

# Learn, Achieve, Live, Succeed: The Perspectives of Looked After Children on Success

**Robbie Huxtable**

## **Abstract**

This paper outlines a study which investigated the views of eight looked after children on what it means to be successful in school. The participants were aged 12-14 and lived and attended school in rural south west Scotland. The study adopted semi-structured interviews which were analysed using Framework Analysis. The analysis identified three arenas for success: Learn, Achieve and Live as well two types of success: Success-as-development and Success-as-goal. The impact of teachers on each of these arenas was evident and was considered most influential in the Learning and Achieving arenas. Factors affecting all arenas, such as the role of the classroom secondary teacher on provision for looked after children are discussed as well as implications of the research on future practice.

## **Keywords**

Looked-after children, success, education, framework, Scotland

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## Introduction and National Context

*It is widely accepted that as a group, looked after children perform less well at school; when compared to the general school population their attendance rates are lower, their exclusion rates are higher and their academic attainment is lower:*

We Can and Must Do Better (2007, p.20).

In recent years, Scottish education has seen the introduction of a number of influential initiatives related to the health and wellbeing of our young people: Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) (Scottish Executive, 2004), Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) (Scottish Government, 2010) and the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. Each of these has a significant impact on the provision for looked after children.

GIRFEC, aimed to provide a consistent way to work with children and young people. The introduction of a 'Named Person' for every child and, proportionate, multi-agency information sharing as part of this initiative has required a change in the responsibilities of all members of staff in the education sector. Aspects of GIRFEC were taken forward and incorporated in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and further changes to the role secondary schools play in the lives of looked after children came with the introduction of CfE in 2010. The responsibility of a significant portion of health and wellbeing education, as well as numeracy and literacy, is now in the hands of all practitioners and to be delivered during discreet subject lessons.

These initiatives have been developed in response to the growing volume of literature across the last 30 years that indicates local authorities are failing to provide positive educational outcomes for looked after children (Jackson 1987, 1994, Jackson and McParlin 2006, Simon and Owen 2006, Connelly and Chakribarti 2008).

Looked after children in Scotland follow the negative UK-wide trends pertaining to the number of qualifications gained upon leaving school and poor numeracy and literacy levels (Connelly and Chakribarti, 2008). While, as of 2013/14, rates of exclusions and non-attendance for looked after children are falling (Scottish Government, 2015) they are still significantly higher than that of non-looked after children.

Prior to the introduction of GIRFEC, Scottish reports including Learning with Care (HMIE and SWSI 2001), Extraordinary Lives (Social Work Inspection Agency, 2006) and Count Us In (HMIE, 2008) set out the educational disadvantages that looked after children faced and proposed ways for agencies to move forward in

improving these outcomes. The need for multi-agency working to create a shared understanding of the importance of education for improving the life chance of children and young people was also identified (HMIE, 2001).

## Why this Research?

*Listening to the views of looked after children and young people, and being alert to their current experiences is central to improving educational achievement;*

Brodie (2010, p.3).

There is a tranche of literature and policy throughout the UK documenting the educational underachievement of looked after children; general trends regarding poor attendance, attainment and exclusions are also well documented (Scottish Government, 2014). Research in this area has now turned towards improving educational outcomes and this study intends to provide practitioners with an insight into what success means to some of these young people.

Since the implementation of CfE and GIRFEC there has been an increased responsibility upon classroom teachers to have an awareness of and cater for the health and wellbeing of every child (Scottish Executive, 2006). CfE is built upon four pillars, or 'capacities': Successful Learners, Responsible Citizens, Effective Contributors and Confident Individuals. These capacities have since become the cornerstones of school ethos across Scotland (Miller and Gillies, 2013) despite the terms remaining virtually unchallenged (Priestley & Humes, 2010). The concept of a Successful Learner is particularly relevant to this study.

