoing services, referrals to specialized service providers, placements in out-of-home care).

2.1. Trend analysis of five cycles of OIS data

The overall investigation rate for neglect was compared over time in this analysis, along with a comparison of the rate of investigated educational neglect. Statistically significant differences were assessed with WesVar software.

Educational neglect has been defined comparably across cycles of the OIS from 1993 to 2013, as situations in which a caregiver knowingly allows chronic truancy (5 or more days a month), fails to enroll a child in school, or repeatedly keeps the child at home. The trend analysis presents the rates of *investigated* neglect, which includes investigations in which the maltreatment was substantiated, suspected, and unfounded.

2.2. Quantitative descriptive analysis of OIS-2013 data

In addition to examining the five cycles of the OIS to analyze trends, the latest cycle of the OIS (2013) was examined in greater detail to understand the characteristics of child welfare investigations involving educational neglect as a primary form of maltreatment. Educational neglect was examined and compared to other subtypes of neglect using chi-square analysis in SPSS software. Children age four to 15 years old were included in these more detailed analyses in order to focus only on school-aged children, the population most likely to be impacted by educational neglect (unweighted $n = 960$, weighted $n = 19,995$). The following variables were examined: investigation referral source, child demographics, child functioning concerns, caregiver risk factors, maltreatment substantiation, and co-occurrence with other forms of alleged maltreatment. The analysis was then limited to only substantiated neglect investigations and several child welfare service outcomes were examined, including ongoing child welfare services, referrals to specialized service providers, and placement in out-of-home care (unweighted $n = 485$, weighted $n = 8087$).

2.3. Detailed measures from OIS-2013

2.3.1. Neglect subtypes

Workers indicated the specific subtype(s) of maltreatment they were investigating from a list of 32 forms of maltreatment, which were subsumed under the following five categories in the OIS: physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, emotional maltreatment, and exposure to intimate partner violence. If the primary category of maltreatment listed on the data collection instrument was neglect, then the investigations were included in this analysis. Educational neglect was compared to four other subtypes of neglect in this analysis: (1) failure to supervise (i.e., child suffered or is at risk of suffering physical or sexual harm because the caregiver is not adequately protective, or child committed a criminal offence because of caregiver failure to supervise), (2) physical neglect (i.e., child suffered or is at risk of suffering physical harm because of a caregiver's lack of adequate care including nutrition, dangerous living conditions, and lack of hygiene), (3) medical/dental neglect or failure to provide psychological/psychiatric treatment (i.e., child requires medical, dental, or mental health treatment and the caregiver does not provide the appropriate treatment), and (4) abandonment (i.e., caregiver is no longer willing or able to exercise custodial rights). Neglect was measured as one dichotomous variable with two categories (1 = educational neglect, 0 = other subtype of neglect).

2.3.2. Investigation referral source

Workers indicated the source of the maltreatment allegation. Multiple sources could be endorsed if multiple referrals were made to a child welfare authority. Referral sources were collapsed into the following four categories for the purpose of this analysis: (1) non-professional referral source (i.e., custodial parent, non-custodial parent, child, relative, neighbor/friend, landlord), (2) community health, mental health, or social service professional (i.e., social assistance worker, crisis service/shelter, community/recreation center, hospital, community health nurse, community physician, mental health professional, other child welfare service, day care center, community agency, internal child welfare personnel, legal professional, probation officer, dentist), (3) school (i.e., any personnel, including teachers, principals, and support staff), and (4) police. Each of these four referral sources was measured dichotomously to indicate the presence or absence of an allegation from the specified source.

2.3.3. Child demographics

Child age (4–7 years, 8–11 years, 12–15 years), sex (female, male), and ethnicity (White, Black, Aboriginal, Other) were examined.

