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Child Protection System and Education: An Umbrella Review of Factors Supporting the Educational Progress of Children in the Foster Care System

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Received: 30 July 2025 | **Revised:** 26 December 2025 | **Accepted:** 11 February 2026

Keywords: children in the foster care system | education | educational progress | umbrella review | young people in foster care

ABSTRACT

International literature has consistently demonstrated that children in the foster care system (FCS) exhibit poorer academic outcomes: lower academic achievement, higher rates of school absenteeism and truancy, lower high school graduation rates and reduced postsecondary educational attainment. In response, this meta-review aims to synthesize existing evidence and offer an integrative perspective on the factors that support educational progress among children and adolescents in the FCS. Accordingly, an exhaustive search of systematic reviews, meta-analyses and scoping reviews was conducted across five databases, covering the period from 2013 to 2024. A total of 2086 articles related to various aspects of care experiences were identified, of which 14 reviews were selected based on their specific focus on educational outcomes. The use of inductive thematic analysis enabled the identification of five key factors that support educational progress: (1) educational and placement stability; (2) interagency coordination and collaboration; (3) supportive relationships with a key positive adult; (4) educational and socio-emotional support; and (5) the implementation of school practices that promote autonomy, agency, and participation. These factors operate interdependently across institutional, school and psychosocial domain levels, systematically supporting educational advancement. These findings are intended to inform the development of effective educational policies and practices tailored to the specific needs of children and adolescents in the FCS.

1 | Introduction

For decades, different international studies have consistently shown that children in the foster care system (FCS) systematically experience poorer educational outcomes than the general population. This group exhibits higher levels of absenteeism, grade repetition, low academic performance and lower school completion rates—particularly those living in residential care settings (Brady 2017; Carpenter-Aeby et al. 2017; Flynn et al. 2012; Montserrat et al. 2013). These limited educational trajectories are, in turn, associated with increased risks of social exclusion and psychosocial challenges in adulthood, such as unemployment, housing insecurity or incarceration (Gypen et al. 2017; Font et al. 2021).

The study seeks to move beyond deficit-based narratives and proposes to reorient the analysis toward the protective and enabling factors that promote academic success. Furthermore, it aims to integrate the existing fragmented evidence into a systematic, coherent and constructive understanding of educational progress.

Globally, it is estimated that between 3.18 and 9.42 million children receive residential care, although this figure may be significantly higher due to the lack of standardized

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recordkeeping (Desmond et al. 2020; UNICEF 2020). Despite representing a minority within the education system, they are one of the most vulnerable groups (Crenshaw-Williams 2023; Oakley et al. 2018). In most cases, these children have been victims of neglect, abuse or violence within their families, which prompted their entry into the child protection system (Montserrat et al. 2013; Palmieri and La Salle 2016). For many, this vulnerability is compounded by structural poverty in their communities and by mental health or substance-use issues in their families of origin, conditions that further limit their potential support networks (Jackson and Cameron 2011; Sebba et al. 2017).

Trauma and adversity can lead to emotional and behavioural problems among children and young people in care, which in turn affect their adjustment, particularly within the school environment. This may help explain why institutionalized children are up to three times more likely to be placed in special education programs than their non-institutionalized peers. However, such inclusion rarely translates into appropriate support or improved academic performance (Carpenter-Aeby et al. 2017; Townsend et al. 2020). Moreover, students in foster care with special educational needs are often placed in more restrictive learning environments than their non-care counterparts with similar needs (Farnsworth et al. 2022). Additionally, children and young people in foster care who belong to ethnic minority groups (Sebba et al. 2017; González-García et al. 2017) or identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community (Shpiegel and Simmel 2016) face further disadvantages.

In addition to individual barriers, institutionalized children face significant systemic challenges, most notably frequent changes in residential placements or foster families, which are often accompanied by changes in schools (Clemens et al. 2017; Farnsworth et al. 2022; Jackson and Cameron 2014; Rutman and Hubberstey 2016). In the United States, one-third of children in foster care experienced at least eight placement changes and seven school transfers (Pecora et al. 2006). These relocations lead to serious disruptions, including delays in enrolment, loss of academic credits, prolonged absences and lack of access to support services (Farnsworth et al. 2022).

Several studies in Spain highlight the relative stability of residential care placements (Montserrat et al. 2014). Nevertheless, discouraging educational progress outcomes are also found. Only 20.6% of children in foster care complete compulsory secondary education (ESO) within the expected timeframe, compared with 60% in the general population (Montserrat et al. 2014). In Catalonia, although 53.9% of participants completed ESO, only 37.3% finished primary school on time, and almost half repeated a grade at least once (Arnau-Sabatés and Sala-Roca 2023).

These outcomes are further compounded by the low expectations held by educators and care teams, which negatively impact the motivation and aspirations of students in care (Fernández-Simo et al. 2022; Goig and Martínez 2019; Rodríguez 2022). Even those who do complete compulsory education are often directed toward basic vocational training programs aimed at rapid entry into the job market (Montserrat et al. 2013; Cabedo et al. 2024).

The low rate of academic completion among young people in foster care raises significant concerns, given the social and economic benefits associated with gaining an educational qualification. For this group, access to employment is a key tool for achieving stability and autonomous integration into society (Arnau-Sabatés and Gilligan 2015). Numerous studies have shown that higher levels of education lead to better employment opportunities, higher income and improved housing conditions, while also contributing to reducing inequalities based on social origin (Ministerio de Derechos Sociales Consumo y Agenda 2030 2024). Conversely, low educational attainment often results in precarious, unstable employment trajectories with limited prospects for advancement, thus perpetuating the cycle of social exclusion (Garcés et al. 2019; Melendro 2009). For these children and young people, education is an essential component of their development; beyond determining access to employment, it provides critical social, cultural and economic capital needed for their emancipation (UNESCO 2016).