Previous studies regarding success and improving educational outcomes for looked after children (Coulling, 2000; Happer, MacCreadie and Aldgate, 2006; Sugden, 2013) have had emergent themes which include: stability, high expectations, feeling cared for and being able to achieve. The views from these studies were obtained using samples from primary schools and from young people who had left school. The focus of this study is on young people who are currently in the 'junior phase' of secondary school (S1 – S3: age 12-14) as there is a gap in the knowledge at this age group.

Brodie (2010) and Sugden (2013) have both emphasised the need for staff to be aware of those children, who are looked after or accommodated, in their classes and the contribution teaching staff can make to each child. It has also been identified that teachers have a desire to improve achievement and support for looked after children (Scottish Government, 2008).

## **Aims**

This study aims to investigate the views of looked after young people between the ages of 12 and 14 on the idea of success and what factors affect their success.

It is the primary intention of this project to provide some insight on the views of looked after young people for the benefit of classroom teachers. The awareness given by this research will hopefully provide all practitioners with a better understanding of some of the issues these young people encounter.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The criteria for participation in this study were that the pupil was in S1 – S3 and had been looked after for a period of six months or more. It was not requested or specified whether the young people were in foster care, kinship care or under a supervision order.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study was conducted in accordance with the Scottish Educational Research Association Guidelines (2004). Overarching permission and ethical approval for this research was given through a local ethics committee from the social work and education directorates of Dumfries and Galloway Council.

### **Consent**

Schools across the region were asked to identify any young people who might be willing to take part and were supplied with information sheets and consent forms detailing the nature of the research and confidentiality agreement. The looked after children co-ordinator helped to share this information with the identified young person and their carers to explain the project and to gain informed consent. Over 20 young people were approached however only eight agreed to participate for reasons discussed below.

### **Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were arranged for each of the participants and took approximately 30 minutes. The interviews were carried out in conjunction with the Dumfries and Galloway Listen2Us group; Listen2Us is a consultation group made up of care leavers and is experienced at working with and expressing the

views of looked after young people. Two members of the group helped to conduct the interviews by running the card sorting task.

The interview consisted of three activities with open ended questions following on from these activities:

**Card sorting:** - Participants were asked to arrange cards representing school subjects into three piles: enjoy, don't enjoy, don't know. The participant then arranged cards, of their own writing, describing other aspects of school under the same headings.

**The Ideal Teacher and School:** - Participants were asked to imagine and describe what the features of a perfect school and perfect teachers would be. Discussion took place surrounding their reasons for their answers and how that would be different from their current school experience.

**Finish my tweet:** - Participants were given a series of unfinished 'Tweets' which they had to complete, in no particular order:

'I think success is...'

'I think teachers think success is...'

'I think parents/carers think success is...'

'To be successful I need...'

## Analysis

All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and then transcribed in full. After a period of familiarisation with the data set, an iterative process of indexing and thematic charting took place in line with the framework analysis method proposed by Ritchie, Lewis and O'Connor. (2003):

**Familiarisation:** The entire data set was reviewed, in a process of familiarisation, until it was believed that the diversity within it was understood.

**Indexing:** Five main themes were identified in this process: teachers, learning, school, subjects, success and a total of 25 subthemes. At this stage, main themes and sub-themes maintained the use of language and terms from the data set to ensure the analysis stayed rooted in the data.

**Thematic Charting:** Spreadsheet software was used to create a thematic matrix, or chart, for each main theme. Care was taken when synthesising the indexed data to ensure that the main essence of the data was kept without losing the language of the participant. During thematic charting, the total number of sub themes was refined to 22.

**Descriptive Analysis:** The goal of this descriptive analysis is to provide illuminating content and display the data in a conceptually pure manner. Descriptive accounts are created through a process of detection, categorisation and classification.