2.3.4. Child functioning concerns

Participating workers were provided with a list of functioning concerns commonly identified in child welfare-involved populations. Workers indicated if the concern was present (diagnosed, observed, or disclosed by the parent, child or professional, or suspected by the worker) or absent (problem was not present or was not assessed) in the past six months. For the purpose of this analysis, these concerns were subsumed under six categories: (1) internalizing issues (depression, anxiety, or withdrawal, suicidal thoughts, or self-harming behavior), (2) externalizing issues (aggression, inappropriate sexual behavior, running from home, alcohol abuse, drug abuse), (3) involvement in the youth criminal justice system (young person age 12 and older has been charged, incarcerated, or dealt alternative measures under the Canadian federal Youth Criminal Justice Act), (4) ADHD (persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity), (5) developmental problems (attachment issues, intellectual/developmental disability, failure to meet developmental milestones, fetal alcohol syndrome, positive toxicology at birth, physical disability), and (6) academic difficulties (trouble in school that includes learning disabilities, special needs). These functioning concerns were measured as six separate dichotomous variables. An overall dichotomous summary variable was also produced reflecting the presence of at least one of the aforementioned child functioning concerns (i.e., 1 = at least one functioning concern, 0 = no functioning concerns).

2.3.5. Caregiver risk factors

Workers were also provided with a list of risk factors commonly identified among caregivers involved with the child welfare system, and they indicated whether the risk factor was present or absent for the primary and/or secondary caregiver living in the home. Six risk factors were examined in this analysis, including: (1) mental health issues (any diagnosis or problem), (2) physical health issues (chronic illness, frequent hospitalizations or physical disability), (3) few social supports (social isolation or lack of social support), (4) substance abuse (abuse of alcohol, prescription drugs, illegal drugs or solvents), (5) social assistance receipt (primary source of household income is social assistance, employment insurance, disability insurance, or another form of benefit), and (6) running out of money for basic necessities (family ran out of money for food, housing or utilities in the last six months). These risk factors were measured as six separate dichotomous variables. In addition, an overall dichotomous summary variable was created reflecting the presence of at least one caregiver risk factor (i.e., 1 = at least one caregiver risk, 0 = no caregiver risks).

2.3.6. Maltreatment substantiation

Workers indicated whether the primary subtype of maltreatment they investigated was substantiated (balance of evidence indicated that maltreatment occurred), suspected (not enough evidence to substantiate maltreatment but it could not be ruled out), or unfounded (balance of evidence indicated that maltreatment had not occurred). Substantiation was measured as one categorical variable with three categories.

2.3.7. Maltreatment co-occurrence

Workers could list up to three forms of alleged maltreatment on the data collection instrument. This analysis was limited to investigations in which neglect was the primary overarching category of investigated maltreatment, but workers could list a secondary and/or tertiary category of maltreatment in addition to neglect. Co-occurrence was indicated if the neglect was concurrently investigated with physical abuse (e.g., hit with hand or object), sexual abuse (e.g., fondling), emotional maltreatment (e.g., verbal abuse or belittling), or exposure to intimate partner violence (e.g., direct witness to physical violence). Each of the four possible co-occurring types of maltreatment was measured dichotomously (present or absent).

2.3.8. Child welfare services

Three key child welfare services were examined in this analysis among investigations of substantiated neglect: ongoing child welfare services (i.e., case will stay open to receive ongoing services from the agency), referrals to specialized service providers (e.g., referral to parent support group, counselling), and placement in out-of-home care (i.e., child was placed in kinship, foster, group, or residential/secure treatment care at the conclusion of the child welfare investigation). Each of these services was measured dichotomously (1 = provided, 0 = not provided).

2.4. Analysis of case narratives

In addition to the quantitative data collected in the OIS, workers also provided a brief written narrative describing the allegation of maltreatment and the outcome of the investigation in their own words. The narratives of 36 investigations that identified educational neglect as the primary maltreatment type were thematically analyzed to better understand this form of maltreatment using open coding. The findings are summarized alongside quantitative results.

3. Results

3.1. Trend analysis of five cycles of OIS data

Table 2 presents a comparison of investigation rates over time, for all types of neglect and for educational neglect specifically. Rates of investigated educational neglect have been consistently low over time, particularly compared to rates of all types of neglect as a whole. Approximately 0.22 investigations per 1000 children in Ontario focused on educational neglect in 1993, and approximately 0.34 investigations per 1000 children focused on this form of neglect in 2013. A significant increase in the rate of investigated educational neglect was observed between 1998 and 2003, with rates doubling from 0.20 per 1000 children to 0.40 per 1000 children, which corresponds to an overall increase in investigations of all types of neglect.

