The Educational Attainment of Looked After Children: Key Messages from Research
A Briefing Paper for the Looked After Children's Strategic Implementation Group
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Introduction and background

The following case example, a real story, with identifying features altered, will help to set the scene for a brief account of the key messages emerging from research in relation to the educational experience and attainment of looked after children and young people in Scotland.

Chris (not his real name) was 18 when interviewed, living in homeless accommodation and was uncertain about his direction in life. His last formal education had been a period between ages 15 and 16 spent in a residential school on the other side of the country from his home. There he gained Access 3 in maths and 'some intermediates, including English' but he was not entirely sure about his actual qualifications. He was clear about one thing: he'd liked to have spent longer at the residential school where he had felt supported; if he had gone there earlier he felt he would have gained more qualifications. As it was, he had previously attended two secondary schools and had experienced a number of periods of exclusion from both, during which time he could not recall being provided with any additional educational support, although he had spent time attending a special project for excluded children which he had enjoyed. After leaving the residential school, Chris began a catering course in a nearby college, something he really liked. Unfortunately there were difficulties with accommodation and Chris was forced to leave the course and return to live with family. When that arrangement broke down he became homeless. Chris enrolled in a college 'taster' course which he described as 'OK'. There was a work placement on a building site but he was treated 'like a skivvy', had to sweep the floors and by his own account he 'didn't learn anything'. It seems that no-one got close enough to Chris to learn about his interest in catering. He now had 'no idea what I want to do'.

Chris's story is depressingly typical of many looked after young people whose life experiences lead them to have difficulties in education. Interventions came too late or were out of step with Chris's needs. Many looked after children and young people succeed in education, because they get the support they need, or in spite of the barriers they face. However, Chris's experience helps to remind us of the systemic problems which persist, despite considerable efforts in the past ten years to make improvements.

The aim of this short briefing paper is to provide a summary of the research landscape in relation to the education and attainment of looked after children and young people and to identify some key messages in order to assist in identifying priorities for work in influencing practice. Twenty years ago there was very little research to report but that situation has changed dramatically and now the challenge is to be selective.

Themes in the research literature

The research literature can usefully be classified into three broad themes. Firstly, there are studies of educational outcomes, highlighting the generally low attainment of looked after children in comparison with their non-looked after peers, and implicating the effects of social deprivation and child poverty (Bebbington & Miles, 1989; Osborn & St. Claire, 1987). Low attainment at school impacts on low rates of access to higher education as a destination from school: currently 2.6% of school leavers from Scottish looked after backgrounds go directly into higher education, compared with 35.5% of non-looked after school leavers, though further education is a more significant destination.[i]

A second theme identifies deficiencies in agencies' monitoring of the educational careers of looked after children, and the doubtful accuracy of data about their achievements (Connelly et al., 2008; Fletcher-Campbell, 1998; Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools and Social Work Services Inspectorate, 2001; Jacklin, Robinson, & Torrance, 2006; Vincent, 2004). Advice about monitoring the educational outcomes of looked after children, was provided in a Scottish Government guide, based on the research into the Educational Attainment of Looked After Children Local Authority Pilot Projects.[ii]

Thirdly, there have been many studies of the quality of the educational environment in care settings, the attitudes and understandings of professionals and the support arrangements generally for looked after children in education (Gallagher, Brannan, Jones, & Westwood, 2004; Harker, Dobel-Ober, Akhurst, Berridge, & Sinclair, 2003; Hayden, 2005; Jackson, 2007). Despite the focus on ensuring that looked after children have appropriate opportunities for intellectual stimulation, and more consistent use of personal education planning, there remain significant concerns about the quality of the care environment (Elsley, 2008).

A study in one rural local authority in England found evidence of the use of personal education plans helping to raise the profile of the educational needs of looked after children (Hayden, 2005). Within the context of a residential care setting, researchers examined four aspects of 'engagement' (behaviour, relationships, participation and motivation), three factors of attainment (literacy and numeracy, public examinations and post-16 education and training) and seven aspects of educational processes (inculcating children with a sense of value for education, establishing expectations of children, an incremental re-integration programme, preparing children, supporting children, supporting educational placements and developing a learning culture) (Gallagher, et al., 2004). The authors concluded that residential care can influence education positively. They found that the key factors included giving children a sense of the value of education, clear and consistent messages about expectations in relation to education, a well-structured re-integration programme, providing support for children and staff when children are in school, and developing a learning culture within the home.

The remainder of this briefing examines in more detail the first of the three themes.