Although the specialized literature has extensively documented the high rates of school failure, this phenomenon should not be understood as isolated or individual, but rather as the result of a complex interplay of social, institutional, familial and personal factors that systematically constrain educational opportunities (Fernández-Simo and Cid-Fernández 2020). While acknowledging these disadvantages is crucial, an exclusive focus on the difficulties risks reinforcing stigma and obscuring evidence of educational progress. Few studies have systematically examined the protective factors that underpin the academic success of students in foster care. Consequently, this review aims to identify and synthesize the institutional, school-based and psychosocial factors that facilitate educational achievement during compulsory education.

The guiding question of this review is the following: What factors support the educational progress of children and young people in foster care during compulsory education? The aim is to identify the institutional, school-related and psychosocial factors that facilitate educational progress. This review seeks to address the existing gap in empirical evidence and to systematize the available findings with the goal of contributing to the design of more effective school policies and practices that are tailored to the specific needs of this student population.

2 | Methodology

This study employs an umbrella review methodology, that is, an overview of reviews (Conn and Coon Sells 2014), with the aim of integrating empirical evidence from multiple systematic reviews and providing a broad perspective on a complex phenomenon. This approach helps compare interventions and their outcomes related to a common issue (Gessler and Siemer 2020). The process followed the methodological steps outlined by Fusar-Poli and Radua (2018) and adhered to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, which offer a standardized, transparent framework for identifying, choosing, evaluating and synthesizing reviews (Page et al. 2021).

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2.1 | Search Strategies

The search was conducted across five databases: Scopus, PsycINFO, WOS, ERIC and Google Scholar. A combined keyword strategy was adapted to the specific requirements of each database, using the following terms: "school" OR "educati*" (education, educational and educative) AND "children in care" OR "foster care" OR "residential care" OR "group home" AND "review" OR "systematic review" OR "scoping review" OR "systematic literature review" OR "metanalysis." These search criteria were applied to titles and abstracts, and the search was conducted between July and December 2024.

2.2 | Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) articles published in academic journals classified as systematic reviews, meta-analyses or scoping reviews; (2) articles focused on early childhood education, primary and/or secondary education; (3) articles with samples including children in residential or foster care; (4) articles presenting findings that support educational progress; (5) articles published between 2013 and 2024; and (6) articles written in English or Spanish.

The exclusion criteria were as follows: (1) reviews that were not systematic reviews, scoping reviews, meta-analyses or grey literature (e.g., reports, theses or books); (2) those whose results did not explicitly address the school context; (3) reviews focused on postcompulsory education (e.g., higher education, vocational training or job market insertion); and (4) studies focused exclusively on subgroups requiring differentiated approaches, such as children with disabilities, cognitive disorders or refugee status.

2.3 | Data Extraction

The search yielded a total of 2086 studies; after removing duplicates, 2032 remained (see Figure 1). Following a review of titles and abstracts, 2008 articles were excluded. In the next stage, the full texts of the remaining 24 articles were assessed, resulting in the exclusion of 10 studies for the following reasons: seven reviews were excluded for focusing on higher education and job market integration (exclusion criterion 3); two were excluded for focusing on a specific subgroup within the study population (exclusion criterion 4); and one article was excluded for not meeting the methodological standards of a systematic review (exclusion criterion 1).