3.2. Quantitative descriptive analysis of OIS-2013 data

Table 3 presents a descriptive analysis of the latest cycle of the OIS, focusing on all maltreatment investigations in which the primary form of investigated maltreatment was neglect. Educational neglect was compared to the other subtypes of neglect using chi-square analysis. The vast majority of investigations of educational neglect were referred to the child welfare authority by school personnel, such as a teacher or principal (77% of educational neglect investigations), while under one-third of investigations of other neglect subtypes were referred by the school (28%, or 5638 investigations, $\chi^2 = 36.31, p < 0.001$). Almost one-quarter of educational neglect investigations was referred by a non-professional (23% of educational neglect investigations, or 176 investigations), such as a relative or neighbor.

Educational neglect investigations tended to involve younger children (294 investigations, or 38% of all educational neglect investigations) or adolescents (329 investigations, or 43% of educational neglect investigations). Approximately one in five educational neglect investigations involved a child who was between age eight and 11 (149 investigations, or 19% of all educational neglect investigations). The age distribution within educational neglect was not significantly different from the age distribution within other subtypes of neglect ($\chi^2 = 3.61, p = 1.64$). In addition, no significant differences in child sex or ethnicity were observed between educational and other subtypes of neglect.

The examination of child functioning concerns revealed that, overall, a large proportion of investigations focusing on educational neglect noted functioning concerns for the child, in particular academic difficulties (444 investigations, or 58% of educational neglect

Table 2
Comparison in Educational Neglect Rates Over Time in Ontario.

	OIS-1993		OIS-1998		OIS-2003		OIS-2008		OIS-2013	
	#	Rate per 1000	#	Rate per 1000	#	Rate per 1000	#	Rate per 1000	#	Rate per 1000
All Neglect	12,278	5.61	23,176	9.83	41,424	17.33	28,908	12.14	26,767	11.39
Educational Neglect	475	0.22	481	0.20	951	0.40*	704	0.30	808	0.34

*Significant increase.

Table 3
Profile of Child, Family, and Maltreatment Characteristics Across Subtypes of Neglect.

	Education Neglect		Other Subtypes of Neglect		Chi-Square	
	#	%	#	%	Value	Sig
Investigation Referral Source						
Non-professional	176	23%	6327	32%	1.40	0.236
Community professional	–	–	3865	19%	3.67	0.055
School	597	77%	5638	28%	36.31	< 0.001
Police	–	–	2993	15%	3.68	0.055
Child Age					3.61	0.164
4-7 years	294	38%	7655	38%		
8-11 years	149	19%	6318	32%		
12-15 years	329	43%	5945	30%		
Child Sex					0.72	0.396
Female	318	41%	9606	48%		
Male	454	59%	10,312	52%		
Child Ethnicity					2.30	0.512
White	566	73%	13,990	70%		
Black	–	–	894	4%		
Aboriginal	–	–	2778	14%		
Other	–	–	2255	11%		
Child Functioning Concerns						
Internalizing issues	290	38%	4330	22%	4.41	0.036
Externalizing issues	148	19%	4156	21%	0.87	0.768
Involvement in criminal justice system	–	–	565	3%	0.01	0.956
ADHD	–	–	3334	17%	1.21	0.271
Developmental problems	289	37%	5588	28%	1.35	0.246
Academic difficulties	444	58%	5691	29%	12.82	< 0.001
Caregiver Risk Factors						
Mental health	466	60%	5317	27%	18.19	< 0.001
Physical health	134	17%	2843	14%	0.41	0.524
Few social supports	447	58%	6280	32%	9.81	0.002
Substance abuse	219	28%	4441	22%	0.59	0.442
Social assistance receipt	304	39%	6740	34%	0.33	0.564
Ran out of money for basic needs	153	20%	2779	14%	0.28	0.599
Maltreatment Substantiation					17.62	< 0.001
Unfounded	168	22%	11,667	59%		
Suspected	–	–	695	3%		
Substantiated	532	69%	7555	38%		
Cooccurrence with Alleged					6.77	0.149
Physical abuse	148	19%	1258	6%		
Sexual abuse	–	–	459	2%		
Emotional abuse	–	–	1229	6%		
Exposure to IPV	–	–	1637	8%		
Total	772		19,918			

Percentages reflect percent within the 772 educational neglect investigations compared to the percent within the 19,918 investigations of other neglect subtypes. Based on an unweighted sample of 36 educational neglect investigations and 924 investigations of other neglect subtypes. Estimates under 100 are not reported because they are too small to be reliable.

investigations), internalizing issues (290 investigations, or 38% of educational neglect investigations), and developmental problems (289 investigations, or 37% of educational neglect investigations). Two significant differences were observed between educational neglect investigations and investigations of other subtypes of neglect. Educational neglect investigations were more likely to note internalizing issues (chi-square = 4.41, $p = 0.036$) and academic difficulties for the child (chi-square = 12.82, $p < 0.001$). A very small number of investigations focusing on educational and other subtypes of neglect noted involvement in the youth criminal justice system for the young person.