Educational outcomes

The first point to make is so simple that it is often overlooked. There is a strong link between attendance at school and attainment. For example, a large scale study of schools in Ohio, USA found significant positive relationships between attendance and attainment, highest in the ninth grade when academic expectations are apparently particularly high (Roby, 2004). Figure 1 below highlights the particular problem of absence from school of children looked after 'at home' in Scotland. Whilst the rate of exclusion from school is significantly high for looked after children, it is also highest for the at home group. An obvious, if simplistic, conclusion is that concentrating efforts on improving the attendance at school of this group might produce substantial benefits in relation to the average attainment of looked after children.
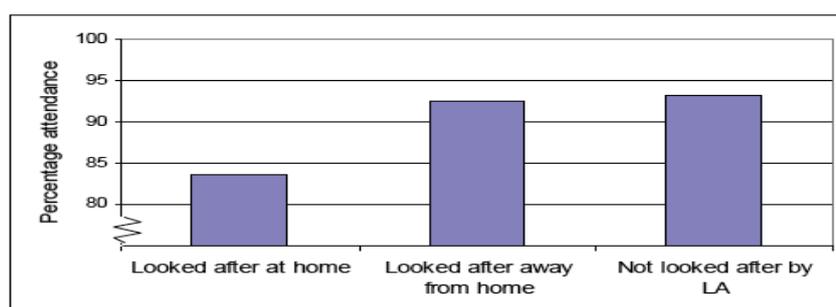

Figure 1: Attendance at school 2008-09[iii]

Figure 2 below shows attainment on 5-14 National Assessments for two school stages, Primary 3 and Secondary 1. The figures show dramatically how looked after children lag behind their non-looked after peers, and how disadvantages in reading and writing, already evident at an early age, become more significant by the start of secondary schooling. While the gap in maths is not so large in the early years, the deficit by adolescence is significant, presumably exacerbated by poor reading skills affecting decoding needed to understand maths problems.

Stage	Expected Level	Reading	Writing	Maths
Primary 3	A or above	74 (88)	69 (85)	89 (95)
Secondary 1	D or above	42 (74)	30 (70)	31 (70)

Figure 2: Percentage of looked after children reaching the expected attainment level (percentage of non-looked after children in brackets)[iv]

There are two points to make in relation to this observation. Firstly, there is significant evidence of the importance of support for reading in the early years. Apart from the instrumental advantage that facility in reading confers (e.g. in everyday living skills, decoding written instructions and making progress in school subjects), there are important psychological advantages associated with the intimacy of a parent or carer reading to a young child. One study examined closely the reading experiences of teachers and parents in a group of 32 children with a mean age of six years and four months (Greenhough & Hughes, 1998). The researchers identified differences between teachers'

and parents' reading practices, with teachers more likely to read to the children and to discuss the text with them, behaviour the authors termed 'conversing'. There were also large differences between parents in the amount of conversing engaged in, with 'high conversing' parents more likely to see reading as valuable and as an activity for its own sake.

Secondly, there is a relationship between early reading and later educational attainment. For example, researchers at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago noted that a critical transition takes place around grade four (age 9 or 10); before this many children are engaged in 'learning to read', while after this age the focus is on 'reading to learn'. The researchers found that children who were reading at or above 'grade level' at grade 3 were more likely to graduate from high school.[v] In our terms this would mean that they would be more likely to progress to further and higher education. An evaluation of a small-scale pilot of a *Reading Rich* programme with looked after children was carried out for Scottish Government (Finn, 2008). There are a number of useful messages in this research but one of particular interest is that the feature which appeared to have high impact was the direct contact between authors and young people: 'This aspect of the programme had the capacity to motivate, inspire, and increase the young people's expectations, and in many cases improve their behaviour' (p.33). There are many more local examples of success in reading programmes aimed at looked after children in Scotland, such as South Lanarkshire's work to encourage reading through involvement in drama and the supporting residential staff who volunteered to act as literacy co-ordinators.

One of the important findings of the research into the Educational Attainment of Looked After Children Local Authority Pilot Projects undertaken for the Scottish Government was that intervening by providing support aimed at boosting attainment can make a difference, even with older children (Connelly, et al., 2008). For example, about 40% of 230 young people advanced by one 5-14 National Assessment level, an amount similar to the average rate of progress of all children and significantly greater than the typical progress of looked after children. The research was unable to determine which kinds of intervention made most difference and in any case evidence from elsewhere suggests the nature of the activity may not be particularly important and that engagement is what is crucial.

A recent Canadian study examined the provision of three hours of home-based tuition per week over 30 weeks with 42 children in foster care aged 6-13. The study children were compared with 35 'wait-listed' children who were due to receive the additional support at a later date (Flynn, Paquet, Marquis, & Aubry, 2010). The study group children made gains in reading and maths compared with the comparison group, despite only 48% of the group having received the full programme as intended.

