

Better Education, better futures. Research, practice and the views of young people in public care – Summary

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This report in brief

Barnardo's Better Education, better futures report is about the education of a particularly vulnerable group of young people – those in public care in the UK. It brings together:

- Research about the education of young people in care
- Examples of innovative policy and practice from a selection of local authorities in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales – the four nations of the UK
- The views and experiences of some young people who are and have been in care.

The purpose is to examine what have been the weaknesses in recent practice and to highlight some initiatives which address these. If real progress is to be made and young people's potential is to be fulfilled, social work and education practitioners and policy makers need to learn from ideas across the country and from the children and young people they serve. They also need to build on the strengths of young people rather than continually dwelling on their problems.

What does the law say?

The law and accompanying guidance in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is clear about children's rights in this area. All children who are looked after or accommodated have the same rights and should have the same opportunities as other children to education, including further education. They should also be offered other opportunities for development, such as leisure and extracurricular activities.

What is known about the education of children in public care?

It has been known that, despite the good intention of legislation, children who spend time in public care do less well than others at school. The vast majority are of normal intelligence and yet:

- Up to 70% of young people in foster care and over 80% in residential care leave school with no qualifications
- Fewer than 20% go on to further education compared to 68% of the general population, and fewer than 1 in 100 go to university
- Children in care are 10 times more likely to be excluded than their peers and as many as 30% are out of mainstream education because of either truancy or exclusion
- Between 50% and 80% are unemployed between the ages of 16 and 25.

What did young people tell us?

Young people were asked in focus groups about their educational experiences in care. They showed great resilience and sense of humour, speaking openly and honestly both about their positive and negative experiences. Some had had good stable placements and had done well at school. Others had felt undermined and discouraged. For many there was a huge gulf between well-meaning policies devised in council offices and meeting rooms and the day-to-day experience of being buffeted about (as they often saw it) in the care system.

Some quotations from young people are included below.

Why do young people in care underachieve at school? What does research tell us?

The report focuses on several aspects of the education of young people in public care:

Corporate Parenting

When children are placed away from home a bewildering number of people may be involved in their care. But there may be no one who has an overview of the child's family and care history, no one who feels a special interest in the child and can act as advocate in time of trouble as parents do. In particular:

- Education and social services departments often do not work together and communicate about the children in their care
- Social workers and education staff frequently lack knowledge of each other's structures and specialist language. Teachers may have a limited understanding of the care system and may have misconceptions about why children enter local authority care. The initial training of social workers includes little information about schools, their organisation or curriculum
- Most social workers do not think education is part of their core business (which they see as finding placements and maintaining family relationships).

'There was one teacher at my school, he was brilliant. He used to make learning fun and enjoyable. He knew my situation so he probably spoke to me more than anyone in the classroom.'

Raising Expectations and Attainment

"You don't hear of a lot of people coming out of care and going on to be nuclear physicists or brain surgeons. And yet there are certainly people in care who are bright enough."

- Research shows that social workers and teachers generally have low expectations of the educational abilities and potential of young people in care. Young people's education is not adequately planned and targets are not set or monitored by the authorities
- Children and young people do not receive the support they need to enable them to do well at school. Social workers consistently underestimate their difficulties

- Children and young people are often moved to different schools when their placements change, thus disrupting their education.

Social workers should think, "If this was my child, what would I want for them? What would I be doing to get my child a good education?"

The Care Environment

We know that where a child is living is crucial for how well they do at school.

Children in residential care can do well if the home is an environment where learning is valued. But they often lack space and quiet to study and resources such as books, stationery and access to computers. Residential staff need to support them and be interested in what is going on at school. Foster carers can do much to improve educational outcomes for children. This seems particularly the case if the foster carers, especially the mothers, have had good educational experiences themselves.

At present foster parents do not generally receive advice about liaison with schools when they begin to look after a child and some of the potential of fostering is being wasted.