Investigations focused on educational neglect were significantly more likely than investigations of other subtypes of neglect to identify mental health issues (chi-square = 18.19, $p < 0.001$) and few social supports (chi-square = 9.81, $p = 0.002$) for the primary or secondary caregiver to the child. While investigations of other subtypes of neglect commonly noted socioeconomic risk factors for the child's family, a large proportion of educational neglect investigations also noted these risk factors. Approximately one in five investigations focused on educational neglect (20% or an estimated 153 investigations) noted the child's family had run out of money for basic necessities in the past six months, and 39% of these investigations (an estimated 304 investigations) noted social assistance as the primary source of household income.

A large proportion of educational neglect investigations were substantiated (69% or an estimated 532 educational neglect

Table 4
Summary of Child and Family Risks Across Age, within Investigated Educational Neglect.

	Age 4–7		Age 8–11		Age 12–15		Chi-Square	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	Value	Sig
At least one child functioning concern	244	83%	134	90%	329	100%	59.32	< 0.001
At least one caregiver risk factor	294	100%	149	100%	229	70%	154.69	< 0.001
Total	294		149		329			

Percentages reflect percent within the 294 educational neglect investigations conducted for children age 4–7, compared to the percent within the 149 educational neglect investigations conducted for children age 8–11 and the percent within the 329 educational neglect investigations conducted for 12–15 year-olds. Based on an unweighted sample of 36 educational neglect investigations.

investigations). These investigations were significantly more likely than investigations of other subtypes of neglect to be substantiated following the initial investigation (chi-square = 17.62, $p < 0.001$).

Due to the relatively small number of investigations in which alleged neglect co-occurred with another form of alleged maltreatment, some estimates of co-occurrence were unavailable because they were too small to be reliable. The most common category of maltreatment that co-occurred with educational neglect was physical abuse, which was noted in 148 educational neglect investigations (19%).

Table 4 focuses exclusively on investigations of educational neglect (an estimated 772 investigations) and compares child functioning concerns and caregiver risk factors across three child age groups. This summary table uses the two composite variables that reflect the presence of at least one child functioning concern and the presence of at least one caregiver risk factor, respectively. A very large proportion of educational neglect investigations noted at least one functioning concern for the child and risk factor for the parent, across all age groups. In fact, all investigations involving children age four to 11 noted at least one risk factor for the primary or secondary caregiver, and all investigations involving youth age 12–15 noted at least one functioning concern for the young person. Investigations involving older children and youth were more likely to note a child functioning concern (chi-square = 59.32, $p < 0.001$), and investigations involving younger children were more likely to note a caregiver risk factor (chi-square = 154.69, $p < 0.001$).

Table 5 presents analysis of the child welfare service response in substantiated neglect investigations (an estimated 532 substantiated educational neglect investigations and 7555 substantiated investigations of other subtypes of neglect). The majority of substantiated educational neglect investigations received ongoing child welfare services following the initial investigation (81%, or an estimated 429 substantiated educational neglect investigations) and over half (56% or 300 investigations) received a referral to a specialized service provider. Educational neglect investigations were significantly more likely to receive ongoing child welfare services (chi-square = 5.56, $p = 0.018$), and significantly less likely to result in placement in out-of-home care for the child (chi-square = 7.84, $p = 0.020$).

3.3. Analysis of case narratives

The thematic analysis revealed several themes in the narratives describing investigations that focused on educational neglect, which are summarized in Table 6. Distinct types of educational neglect investigations emerged. Some investigations focused fairly narrowly on the behavioral expression of educational neglect, with child welfare workers citing the exact number of missed school days or late arrivals in a specified time period. In these investigations, workers typically did not record the way that missing all or part of the school day impacted the child’s developmental outcomes, nor did they focus on the family issues that may be contributing to the missed school. In other investigations, educational neglect was described as one component of a generally neglectful and chaotic home environment. These environments often included parental drug use or mental health issues, housing transience, and a general neglect of basic needs. When educational neglect investigations involved younger children, workers tended to include

Table 5
Child Welfare Service Response in Substantiated Neglect Investigations.