## Validity and Reliability

In order to maintain validity and rigour within the qualitative analysis process, a number of approaches were used. Analysis was intended to be transparent and reflexive to ensure that the processes followed were clear and considered (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003; Yardley, 2008). The researcher aimed to ensure analysis was also grounded in the data, maintaining the language of the participants to ensure that classification was appropriately generated and a research team was consulted throughout the analysis process. A reflective approach was used during all phases of research in order to remain open to new themes as well as potential contextual factors and researcher influences which may have impacted on the analysis process (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003; Yardley, 2008). Finally, whilst developing the main and sub themes, the researcher made efforts to identify cases within the data which provided deviant examples to the developing understanding.

## Presentation and Analysis of Findings

Through analysis of participants' responses to the interview tasks, it was clear these young people saw success in three arenas: Learn; Achieve; and Live. Learn and Achieve both reflected participants' feelings towards success in school whereas Live looked at success beyond the school environment. Learn was seen as a subcategory of Achieve and Achieve a subcategory of Live as displayed in fig.1. For example, improvement in Maths (Learn) would lead to doing well in the National 5 exam<sup>1</sup> (Achieve) and would enable future study at university (Live).

The responses also identified two differing types of successes: Success-as-development and Success-as-goal. Success-as-development refers to the idea of success being attributed to a specific individual development or improvement within the participant whereas Success-as-goal is the achievement of an end point or goal.

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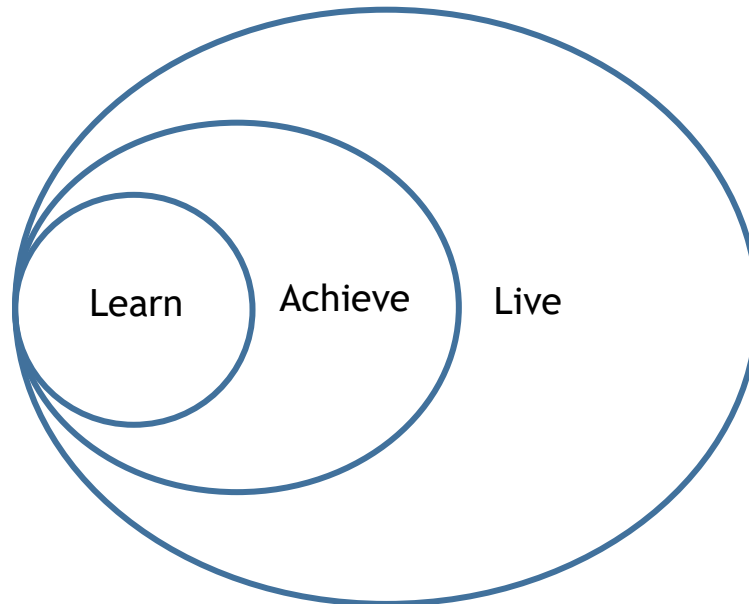
<sup>1</sup> For more information about National Qualifications in Scotland see the [SQA website](#).

The impact of teachers, on all three arenas or success, was also highlighted by the participants. It was identified that teachers' traits, communication, temperament and discipline system influenced participants' enjoyment and engagement of particular subjects, and school in general, with resulting implications for their ability to be successful.

Discussions around Success were almost always focused around school. This might have been expected as the interviews took place in the participant's school, two of the interview tasks were explicitly about school and the researcher was a teacher. The third task did not refer to aspects of school (but did have mention of teachers), however participants did not venture very far from the idea of success being rooted in schools. The essence of the Learn and Achieve arenas is that they are potentially applicable beyond the school walls – for example: success was when I improved at horse riding (Learn) and managed to win a show jumping competition (Achieve). In this instance the impact of teachers was significantly less and the impact of riding instructor significantly greater. It should be noted that the impact of teachers as discussed below is in reference to successes in an educational context.

## Arenas of Success

Fig. 1. – Arenas of Success



### **Learn: a current personal development or improvement**

#### **Success-as-Development**

*'Success is being smart and clever'*

*'Success is a child improving'*

*'Success is when you try your best'*

*'You need to learn to have a good life'*

Young people saw this type of success as improvements including: getting better at Maths, not being sent to the behaviour room as much, and not burning things in Hospitality. Although not specifically goal-orientated, Learn successes involved developments which would enable future Achievement-based success. School was seen as the main place for Learn successes and the high impact of teachers in this process was evident from the responses.