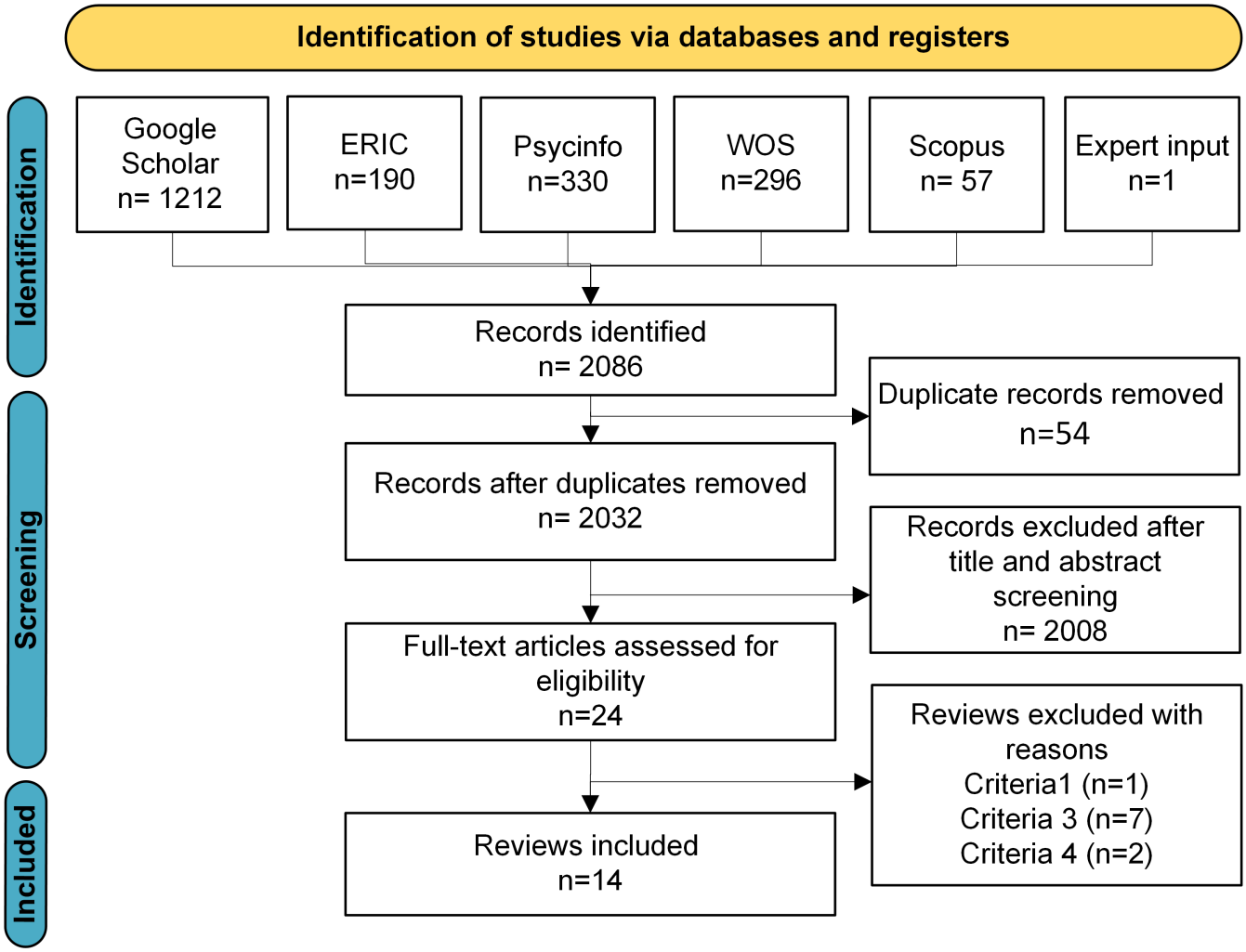

FIGURE 1 | Flowchart of the search and review selection process. *Note.* PRISMA 2020 flowchart adapted for an umbrella review (Page et al. 2021).

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2.4 | Quality Assessment

The reviews included were evaluated using the AMSTAR-2 tool, which consists of 16 criteria designed to assess the methodological rigour and transparency of systematic reviews, meta-analyses and scoping reviews (Shea et al. 2017). Each review was rated according to these criteria using the categories Y (Yes), N (No) and P (Partial). Criteria 11, 12 and 15—specific to meta-analyses—were applied only to Review [7] (see Table 1).

2.5 | Data Analysis Process

Because of the methodological diversity of the reviews included, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted. This approach is suitable for synthesizing both qualitative and quantitative findings from systematic reviews, meta-analyses and scoping reviews. The analysis was carried out using ATLAS.ti software and consisted of four stages: (1) initial coding, (2) inductive grouping of codes, (3) construction of analytical dimensions into factors and subfactors and (4) narrative synthesis of the results.

3 | Results

3.1 | Characteristics of the Reviews Included

The selection process resulted in the inclusion of 14 articles (see Table 2): 12 systematic reviews [1–6, 9, 10, 12–14], two scoping reviews [8,11] and one combining a systematic review with a meta-analysis [7]. The reviews included studies conducted in various countries, with the most frequent being the United States [1, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15], Canada [1, 4, 7, 9, 12–14], the United Kingdom [3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 12–14], Sweden [1, 7, 12, 13] and Australia [7, 10, 13], as well as others such as Japan, South Korea, Iran [3], Brazil, India, Africa, Peru and European countries [5]. Some reviews did not specify the origin of the samples included [1, 2, 5].

TABLE 1 | AMSTAR 2 checklist for each review.

Review ID														
Criteria AMSTAR 2	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14**
1. PICO components	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
2. Protocol	P	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
3. Study design	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
4. Comprehensive search	P	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
5. Study selection	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y
6. Data extraction	Y	P	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	N	P
7. Excluded studies justification	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	P	Y	Y
8. Included study details	P	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
9. Risk of bias (RoB)	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
10. Funding sources	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y
11. Statistical method	—	—	—	—	—	—	Y	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
12. RoB in meta-analysis	—	—	—	—	—	—	Y	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
13. RoB in individual studies	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	—	N	Y	P	Y	Y	Y	Y
14. Heterogeneity	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	Y	N	P	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
15. Publication bias	—	—	—	—	—	—	Y	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
16. Conflict of interest	N	N	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y

Note: The identification number (ID) and the authors of each review can be found in Table 2.

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TABLE 2 | Description of reviews included.

ID	Review	Studies included	Sample	Study objective	Key findings on educational progress
[1]	Brady (2017)	21	AD, CL, LAC, FP, YFC	To explore international evidence on educational interventions for children and young people in care.	Highlights the role of mentoring programs, interagency coordination, individualized support and placement stability.
[2]	Carpenter-Aeby et al. (2017)	30	CFC, FFC, LAC, YFC	To evaluate effective academic interventions for children and young people in foster care.	Tailored mentoring, team-based approaches, direct instruction and strong caregiver–student relationships improve outcomes.
[3]	Costa et al. (2019)	25	BF, RC, YFC	To identify predictors of psychosocial adjustment in adolescents in residential care.	Autonomy, peer attachment, care history and teacher–student relationships are associated with positive school adjustment.
[4]	Evans et al. (2017)	15	CFC, CSEN, FFC, GJJS, KC, LAC, YFC	To evaluate educational interventions and their effectiveness in the educational progress of children and young people in foster care.	Interventions involving tutoring, mentoring and personalized approaches improve educational achievement.
[5]	Garcia-Molsosa et al. (2021)	26	CFC, ESS, IP	To analyse factors influencing school functioning among children and young people in residential care.	Stability, interagency coordination, positive relationships, a sense of mastery and high expectations are predictors of educational progress.
[6]	Goding et al. (2022)	11	CFC, CL, YFC	To explore school experiences from the perspective of children and young people in residential care in the UK.	Stability, meaningful relationships, self-sufficiency, agency, safe spaces and understanding from school staff are key factors.
[7]	Goulet et al. (2024)	26	CFC, FFC, KC, YFC	To evaluate the effectiveness of academic interventions in reading and mathematics.	Direct support such as tutoring, individualized assistance and the provision of learning materials improved the skill assessed.
[8]	Hwami (2018)	10	CFC, ESS, RC, YFC	To describe educational barriers for children and young people in foster care in Alberta.	Stability, tutoring, individualized support, high expectations from caregivers (social workers) and interagency cooperation were identified as key supports.