	Education Neglect		Other Subtypes of Neglect		Chi-Square	
	#	%	#	%	Value	Sig
Child Welfare Service Response						
Ongoing service	429	81%	4133	55%	5.56	0.018
Referral to other service	300	56%	4357	58%	0.06	0.813
Placement	–	–	1659	22%	7.84	0.020
Total	532		7555			

Percentages reflect percent within the 532 substantiated educational neglect investigations compared to the percent within the 7555 substantiated investigations of other neglect subtypes.

Based on an unweighted sample of 26 substantiated educational neglect investigations and 459 substantiated investigations of other neglect subtypes. Estimates under 100 are not reported because they are too small to be reliable.

Table 6
Summary of Thematic Analysis.

Theme	Description
Missing school	In some investigations, the main issue was missing school. Workers indicated the exact number of missed school days and/or late arrivals in a given time period and this was the focus of the investigation.
General neglect	Educational neglect was sometimes investigated alongside many other neglectful behaviors, such as lack of supervision due to parental substance misuse or lack of a safe home environment.
Young children's developmental issues	Child welfare workers described the developmental issues experienced by young children. These issues appeared to inform their assessment and decision-making process.
Adolescents' lack of attendance	Child welfare workers identified several reasons why adolescents were not attending school, often focusing on the behavior of the teenager.

descriptions of some of the developmental problems experienced by the children. These problems were described as factors to consider during the investigation decision-making process, rather than possible developmental outcomes that had resulted from a chronic neglect of children's educational needs. Among adolescents, workers tended to focus primarily on the fact that a young person was not attending school. In some cases, workers described the adolescent's mental health and behavioral challenges that impeded their ability to attend school, and identified that the parent was not implementing any measures to facilitate the adolescent's school attendance. In other cases, the worker described situations in which an adolescent was staying home from school to take care of younger siblings. Overall, investigations of younger children appeared to focus more on the behavior of the caregiver and the general household risks, whereas investigations of older children and youth focused more on the behavior of the young person.

4. Discussion

This paper provides insight into the characteristics of children and families identified to child welfare service providers for educational neglect and the way that this form of maltreatment is different and similar to other types of neglect as well as truancy. It also provides an overview of trends in investigated educational neglect in Canada over the past twenty years from 1993 to 2013. Educational neglect is a relatively uncommon form of maltreatment investigated by child welfare authorities in Ontario, Canada. Investigation rates have been low since first measured provincially in 1993, and the latest estimate indicates that only 0.34 per 1000 children in Ontario are subject of an educational neglect investigation. This is much lower than estimates reported by researchers in the United States and Europe. While Canada's child welfare system shares certain features of systems in the United States and several European countries, important differences in population and context may explain the vastly different findings regarding educational neglect. The rate of all types of officially recognized neglect is higher for children and youth of all ages in the United States compared to Canada (Fallon, Trocmé, Van Wert, MacLaurin, & Sinha, 2012), and the prevalence of all types of neglect is also higher in the Netherlands (Euser et al., 2013) and Romania (Browne, 2002). The close relationship between neglect and poverty may partially explain the higher rates observed in the United States and some European countries. Although Canada tends to fare similarly on indicators of poverty and education as European countries such as the Netherlands (OECD, 2016a, 2016b), trends point to the socioeconomic advantages experienced by the Canadian population relative to the population in the United States (Gilbert, Fluke, Gonzalez-Izquierdo, Brownell, & Gulliver, 2011). One in five young people under the age of 18 lives in poverty in the United States compared to approximately 16.5% of Canadian young people (OECD, 2016a). Further, Canada is reaching the international benchmark on eight of 10 indicators of inclusive and equitable quality of education and lifelong learning opportunities, whereas the United States only reaches the benchmark for two of 10 of these indicators (OECD, 2016b). These contextual factors may help explain the relatively low rates of educational neglect observed in this study; however, more research is needed to better understand international variation in educational neglect trends.