#### **Impact of Teachers on Educational Learn Successes**

*'I hate [subject] 'cos I hate the teacher...makes me feel rubbish'*



*'I don't fall out with the [subject] teacher because she listens to me'*

The young people in this study described the impact teachers had on their Learn successes to both positive and negative extents. Teachers' moods played a big role in whether or not young people engaged in particular lessons. Young people described that if a teacher was 'crabbit' (a Scots word for grumpy) they were less motivated to work or acted different. Conversely, teachers who were seen as approachable and supportive enabled educational development. Teacher-student communication was another factor identified that affected Learn-successes. Being shouted at and frequently told to 'shut up' disengaged young people with the subject and in some cases made pupils scared of the teacher. In contrast, the young people valued being spoken to normally but appreciated the need for a fair discipline system with consistent sanctions. Teachers were seen as having a high impact in the Learn arena.

## **Achieve: success as academic achievement**

### **Success-as-Goal**

*'Success is doing something well'*

*'Success is going to uni or being famous'*

*'Success is good qualifications'*

*'Success is when you achieve'*

The idea of success as an achievement of a goal reoccurred across all participants and ranged from simply getting good marks in a Maths test to passing five Highers. Success was achieving short to mid-term goals which the young people felt were attainable in the near future. In order to reach success in this arena, it was recognised that success would first have to be gained in the Learn arena

### **Impact of Teachers on Educational Achieve Successes**

*'[Teacher] says I could get National 5 in [subject]...makes me want to do it'*

*'Teachers are just focused on exams'*

Young people recognised that Achieve-success came as a result of Learn-success and that teachers were key to gaining experiences of either. Some responses

described that simply being put into a position where they could achieve, such as a National 5 class as opposed to a National 4 class, increased their motivation. Young people spoke of the difficulty of achieving in a subject which they did not like or did not see the relevance in. Teachers were identified as the main factor influencing whether a pupil enjoyed a subject or not – even above the subject content. Relevance of tasks to the subjects or the subject to real life application was another motivating factor for the young people. Teachers who provide opportunities for achievement in extra-curricular activities, such as use of a recording studio or running a football team, were also able to develop effective relationships with the young people which were carried into curricular areas.

## **Live: future success and a successful life**

### **Future Developments and Goals**

*'Success is a good job'*

*'Success is having a good job, money for house and car'*

*'Need a good home to be successful'*

*'Work brings a successful life'*

Factors which emerged under the headings of Learn and Achieve, fed into a notion of future success and living a successful life. The responses identified in the Live arena were ones which moved away from the idea of academic achievement and towards a more holistic view of success. These included financial and emotional stability, getting a good job and owning a house and car. During the interview, Live successes were also always a product of earlier mentioned Learning- or Achievement-successes: e.g.. Success is getting in to university so I can be a social worker. Each participant articulated aspirations for the future mostly focused around the career they wished to pursue; with this career came financial stability, a house and a car. This arena of success reflected achievement of long term goals and the processes in reaching them.