(Continues)

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TABLE 2 | (Continued)

ID	Review	Studies included	Sample	Study objective	Key findings on educational progress
[9]	Liabo et al. (2013)	11	FFC, CFC, LAC, YFC	To analyse school-based interventions aimed at improving educational progress.	Community support, personalized tutoring and school coordination led to modest improvements.
[10]	Luke and O'Higgins (2018)	28 + database	CFC	To determine whether the care system explains low academic performance.	Low performance is more strongly associated with pre-care factors than with the care status itself.
[11]	Lund and Stokes (2020)	25	CP, CFC, ESS, YFC, LAC	To review the educational outcomes of children and young people who have received foster care in Australia.	Stability, high expectations, positive relationships, individualized plans, participation and agency were identified as facilitators.
[12]	Männistö and Pirttimaa (2018)	19	CFC, YFC, FFC, ESS	To evaluate interventions aimed at improving the academic achievement of children and young people in foster care.	Structured, socioemotional and personalized interventions—both direct and indirect—show sustained positive outcomes.
[13]	O'Higgins et al. (2017)	39	CFC, CSEN, FFC, KC, YFC	To identify factors associated with the academic performance of children and young people in foster care.	Special educational needs (SEN), gender, ethnicity, care history and caregiver support are predictors of educational achievement.
[14]	Townsend et al. (2020)	11	CFC, LAC, YFC	To analyse school experiences from the perspective of children and young people in foster care.	School as a refuge, individual education plan, supportive relationships and autonomy are key to motivation and school well-being.

Abbreviations: AD, adoptees; BF, biological family; CFC, children in foster care; CG, caregivers; CL, care leavers; CP, care providers; CSEN, children with special educational need; ESS, educators and school staff; FFC, family foster care; FP, foster parent(s); GJJS, girls within the juvenile justice system; IP, institutional professionals; KC, kinship care; LAC, looked after children; RC, residential care; YFC, youth in foster care.

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The reviewed articles included studies published between 1989 and 2023 spanning a wide range of methodological designs. Qualitative designs such as phenomenological, narrative and case studies were identified [1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 14]; as well as non-experimental quantitative studies, including cross-sectional, correlational and longitudinal designs [3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 13] and quasi-experimental designs [2, 4, 9, 12]. Only two reviews included randomized controlled trials (RCTs) [7, 12]. Several reviews also used mixed-methods approaches combining quantitative and qualitative analyses [1, 4, 5, 9, 11, 12].

Regarding thematic diversity, some reviews provided an overview of educational support and major research trends related to the academic progress of children in the FCS [1, 3, 8, 11]. At the school level, various interventions were analysed targeting improvements in academic performance, attendance, engagement or specific academic skills [1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 12]. The most frequently evaluated interventions included: *Letterbox Club* [1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 12], *Early Start to Emancipation Preparation* (ESTEP) [1, 4, 7], *Teach Your Children Well Method* [1, 4, 7], *Educational Liaisons* [1, 9, 12], *Big Brother*, *Big Sister*, *Boys and Girls Club*, *Helsingborg* [2], *Paired Reading* [1, 7, 12, 14], *Head Start* [4], *Kids in Transition to Schoo*l [4], *Skolfam* [7, 9, 12] and *Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care for Adolescents* (MTFC-A) [2, 4].

Finally, other reviews explored individual, social and contextual factors related to psychosocial adjustment [3, 13, 14] and academic performance [5, 6, 10].

4 | Overall Results

The thematic analysis identified 106 codes related to the educational progress of children in the FCS. These codes were grouped into thematic categories based on their similarity, conceptual relationship, and relevance, as determined by both the strength and frequency of evidence across the reviews. These categories were then organized into three overarching dimensions according to their scope: institutional (governance and interagency coordination, regulatory frameworks), school-based (internal dynamics and pedagogical practices), and psychosocial (psychological, relational and emotional aspects of the student) (see Figure 2).

From this analysis, five core factors influencing educational progress were synthesized: (1) educational and placement stability, (2) interagency coordination and collaboration, (3) positive relationships with trusted adults, (4) academic and socioemotional support and (5) promotion of autonomy, agency and participation. In addition, several relevant subfactors were identified, such as (3.1) trauma-informed teacher training, (3.2) positive peer relationships and (4.1) environmental and social support.

4.1 | Educational and Placement Stability

Twelve reviews conclude that school stability is a core factor in the educational progress of children in the FCS [1, 2, 4–6, 8–14].