The low rate of educational neglect found in this study may also be explained by the fact that this form of maltreatment is not explicitly identified in Ontario's child welfare legislation and policy, whereas it is included in the policies of other jurisdictions. This reflects the lack of universal standards regarding educational neglect, and the absence of a universal definition. The legislation guiding child welfare services, Ontario's *Child and Family Services Act (1990)* aims to protect children and promote their best interests and well-being, and defines children in need of protection as those who have suffered or are at risk of suffering physical harm, sexual harm, or emotional harm. While the child welfare legislation does not identify educational neglect as a form of maltreatment that could lead to such harm, Ontario's *Education Act (1990)* outlines compulsory attendance rules and identifies parents as having a duty to ensure that young people attend school, noting that parents and youth over age 12 are guilty of an offence and liable to a fine if attendance is neglected. This policy structure places the onus on *schools* to manage poor attendance and the complex problems associated with missing school. Despite the low rate of educational neglect investigations in Ontario, this analysis suggests that school personnel refer struggling children and youth to child welfare services in some circumstances, particularly when these young people suffer from other issues such as depression, anxiety or withdrawal, and when they are living in households in which multiple risk factors are present. It is unclear why schools would choose to refer these children and families to child welfare services rather than to non-protection supportive services, such as children's mental health services offered by the school board or a community based service provider for parental mental health issues. It is possible that the well-documented lack of effective and accessible services for children and parents' mental health in Ontario and other jurisdictions (Children's Mental Health Ontario, 2016; Kurdyak, Zaheer, Cheng, Rudoler, & Mulsant, 2017) can explain why schools are referring families to child welfare for a child

protection response rather than to alternative services. It is also possible that schools only refer children and youth to the child welfare system when multiple problems are present in the family, since the thematic analysis highlighted the often chaotic and generally neglectful environments in which children identified for educational neglect lived, particularly young children.

Surprisingly, although educational neglect is not explicitly identified as being within the mandate of child welfare services in Ontario, this study indicates that child welfare agencies frequently provide ongoing child welfare services and referrals to specialized service providers to families when these situations are reported and investigated. This signifies that child welfare workers recognize the complexity of the issue of school absenteeism and the potential for educational neglect to impact young people's well-being. Although the written narratives of workers analyzed in this study did not often explicitly acknowledge the potential for missed school to impact child development, the intensity of the service response in educational neglect investigations may imply that workers felt it was (a) within their mandate to intervene and (b) within their capacity to provide an effective service response. Approximately four in five children who were educationally neglected in this sample received ongoing child welfare services. This is particularly striking when considering that overall in Ontario, only 25% of investigations remained open for ongoing child welfare services following the initial investigation (Fallon et al., 2015). The present study also found that educational neglect investigations had a significantly higher rate of substantiation than other forms of neglect, with 69% of investigations substantiated. When compared to all forms of maltreatment, the difference is also marked. Overall, only 44% of maltreatment investigations were substantiated in Ontario in 2013 (Fallon et al., 2015). The high substantiation rate may be a result of the concrete and measurable nature of educational neglect (i.e., a certain number of missed school days in a given period), particularly given that other types of maltreatment are more difficult to assess and quantify. However, it may also signal that in the clinical opinions of child welfare workers, failing to ensure that children attend school constitutes neglect and causes harm to a child's development. Importantly, placement in out-of-home care is exceedingly uncommon following situations of educational neglect, reflecting that perhaps child welfare workers recognize this form of neglect does not put children and youth in immediate or urgent danger, but rather has implications for their longer term developmental well-being.

Research suggests that the child welfare system can be an effective tool for addressing school attendance and other educational problems among children and youth. School attendance, particularly among younger children, has been shown to improve following involvement in the child welfare system for educational neglect, which may involve the provision of services such as case management and alternative response diversion to other community services (Larson et al., 2011). However, this cannot be the only tool to promote school attendance and success among vulnerable children and youth, and it cannot operate in isolation. Some scholars even question whether children and youth who are not alleged to be at immediate risk of harm should be served by the child welfare system, highlighting that this system may not be an ideal intervention point for lower-risk problems such as educational neglect. For instance, there are concerns that the overinclusion of lower-risk families in the child protection system will overwhelm the capacity of service providers to respond effectively to families in need of more urgent protection services (English, Wingard, Marshall, Orme, & Orme, 2000). Indeed, Canada has witnessed an explosion of investigations focused on non-urgent situations since 1998, calling into question whether providing ongoing services to families who suffer from chronic and complex issues is an appropriate function for child welfare services, given the traditional focus on protecting children from immediate harm (Trocmé, Kyte, Sinha, & Fallon, 2014).