The importance of stability

It is virtually self-evident that a disrupted childhood, with many changes of placement and of significant adults, and inconsistent caring is highly damaging to educational chances. Conversely there is evidence of the impact of planned, long-term placements in raising attainment (Aldgate, Colton, Ghate, & Heath, 1992). Being successful in life depends on the underpinning conditions for well-being and relationships being present in everyday life (Bardy, 2008). This is the important message of the *Celebrating Success* study, based on interviews with adults with a care background

who had by their own account been successful in life in a variety of ways. The study summarised the conditions which appeared to facilitate success: having people in your life who care about you; experiencing stability; being given high expectations; receiving encouragement and support; and being able to participate and achieve (Happer, McCreadie, & Aldgate, 2006).

There is also now a growing literature which emphasises the value of participation in sporting, cultural and leisure activities in developing resilience and promoting social, emotional and intellectual development (Gilligan, 2007; Mallon, 2007)[vi]. Active promotion of the development of resilience appears to have significant advantages in helping young people to maintain more stable and satisfying lives. Educational psychologists in South Lanarkshire have developed support materials for teachers and carers, known as the Framework for Assessment and Intervention for Resilience (FAIR), based on the work of Edith Grotberg and have reported good outcomes.[vii]

Recent research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation with families in severe poverty has identified a number of conditions which are associated with the aspiration to progress in education (Goodman & Gregg, 2010). These are:

- Improving the home learning environment (e.g. books, reading to children, computer access)

- Raising parents' (carers) and children's aspirations and expectations for advanced education from primary school

- Helping parents and children to believe that their own actions can lead to advanced education

- Reducing children's behavioural problems and engagement in risky behaviours.

Education and the life course

A study which included a sub-group of 38 adults from care backgrounds in England who were 'high achievers' used as a comparison a group matched in terms of background but whose attainment was more typical of those with care backgrounds (Jackson & Martin, 1998). Virtually all the high achievers had 'A' Level or higher education qualifications, while 86% of the 'low achievers' had no qualifications and the rest had three or fewer GCSEs. The two groups differed on a range of measures. The high achievers had lower scores on the General Health Questionnaire, indicating better mental health. They also had significantly higher scores on life satisfaction and were more likely to be internally motivated and therefore were inclined to a view that they could make a difference by their own actions in their circumstances. They were also more likely to have learned to read early and to have been encouraged to progress to higher education by a significant adult.

Currently there is interest in the proposition that the life chances of adults who were formerly looked after may not be as poor as predicted by low attainment at school. The contention is that greater flexibility in access to post-school education and wider participation policies in colleges and universities will have impacted upon adults with experience of care. This is supported by a follow-up study of 52 residential care leavers in Finland which showed that while they were at high risk of 'cumulative risk behavior' in the years after leaving the institutions, by their mid-20s life situations

had stabilised during their early 20s, particularly for those with a supporting partnership (Jahnukainen, 2007). Zachari Duncalf's research on behalf of the Care Leavers' Association has also identified significantly high achievement among adults with care experience, though the online survey methodology will have resulted in a self-selected group which is likely to have a bias towards those with higher qualifications (Duncalf, 2010).

Conclusion

There is no doubt about the protective value of a good educational experience and of higher attainment in school for looked after children. However, equally important are opportunities to participate in activities and to receive encouragement and support. Monitoring of the attainments of care leavers indicates that while higher proportions are gaining access to further and higher education courses, attainment at school, measured by SCQF levels, are improving only very slowly. On the other hand, the policies which have emphasised the importance of education for looked after children and young people are likely to take many years to make an impact. Also, we know relatively little, so far, about the trajectories of care leavers and it is possible that increasing numbers will access post-school educational opportunities when older, particularly those who have experienced stable, supportive placements. For this reason, it is important to continue to emphasise to teachers, carers and social workers that they should not underestimate the lasting impact they can have with looked after young people, even though this may not be immediately apparent.

The most striking aspect of the evidence is the relative disadvantage of young people who are looked after at home. Encouraging local authorities and schools to examine this problem and to consider creative ways in which improvements in attendance of this group could be achieved locally is likely to make the single most significant contribution to the attainment of looked after children.

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[i] Source: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/12/08090751/13

[ii] See: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/03/25142835/0

[iii] Source: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/12/08155629/0

[iv] Data collected June 2003. Source: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/stats/bulletins/00369-00.asp

[v] See: http://www.chapinhall.org/research/inside/students-and-above-grade-level-reading-grade-3-graduate-high-school-higher-rates-stu

[vi] SCIE has a guide for promoting resilience in foster care settings: http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide06/index.asp

[vii] See: http://www.lookedafterchildrenscotland.org.uk/health/initiatives/fair.asp