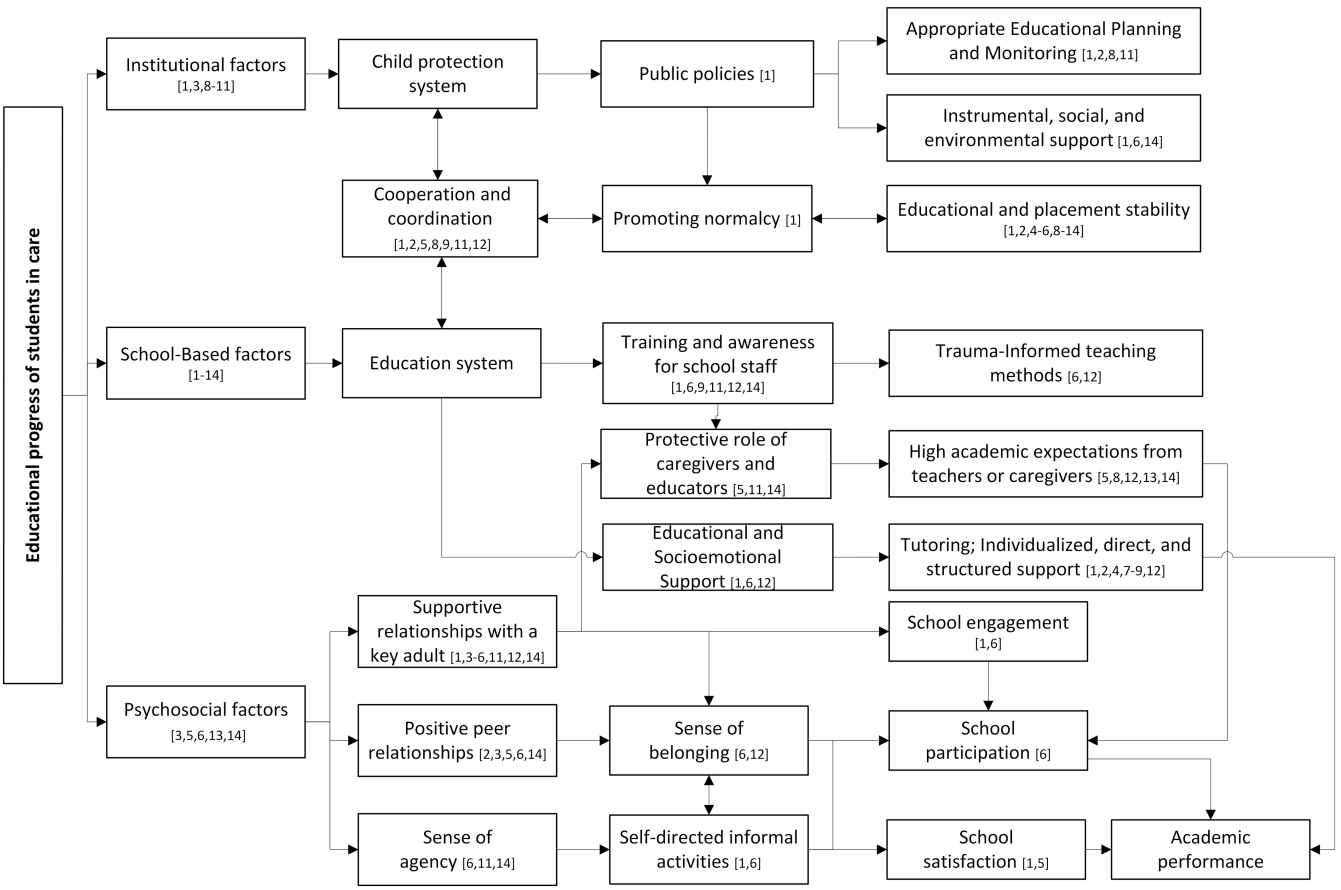

FIGURE 2 | Diagram of factors and subfactors that support educational progress.*Note.* Diagram developed by the authors.

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This encompasses not only the material and structural conditions necessary for learning, but also the consistency, coherence and continuity of affective and social relationships [1, 2, 4–6, 8–14].

Children in foster care frequently experience placement changes, often implemented as behavioural management or control measures, which typically involve changing schools [2, 5, 6, 8, 11]. The studies consistently identify school mobility as a negative factor affecting both the school experience and academic performance [1, 5, 6, 13]. Research focused on young people's perspectives revealed that changes in educational settings negatively impacted their adaptation and learning processes and directly affected their academic outcomes [2, 11]. These placement changes required them to adapt to new curricula, pedagogical practices, teachers and peers, posing an additional challenge to their educational progress. Furthermore, the disruption of social relationships resulting from school mobility was associated with increased absenteeism and lower motivation [11].

Conversely, children and young people who experienced a stable school environment and were able to form meaningful and lasting relationships developed a stronger sense of belonging and security within the education system, which was associated with greater well-being and school engagement [1, 2, 4, 6]. Likewise, placement stability contributed to increased motivation and educational aspirations [1].

Another key factor related to academic progress is permanence. Children who entered the child protection system at an early or preschool age (long-term care), or who experienced fewer placement changes, showed better academic outcomes and a lower risk of school dropout compared with those who entered the system during adolescence or experienced frequent changes [1, 3, 5, 10, 13]. It was also observed that the type of placement affected academic performance; specifically, children in foster care tended to achieve better educational outcomes than those in residential care [1, 10].

4.2 | Interagency Coordination and Collaboration

The literature identified a lack of interagency coordination and collaboration—often resulting from placement changes and school mobility—as a significant barrier. These disruptions negatively impacted collaboration between child welfare agencies and schools, creating administrative challenges, particularly the loss of information and delays in addressing students' specific needs, which in turn affected their academic performance [1, 9, 11].

The review shows that effective interagency coordination and collaboration between schools and child welfare agencies facilitated the updating of school records and the development of individualized education plans tailored to each student's academic, social and emotional needs [1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12]. The capacity of management services in developing these individualized education plans contributes significantly to improving educational outcomes [1,2,8,12].

One strategy evaluated to strengthen interagency coordination was the implementation of educational liaisons within child welfare agencies [1, 8, 9, 12]. These liaisons aimed to bridge the gap between services and provide the young people with ongoing support [1, 8]. Three studies assessed their effectiveness and reported mixed results in terms of educational progress [1, 9, 12]. On the one hand, educational liaisons were found to enhance social workers' ability to track student performance and educational history [12] and were perceived by young people as a valuable source of support for overcoming educational barriers [1]. However, a decline was noted in these professionals' direct engagement with school staff over time [12].