"It's very hard to pass their exams if you've got kids running around all night, setting fire alarms off and throwing plates... The residential care staff let me go up to the office if I needed peace and quiet to study."

Enhancing Motivation and Self-esteem

Many looked after children come from homes where there was little praise or encouragement to learn and have low self-esteem as a result. Research shows that:

- When looked after young people's achievements are recognised, this boosts their confidence, gives other young people good role models and can change the perceptions of teachers and social workers
- Leisure time experiences, such as looking after animals, sport, volunteering and part-time work can improve a young person's self-esteem. This can give them the chance to become involved in decisions which affect their lives.

"They all talk about you as if you're not there. You're sitting there and all these people are saying 'oh, we think it's best for him if we...'"

Promoting Inclusion

Most children in public care go to ordinary neighbourhood schools. However, we know that a higher proportion than the rest of the population are excluded or sent to segregated and inferior forms of schooling. Black children and pregnant schoolgirls are at particular risk. It is clear that:

- Authorities do not take steps to avoid exclusions and, when children have been excluded, little or no education support is provided. Very little support is available to young people to challenge exclusion

- Disaffection in looked after children is not addressed and no steps are taken to re-engage young people in education and schools.

"I was only 14 when my baby was born, but no one discussed with me how I could continue my education."

"My social worker, she tried everything for me. So did my Educational Welfare Officer. They eventually got me part-time schooling, but I had to travel a long distance every day of the week."

Building on achievement

- It is still extremely rare for looked after young people to take A-levels (or Higher Stills in Scotland) even if their Year 11 results are good enough. They also frequently miss out on the careers advice offered to others. Their ambitions are often not taken seriously
- Young care leavers wishing to enter further or higher education face a range of obstacles. Often the care leaving projects do not prioritise education. Planning for higher education needs to start early so that potential problems can be resolved in advance.

"I had a review and they asked me what I wanted to do and I said I wanted to go to college and they said they would support me money-wise. They said they'd support me all the way because I'd done my education all the way."

How has practice responded?

The report surveyed policy and practice in a number of authorities in England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. It identified many promising developments where extra resources were being allocated and new staff appointed. Overall, problems are being recognised and, in many areas, attacked with great vigour. Some examples of initiatives are:

- Structural changes designed to improve communication between education and social services departments
- Events and award ceremonies to celebrate the achievements of young people at school
- Training for foster parents, residential care workers, social workers and teachers – aiming to raise awareness of educational issues and increase interdisciplinary working
- Providing transport for young people in care so that they can stay at the same school if their care placement changes
- Developing personal education plans and setting up good educational support for young people in care. Examples of extra help include: revision clubs during the school holidays; extra tuition before exams; paying foster carers to help with reading and homework; education support projects for unaccompanied asylum-seekers in care
- Ensuring that young people in residential care have somewhere quiet to study in the home or off site
- Making sure that young people in care have access to leisure time activities
- Consulting young people by, for example, using the Department of Health's Looking after Children materials
- Support for those going on to further or higher education, including financial help, accommodation during the vacations and emotional backup through contact with foster parents or social workers.

Conclusion

Although more research is needed into the education of children in public care, there are some clear messages for policy makers and practitioners.

First, until very recently, the education of young people in public care was seriously neglected. Overall the picture was of low attainment, denial of mainstream schooling, lack of concern and encouragement from social workers and teacher, and placements that offered inadequate support. Groups that have been particularly overlooked are pregnant schoolgirls in care, those from minority ethnic backgrounds and unaccompanied refugees and asylum-seekers.

Second, there are now many hopeful signs of attitudes changing and more resources being allocated. There is a new awareness that young people in care have the same right to educational opportunities as their peers. Some promising new practice is developing.

Third, great commitment is needed to make sure that this progress is sustained. The innovations need to be evaluated to make sure that they are as effective as possible. They need to be put on a secure financial footing so that they become an accepted part of good childcare practice, firmly embedded in mainstream services across the country. At present the chance of children and young people in public care doing well at school and enjoying their time there still depends too much on where they live.

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