### **Impact of Teachers on Live Successes:**

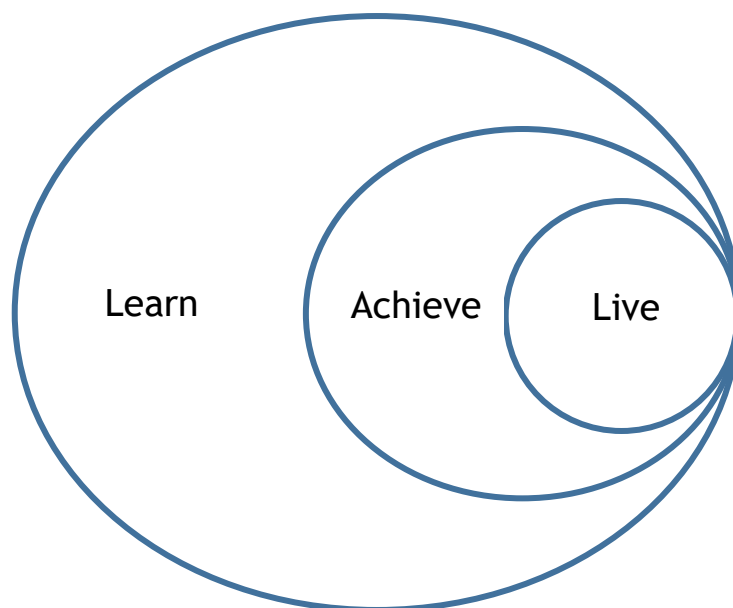
*'You need to stick in school to get a successful life'*

*'I need...carer and friends to get success when I leave school'*

When the young people were asked 'Who do you need to be successful?' some responses referenced a particular teacher. The young people identified these teachers as people who would be able to help them achieve future success, allowing them to achieve exam results and develop skills for work. Although it was recognised that a 'good education' was needed as a platform to getting a 'good life', friends and carers were seen as more influential than teachers with regard to this area of success.

### Overall Impact of Teachers

Fig. 2. – Level of perceived teacher impact in each arena.



*'I like [subject] because the teacher is supportive'*

*'Instead of all the teachers being crabbit – they're being happy'*

*'It bores me when teachers go on and on...'*

*'I hate [subject] because the teacher forgets about me'*

The impact of teachers was seen to have different levels of influence in each arena of success as show in *fig.2*. The young people spoke about the importance of the teacher for improvements in their development and subject knowledge as well as their role in achieving exam results (although this was in conjunction with their hard work). Teachers were not seen as having as much of a direct

influence on the young peoples' successes in the Live arena instead it was others, such as carers and friends, who had greater influence in future non-educational success.

## Discussion

The findings of this study are the views and experiences of the eight young people involved and although we can learn from their experiences there is no suggestion that replicating their views will lead to improved outcomes for every looked after child. This study is intended to provide an insight for practitioners of these views and experiences and this discussion looks at some of the considerations surrounding these findings, implications for practitioners and further recommendations.

## Success

Table 1 details the attributes and capabilities of a Successful Learner as described in CfE.

Table 1. *Attributes and Capabilities of a Successful Learner*

<b>Attributes</b>	<b>Capabilities</b>
Enthusiasm and motivation for learning	Use literacy, communication and numeracy skills
Determination to reach high standards of achievement	Use technology for learning
Openness to new thinking and ideas	Think creatively and independently
	Learn independently and as part of a group
	Make reasoned evaluations
	Link and apply different kinds of learning in new situations

Definitions of all four capacities are given within the CfE document, however, Miller and Gillies (2013) describe them as ambiguous and having a potentially negative impact. The danger stems from the idea that some young people view

these capacities synonymously with achievement and to fall short academically implies failure with regard to these capacities (Buie, 2011). The way in which the attributes and capabilities are described consider very little of the Learn concept of success, more implying that when you can achieve these capabilities you are a successful learner.

This is at odds with the findings of this study, as the importance of the Learn arena and success-as-development was evident from participant responses. *'I like learning...depends what mood I'm in'*

*'Science is good because you get to do experiments...and Geography because you get to learn about the world'*

*'I like it when we're researching – like putting together a poster'*

Consequently, the concept of a Successful Learner could be setting our young people up to fail. Cameron, Jackson, Huari and Hollingworth (2012) have identified how tensions between policy aims and young people's experience can have a negative impact on looked after children. Scottish schools need to ensure the concept of success they are promoting is not purely from an academic standpoint (Miller and Gillies, 2013) and open to all while the four capacities need to be subject to increased dialogue between managers, teachers and learners in order to be effective.