Other studies examined the impact of educational liaisons on school attendance, yielding contradictory results. One study reported a reduction in absences among students who received this support [9], while another found a decrease in school attendance, counter to expectations [12]. Regarding academic performance, slight improvements were recorded in overall grades [9, 12], although they were not statistically significant. The authors noted that outcomes may depend on implementation strategies and available resources [12].

4.3 | Supportive Relationships With a Key Adult

Receiving support and positive reinforcement from others—especially from adults both within and outside the child welfare system—emerged as a key socioemotional factor in the educational experiences of children and young people in care [1, 3–6, 11, 12, 14]. The presence of a significant adult figure—such as a teacher, caregiver, social worker or educator—who offered support and maintained high expectations had a positive effect on school participation and youth empowerment, strengthening self-confidence and motivation to continue their education [5, 12, 14].

The studies consistently highlighted the core role of teachers and school staff in the educational progress and personal development of students in foster care [1, 3, 5, 6], particularly if they demonstrated sensitivity, empathy and a willingness to establish emotionally connected relationships [3]. Research on school experience identified three essential components in the development of meaningful relationships: interest, understanding and trust [6]. Young people valued adults who showed genuine interest in their well-being and education, and who treated them with respect beyond the formal or administrative fulfilment of their duties [6]. Others expressed the desire to be seen and treated like any other young person outside the FCS [11].

However, difficulties were also reported regarding school staff's understanding of the behaviour and context of students in foster care. This lack of awareness was associated with a tendency to apply punitive measures, such as isolation and exclusion [6]. Young people also appreciated the presence of trustworthy adults in the school environment, as these figures reinforced their sense of safety and stability. Nevertheless, they identified barriers to building trusting relationships due to previous experiences of betrayal or inconsistent support. Overcoming these barriers required time, empathy, and sustained commitment from adults [6].

4.3.1 | Training and Awareness for School Staff

Comprehensive training for educators on childhood trauma—including psychological frameworks such as attachment theory,

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adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and resilience—was found to improve the school experience of children and young people in care [6]. Young people noted that school staff sometimes held stigmatizing perceptions about their care status, mistakenly assuming they had been placed in care due to delinquent behaviour [14]. They also emphasized the need for teacher training focused on understanding their lived experiences and the impact of trauma on learning, behaviour and interpersonal relationships [1, 6, 11, 12, 14].

In line with this, several studies evaluated the implementation of a trauma-informed training program for staff working in schools serving girls in residential care [12]. Findings indicated improved understanding of disruptive behaviour as a possible response to traumatic experiences [6, 12]. In addition, teachers were observed to show greater flexibility and empathy, adjusting their pedagogical practices to better meet the individual needs of students in care [6, 12].

4.3.2 | Positive Peer Relationships

Peer attachment was identified as a significant predictor of school experience [2, 5, 6, 14]. Young people highlighted friendships as the most valuable aspect of their school life, noting that belonging to a peer group where they could share experiences and validate emotions promoted school engagement, strengthened their sense of belonging, and increased their participation and satisfaction with the educational process [5, 6, 14]. Likewise, positive peer relationships served as role models for psychosocial adjustment and acted as protective factors against potential risk behaviours [3, 6, 14].

4.4 | Educational and Socioemotional Support

Five reviews examined the effectiveness of school-based interventions aimed at improving various aspects of educational progress among children in the FCS, addressing dimensions such as attendance, social relationships, socioemotional well-being, specific skills, and overall academic performance [2, 4, 7, 9, 12]. The interventions varied by type of support (e.g., tutoring, psychological support, provision of materials), delivery agents (foster carers, tutors, self-directed learning), setting (home, school, or residential care), format (individual or group), and duration (short-, medium-, or long-term) [7, 12]. They were grouped into two categories: direct support, focused on the student, and indirect support, aimed at caregivers, teachers, and professionals through training or interagency coordination [7, 9, 12].

Direct support was the most widely assessed and showed consistent effects, particularly in reading and mathematics [7]. The most effective programs included Paired Reading, which improved reading age by nearly a year among students with significant difficulties [1, 12, 14], and the Letterbox Club, which delivered educational materials and led to moderate improvements in reading, math, and school attendance [7, 9, 12]. Both programs involved foster families or carers. Despite these positive outcomes, a high degree of variability was found, which is attributed to differences in intervention design, instructional format (individual or group), school mobility, and other unexamined variables [1, 7, 9, 12].

In mathematics, improvements were observed in arithmetic, number recognition, and written and oral tasks through direct instruction methods such as peer tutoring, computer-assisted programs, and comprehensive models like Skolfam, which also enhanced cognitive functioning, social relationships, and behaviour [9, 12]. One review found that individualized support showed a slight advantage over tutoring, although differences were not statistically significant [7].

In terms of socioemotional well-being, mental health, and behaviour, therapeutic tutoring proved effective. Children in the FCS who received intensive tutoring showed significant improvements in all these areas; however, those who received only a limited number of sessions had worse outcomes than the non-intervention group [12]. Positive effects were also reported in programs that combined tutoring with mentoring or extracurricular activities [4].

Overall, the reviews agree that despite some studies' methodological limitations, direct support interventions—particularly those that integrate academic and socioemotional support in a personalized, structured, and sustained manner—show significant potential to enhance the educational progress of children and young people in care [1, 4, 7, 12].

4.4.1 | Instrumental, Social, and Environmental Supports

The availability of safe spaces within schools was recognized as a key environmental and social factor in the educational experience of children and young people in foster care [1, 6]. They were described not merely as physical areas but as calm, welcoming environments where emotional support was available and students felt they could relax and be themselves. For some, these spaces acted as a safe base within the school context [6].