Regardless of which system responds, it is critical that children and youth who are struggling academically and living in challenging contexts receive effective and timely services. Indeed, a range of interventions have been designed outside of the child welfare sector to address poor school attendance, some focusing on improving young people's attitude toward education, their emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement in school, or their educational expectations (Marvul, 2012), all of which are tied to overall mental health and well-being (Wang & Peck, 2013). Interventions may be offered in school or community settings and vary depending on the focus on the individual student versus the whole family (Sutphen et al., 2010). Given that many complex factors appear to influence educational neglect, interventions addressing a broad range of issues will likely be most effective, such as those that include diagnostic assessment and treatment, parent and family involvement, school supports, and cross-sector collaboration (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2007; Lambros et al., 2016). Collaboration between schools and child welfare agencies may be particularly important in situations of educational neglect, with evidence indicating that such collaborations increase the likelihood of children receiving school-based and community-based mental health services (Chuang & Lucio, 2011) and help promote school attendance and the creation of an adapted education plan for struggling young people (Hesjedal, Iversen, Bye, & Hetland, 2016).

Schools are particularly well positioned to take the lead in addressing educational neglect, and evidence supports the delivery of school-based interventions to address chronic absences from school and the associated family and academic problems (Pritchard & Williams, 2001). Schools can also provide necessary outreach, early identification, and referral services for students with mental health, family, and academic issues, which may help direct children and families in need to useful resources in the community to address attendance and other issues (Green et al., 2013). School-based changes may also be necessary in order to promote attendance and academic success, as chronic absences from school are associated with classroom and school factors, such as the sensitivity and expectations of teachers, as well as the level of emotional support offered in the classroom (Virtanen, Lerkkanen, Poikkeus, & Kuorelahti, 2014). However, schools may face many barriers in making such changes and delivering effective services, such as a lack of adequate social work staff and a lack of opportunity for consultation with experts outside of the school system (Powers, Bower, Webber, & Martinson, 2010). These kinds of resource shortages may in part explain why school staff referred cases of educational neglect to the child welfare system in the current study.

Child functioning concerns were universally noted among adolescents identified as educationally neglected in this study, whereas caregiver risk factors appear to play a more important role in the identification of educational neglect among younger children. This

aligns closely with the conceptualization of school absence as a symptom of family distress and dysfunction in younger children and a reflection of individual-level problems in adolescents (Larson et al., 2011). Whereas the responsibility appears to lie with caregivers for ensuring younger children attend school, relatively more individual responsibility is placed on adolescents to maintain attendance even in the face of their significant functioning problems. Importantly, however, this study suggests that adolescent attendance problems are not typically cross-identified as both a child welfare and youth justice issue. That is, among the population of youth referred to child welfare services for frequent school absences, few appear to be charged or dealt any measures through the youth justice system for the status offence of truancy or any other offence, and few child welfare workers appear to consider educational neglect and truancy as one in the same. This finding is promising, particularly given the concerns cited by some scholars regarding the increasingly punitive environment to which adolescents who fail to comply to school norms are subjected (e.g., Mallett, 2016).

4.1. Limitations

The OIS is a cross-sectional study that only captures reported and investigated maltreatment. Child welfare workers provided all information directly to researchers using a standardized data collection instrument and this information was not independently verified for accuracy. The study is not intended to be evaluative and cannot provide insight into whether the services provided to investigated children and youth were effective in meeting their needs. Finally, while every effort was made to maintain comparability across cycles of the study, some changes have occurred in the measurement of maltreatment from 1993 to 2013, notably the inclusion of risk assessment investigations in the 2008 cycle (please see Fallon et al., 2015 for more information).

5. Conclusions

Children and youth who experience educational neglect clearly display a high level of need, both in terms of the individual functioning issues with which they struggle and the family environments in which they live. The findings of this analysis contribute to the literature by identifying the issues that likely contribute to a child's poor school attendance, such as mental health issues for the child or caregiver, few family supports, and a generally chaotic and suboptimal home environment. These factors can be targeted in interventions focused on improving school attendance and success among vulnerable children and youth. Such interventions can be delivered in many different contexts, such as the school, the community, or the child welfare system. The rates of educational neglect in Ontario, Canada, are lower than rates reported in other jurisdictions, highlighting the need for further research to better understand variations in the characteristics and service responses to this form of maltreatment across the globe.

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