Home background is another key factor when it comes to success (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005; Jackson and Ajayi, 2007; Berridge, 2012). The link between home life and success was not put to the young people directly but some identified the need for stability in order to be successful:

*'you need a good financial base, good education and good home life...folk that are supporting you'*

*'I probably need to have a good home environment like if there was a lot of things going on at home that would be quite difficult'*

## **Teacher Impact**

Teachers have been identified as one of the most influential factors in a looked-after child's educational development (Morgan, 2009; Sugden, 2013) as well as young people who are not looked after (Harker, Dobel-Ober, Lawrence, Berridge & Sinclair, 2003).

The features of teachers, that were identified by looked after young people as having an impact in the Learn and Achieve arenas, echoed the findings of

Happer et al. (2006). Their study described what care leavers believed made them successful: feeling cared for, stability, high expectations, receiving encouragement and support, and being able to experience achievement.

*'[Subject] teacher is quite supportive. She just wants you to do well'*

*'I likes a funny teacher...one you can have a laugh with and that'*

*'Teachers shouldn't be crabbit'*

In The Educational Attainment of Looked After Children (Scottish Government, 2008), practitioners identified that having appropriate values and attitudes, including: believing in young people, having high expectations and being flexible, was crucial to the achievement of looked after young people. Teachers also placed value on building respectful and trusting relationships which, in turn, built resilience. It was suggested that practitioners believed that stability and a sense of normality created the basis for achievement.

In the above studies, both young people and teachers have broadly similar ideas regarding what they think helps young people to be successful and achieve in school. Yet when it comes to day-to-day interactions the young people in this study describe how there is a difference:

*'good qualifications...that's what teachers think – they always want you to get good qualifications'*

*'teachers think the same as me, what I think success is...although they're more focused on exams'*

*'Teachers are more focused on being in, like, school and success at exams...carers think more, like, successful in life'*

The perceptions of the young people was that teachers were more focused around the Achieve arena whereas the young person in the Learn arena. Despite identifying that it was necessary to gain qualifications from school, the young people in this study described how in order to be interested in the Achieve arena they first had to be engaged at the Learn stage.

## **Teachers' Role**

It is clear from this study that teachers, knowingly or not, influence the success of a looked after child. The identified impact of teachers on educational success leads to considerations about the secondary teacher's role in working towards these successes with looked after children. As a result, there could be an

argument for increased awareness of secondary subject teachers to the plights of looked after children in their classes; but what support should they offer?

Brewin and Statham (2011) and Martin and Jackson (2002) highlighted the importance of not singling out looked after young people in school environments and not making them feel different due to their looked after status. Similarly, an argument for normalising the experiences of looked after children was presented by Ward (2006) where it was suggested that, for some, by not making special allowances for the young person, there was no emphasis on their sense of being different. This can be potentially seen as a contrast to the ethos of GIRFEC and CfE, noted above, and poses the question of who, in schools, is responsible for ensuring the success of looked after young people and to what extent. This contradiction was stressed by Leslie and Mohammed (2015) who identified the difficulty teachers can face between treating all pupils in the same manner but yet being flexible enough to allow for any pressures and difficulties arising in a particular child's life.

Although Brewin and Statham (2011) conclude that normalising should occur while discreetly addressing an individual's needs it is unclear where the role of the classroom secondary teacher lies. Should class teachers be attempting to teach in a manner which incorporates the findings of Sugden (2013) and Happer et al. (2006) with a focus on getting it right for every child? Or, is that aspect of a looked after child's development the responsibility of pastoral care staff while class teachers are left to create a 'normalised' environment where no child's differences are acknowledged?

The positive effects of having a network of supportive adults in the lives of looked after young people have been well documented. Woolley and Bowen (2007) reported better psychological and behavioural engagement in education and Bomber (2007) highlighted the importance of a positive relationship with at least one designated adult in a school environment. Liabo, Gray and Mulcahy's (2013) systematic review into interventions for looked after young people demonstrated that studies showed considerable effort by people to develop and deliver interventions. Young people were not involved in this process however and there were gaps in expectations between different stakeholders.