Safe spaces included access to informal activity groups—such as lunchtime or after-school clubs, pastoral support initiatives, recreational programs, or simply quieter areas within the school [3, 6]. These environments promoted self-confidence, a sense of belonging, and meaningful peer connections [1, 6], thereby increasing motivation and enhancing school engagement [6]. However, some young people reported that access to such spaces was granted only after experiencing negative incidents at school, such as being removed from class or placed in isolation [6].

Furthermore, participation in informal learning activities—such as cultural or leisure-based programs—was positively associated with improved outcomes in formal education [1].

4.5 | Promoting Autonomy, Agency, and Participation in Education

Several studies agree that creating the conditions necessary for learning requires ensuring stability in at least one area of life for children and young people in care [12]. In this regard, education

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emerges as one of the few domains where they can experience a sense of control—often in contrast to other areas of their lives marked by instability and uncertainty [1, 4, 6].

In this context, self-reliance and self-efficacy were described by the young people themselves as key survival competencies for navigating the child protection system [6, 14]. In parallel, some studies conceptualized these qualities as expressions of a sense of agency, meaning the capacity and conviction to actively influence one's own future [6, 11, 14]. Educational interventions that promoted decision-making, autonomy, and the development of agency were associated with higher levels of school participation and satisfaction [1, 5, 11]. In particular, participation in self-directed activities within sports, cultural, or religious settings promoted greater attention and engagement in the educational environment [5]. Similarly, strategies based on the recognition of achieved goals demonstrated positive effects on students' motivation and their connection to the learning process [9].

5 | Discussion

This review redefines education as a means of emancipation and autonomy for children in the FCS. Whereas previous reviews often adopted isolated and linear perspectives—focusing on domains such as academic interventions (Carpenter-Aeby et al. 2017; Goulet et al. 2024; Evans et al. 2017; Männistö and Pirttimaa 2018), psychosocial predictors (Costa et al. 2019), or subjective school experiences (Goding et al. 2022; Townsend et al. 2020)—this study integrates these strands into a multilevel analytical framework. By triangulating evidence from children and young people in foster care, professionals and empirical educational interventions, the review conceptualizes educational success as an ecological and relational process rooted in continuity, coherence and stability.

Stability emerges as a central and recurring theme across most studies, identified as a structuring condition for the educational progress of children in the FCS. This extends beyond physical permanence to include continuity in the educational environment—consistent pedagogical practices, stable teaching staff and safe spaces—alongside sustained placement in foster, residential, or kinship care and coherence in meaningful relationships inside and outside school. One review presents an exception: for young people with behavioural difficulties, changing schools may increase satisfaction by enabling a break from problematic trajectories. However, this finding derives from a school located within a residential care centre, limiting its generalizability (Garcia-Molsosa et al. 2021).

Despite such exceptions, the literature consistently identifies stability as a foundational condition for educational progress, supporting the normalization of school, social and emotional life. A stable school environment facilitates regular participation in academic and extracurricular activities, enables lasting emotional bonds and support networks and fosters belonging, contributing to more equitable experiences relative to non-care peers (Martín and Jackson 2002; Pokempner et al. 2015). Recent work highlights that stability is also subjective and relational, involving access to responsive adults and caring environments that nurture feelings of connection, belonging and safety (Devaney et al. 2018; Moran et al. 2016; Salazar et al. 2018).

Nevertheless, persistent institutional barriers hinder stability in the educational context. Foremost among them is the lack of coordination between child protection agencies and the educational system, often resulting in abrupt transitions, inconsistent support and high turnover of professionals (Brady 2017; Liabo et al. 2013; Lund and Stokes 2020). Some studies identify educational liaison as a promising mechanism to overcome such fragmentation and enhance individualized follow-up. While these roles improve information management, their effects on attendance and academic performance are mixed, partly due to limited engagement from school staff.

Even so, the stabilizing role of schools—and particularly teachers—is widely recognized (Daly and Gilligan 2005). Teachers are consistently identified by young people as key figures in personal development, school engagement, academic satisfaction and perceptions of stability (Costa et al. 2019; Goding et al. 2022). McGuire et al. (2021) find that teacher social support is the strongest predictor of academic achievement—especially in mathematics—and classroom behaviour, surpassing parental and peer support. Such relationships are associated with reduced emotional dysregulation and attentional difficulties.

Nonetheless, tensions persist regarding teachers' capacity to meet the specific needs of students in foster care. Young people report that many educators lack the knowledge and tools needed to understand how abuse, neglect and instability shape learning and adjustment (Goding et al. 2022; Lund and Stokes 2020; Townsend et al. 2020). Experiences of stigmatization and low expectations are also reported, undermining engagement, aspirations and long-term outcomes (Berridge 2012; Ellis and Johnston 2024; Mannay et al. 2017).

Empirical evidence confirms that high-quality relationships play a protective and restorative role for young people in foster care, buffering against trauma and adversity (Babo et al. 2024; Quiroga and Hamilton-Giachritsis 2015). Peer support helps reduce internalizing problems such as anxiety and depression and enhances psychosocial and school adjustment (Costa et al. 2019; Goding et al. 2022; Garcia-Molsosa et al. 2021). Yet such relationships are not always accessible. Brett et al. (2024) found that youth in foster care have weaker interpersonal ties with peers and face a greater risk of bullying and cyberbullying.

Tutoring and mentoring initiatives have emerged as strategies to strengthen social, emotional and academic support. Although not all programs yield significant academic gains—due to methodological variation—there is consensus that effectiveness increases when emotional and relational dimensions are prioritized. Mentoring programs such as the Boys and Girls Club and Big Brothers Big Sisters provide sustained relationships with caring adults who act as role models and advocates (Carpenter-Aeby et al. 2017; Evans et al. 2017). Mentors with lived experiences similar to those of youth in foster care further support identity

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development and resilience (Rutman and Hubberstey 2018; Townsend et al. 2020). Thompson et al. (2015) demonstrate that both formal mentors (teachers, tutors, social workers) and natural mentors (community figures) positively influence mental well-being, psychosocial development and academic outcomes. Keenan and Choi (2024) show that mentoring enhances social skills, stress management and life satisfaction. Adolescents in foster care with mentors are 1.3 times more likely to complete secondary education than those without such support. Mentoring thus expands social networks and life opportunities often restricted for this group.

Young people also value opportunities to exercise control and participate in educational decision-making. Concepts such as self-efficacy and self-reliance emerge as key personal assets in state care. Stein (2005), drawing on resilience theory, defines self-efficacy as the belief in one's ability to manage and direct one's life. Cameron (2007) conceptualizes self-reliance as a capacity for action developed when formal supports are limited, requiring self-management strategies to sustain participation and continuity. Both concepts can be understood as expressions of agency.

Several authors conceptualize agency as a socially situated process shaped by the interaction between individuals and structural environments. For Berridge (2017), agency emerges through contextual conditions—such as available support and real opportunities for participation—whereas Van Breda (2016) emphasizes that agency is constructed within broader social structures of services and protections. Together, these perspectives show that agency is neither solely individual nor purely structural, but a dynamic negotiation between personal initiative and institutional arrangements.

In summary, this review shows that institutional structures support educational progress when they provide stable and coherent environments, promote trauma-informed pedagogical practices, support meaningful and sustained relationships and ensure effective interagency coordination. These conditions strengthen participation, autonomy and agency, which are essential for educational success and the transition to adulthood and independent living.

6 | Limitations

6.1 | Limitations of the Studies Reviewed

The reviews included collectively exhibit methodological, conceptual and contextual limitations that constrain the robustness of their findings. Methodologically, descriptive and cross-sectional designs predominate, which are adequate for identifying associations but insufficient for establishing causal relationships or capturing long-term educational processes (Costa et al. 2019; Garcia-Molsosa et al. 2021; Luke and O'Higgins 2018; Männistö and Pirttimaa 2018). Only two reviews incorporated longitudinal studies (Evans et al. 2017; Liabo et al. 2013), yet these studies shared common limitations—absence of control groups, high attrition rates and incomplete data sources—that compromised their internal validity. Several reviews also noted the use of small, non-representative or convenience samples (Costa et al. 2019; Garcia-Molsosa et al. 2021; Goding et al. 2022; Hwami 2018; Townsend et al. 2020).

The reviews further displayed conceptual heterogeneity. Definitions of 'being in care', 'educational success' or 'school functioning' varied widely, as did the indicators employed (grades, attendance, behaviour), often in the absence of standardized instruments (Costa et al. 2019; Garcia-Molsosa et al. 2021; Lund and Stokes 2020; Männistö and Pirttimaa 2018). This methodological and conceptual variability led most reviews to rely on narrative synthesis rather than meta-analysis, thereby reducing the precision of conclusions and increasing interpretive subjectivity. Added to this is a marked geographical and linguistic bias, characterized by a predominance of studies from anglophone contexts and the almost exclusive inclusion of English-language literature (Brady 2017; Luke and O'Higgins 2018; O'Higgins et al. 2017; Garcia-Molsosa et al. 2021). Such bias restricts external validity and limits the transferability of findings to other sociocultural and educational settings.

6.2 | Limitations of the Umbrella Review

The heterogeneity of approaches and methods required the use of thematic analysis to synthesize and integrate the findings. Although this approach facilitates a deeper understanding of common patterns, it remains vulnerable to interpretative biases arising both from the original reviews and from the research team itself. Moreover, given the limited number of studies, there is a risk of double-counting primary research, which may overrepresent the consistency of certain findings.

Furthermore, the review had to address inconsistencies in definition of the target population (children in the FCS). Terminological diversity (e.g., CFC, LAC, KC, RC) complicates comparing findings across studies. In addition, international variability in educational systems and in definitions of early childhood, primary and secondary stages further hinders comparability. Each system defines differently the duration of regulated education, the stages included in compulsory schooling and the age ranges referred to as 'school age'. Nevertheless, the present study established strict boundaries for its scope, explicitly excluding research focused on post-compulsory education, such as higher education, vocational training or school-to-work transition processes.

Finally, and most notably, the analysis reflects the accumulated geographical and linguistic bias toward Western, English-speaking contexts and the exclusion of studies focused on specific subgroups. These limitations constrain understanding of the internal diversity of the care-experienced population and underscore the need for more rigorous, longitudinal and intersectional research.

7 | Conclusions and Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

This review identifies five key factors that facilitate the educational progress of children and young people under state care:

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educational and placement stability, interinstitutional coordination, supportive relationships with a trusted adult, educational and socioemotional support and the active participation of young people in shaping their educational trajectories.

Educational policies should prioritize stability, which has been recognized by numerous studies as a structural condition for learning and well-being. Schools function as stabilizing environments by providing pedagogical and relational continuity, where teachers play a crucial role. Therefore, professional development should focus on continuous training with a trauma-informed approach, fostering attachment, resilience and high expectations that enable sensitive and restorative pedagogical responses.

Moreover, policies are needed to strengthen collaboration between child protection and education systems through educational liaisons, information-sharing mechanisms and joint training initiatives. These measures promote more effective practices, such as the development of individualized educational plans that integrate academic, emotional and social support.

The most effective educational interventions are those that simultaneously integrate academic and socio-emotional support. To maximize their impact, this support should be delivered in a personalized, structured and sustained manner. Evidence shows that both domains are mutually reinforcing.

Finally, it is essential to recognize children and young people in the FCS as active rights holders, ensuring their genuine participation in educational decision-making and promoting their autonomy, self-sufficiency and long-term emancipation.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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