The role of the classroom teacher in secondary education in relation to success for looked after children is one that requires some future attention. Leslie and Mohammed (2015) highlighted that anyone who is involved with a looked after young person should be aware of the influence their actions have on that young person. The In Care, In School project (Parker and Gorman, 2013) has attempted to address this issue and aims to educate all members of the school environment on the best way to support looked after young people. With Simon and Owen's (2006) grim prediction of social exclusion and unemployment as a

result of poor educational outcomes for looked after children, it is of the utmost importance that schools strike the right balance. Given the level of interaction and influence of teachers on the Learn and Achieve arenas of success, do they have a bigger role in creating positive outcomes than they currently realise? Are some teachers failing looked after young people simply through poor interactions and understanding of a child's situation? It is clear that if the ideologies of CfE and GIRFEC are to be followed, it would appear that our concept of 'responsibility for all' requires some consideration.

## Reflections

It was acknowledged that this study would be unable to represent the full range of views of looked after children as the term 'looked after' encompasses a broad spectrum of circumstances. However, the participants did represent a wide geographical cross-section across the region.

The manner in which participants were selected for this project involved a process of self-selection and relied on the judgement of the school's looked after children co-ordinator to approach pupils which they thought would be suitable. After the initial approach of 20 pupils, 12 were subsequently judged unsuitable by their co-ordinator or did not wish to take part for reasons including: current exclusion, school refusal and not wishing to be identified as looked after. All participants were selected from mainstream secondary schools within the region; partnership with other practitioners in the residential child care sector could provide useful next steps for looked after children in mainstream education.

School was described positively by the participants and they were not asked to discuss their attendance or exclusion rates; attendance and exclusion rates are notably higher for looked after young people (We Can and Must Do Better, 2007; Connelly and Chakribarti 2008) and other insights may be gained from conducting a similar study with those who were thought to be unsuitable on this occasion.

A more holistic view of the issues and findings identified in this study might also be achieved by furthering the parameters of the project to include opinions of teachers, carers, parents and social workers. Further investigation into their views of the relationship between their care status and success was felt to be beyond the scope of the current project but exploration in this area could yield useful insights for future research.



## Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the views of looked after young people on success and to provide insight on this matter for practitioners. It gathered the perspectives of eight young people, aged between 12 and 14, on what they thought success was and who helped them to be successful. Three arenas of success were identified: Learn, Achieve and Live. It was seen that the young people did not believe that their views of success varied wildly from teachers, however, teachers were perceived as having a more blinkered view towards the Achieve arena. The significant impact of the teacher was recognised at each discreet stage with regard to educational success. Notable features of teachers were: how mood, temperament and communication affect young people's enjoyment of the subject and motivation to achieve within it and; the support given to enable learners to achieve their future goals.

The impact and role of teachers in educational success for looked after children was highlighted and can be summarised as follows:

- Interactions with teachers, opportunities for success and high expectations were seen to be key to Learn- and Achieve-Successes;
- Secondary schools need to consider how to best use their frontline teaching staff in supporting the success of looked after children;
- Classroom teachers should be aware of how their role influences educational and wellbeing outcomes for looked after children and young people;
- Teachers should also be aware of the issues of providing an 'ordinary' experience for a looked after child over a specially adapted one;
- Positive relationships with supportive adults can have positive outcomes for looked after children.

The present study has shown the need for schools and teachers to reflect upon the way everyday classroom interactions occur regarding success and looked after children in order to ensure positive outcomes and success for every child.

## Biography

Robbie Huxtable has been a music teacher in Dumfries and Galloway for three years. Over the past 12 months, he has had the opportunity to undertake a part-time research secondment alongside his teaching commitments. Within his secondment, Robbie worked with partners and groups who were involved with

looked after children in the social work and education sectors. Robbie has recently left his teaching post in order to complete further study.

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