

## Book Review

**Jackson, S. (Ed.) (2013). Pathways through education for young people in care. London: British Association for Adoption and Fostering. 276 pp, ISBN 978 1 907585722, £19.95**

For young people in care the pathway through education can be littered with obstacles. Traumatic experiences sustained prior to (or as a result of) coming into care are often compounded by placement instability, school disruption and inadequate support. The outcome for most is a level of educational achievement, at school-leaving age, significantly below that of the general population.

In this book Professor Sonia Jackson has brought together a collection of research studies, programme evaluations and personal stories which highlight the educational challenges faced by young people in care. It also provides some useful insight into how carers and professionals can make a positive difference. The focus is primarily on care systems, exploring how they can obstruct or facilitate a young person's engagement in learning, so the book's utility will be limited for practitioners looking for specific techniques on how to support the learning of looked after children. The book reads more as a plea for policy makers and practitioners to give greater priority (and resources) to the education of looked after children and young people. As Jackson states in the Afterword:

For too many [looked after children] the future holds disappointment, fading hopes and diminished aspirations. The promising initiatives described in this book are mostly localised, short-term and time limited. We will not see real improvement until they become part of mainstream provision, available to all children in care. (p.234)

The book is divided into four parts. The first, *Overview*, provides a concise introduction to the English policy context and recent UK research. Penelope Welbourne and Caroline Lesson's helpful review of the literature (Chapter 2) is worth particular mention, encouraging the reader to take a more nuanced view of the issues, avoiding the overly simplistic conclusions that being 'in care' is itself the problem, or that these children are destined to low achievement because of some 'biographical disadvantage'. The picture is complex, with multiple pre- and in-care factors affecting children's educational progress. In Scotland we are now well placed to identify the learning needs of our looked after children, with the increasing implementation of Getting it Right for Every Child, and mandatory assessments under the Additional Support for Learning legislation. However, to borrow a line from Welbourne and Lesson's chapter, 'the opportunities to provide educational support created by recent policy changes will only offer substantial benefit to children if coupled with therapeutic support where needed' (p.41).

The second part, *Raising Attainment*, opens with an autobiographical account from Collette Bentley, who broke out of a downward cycle of non-attendance and educational disengagement to obtain a first-class degree in languages, and then fulfil her childhood ambition of becoming a doctor. Her story is a salutary reminder that the needs of some looked after children are not complex; patience, persistence and encouragement are all that is required. Whatever the placement type, our care systems should be able to provide

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this for every child. The other chapters in Part 2 focus on measures which have been used to improve looked after children's educational development. Chapters 6 and 8, looking, respectively, at the importance of spare time activities and 'paired reading', represent the book's most practical offerings, introducing new ideas about how carers can support looked after children in their education. For those interested in the Scottish context, Graham Connelly provides an accessible overview of recent developments in Chapter 8, identifying areas of promising practice.

In the introduction, Sonya Jackson states that 'it is very important for teachers to understand [...] how children's learning might be affected by a traumatic family life before care and by the process of coming into care itself' (p.6). Considering this statement, and the central importance of school more generally, it is perhaps surprising that Part 3, *The School Experience*, is this book's shortest section. This may be a reflection of the limited academic material relating specifically to schools and looked after children, but in view of the considerable literature dedicated to children with emotional, developmental or learning difficulties, this part feels like a missed opportunity. This feeling is underscored by the fact that Kate Cairns' *Effects of trauma on children's learning* (Chapter 12) is one of the book's standout chapters. Although it represents only a short, partial introduction to the issues, it provides the reader with a helpful insight into how the adversities faced by looked after children can translate into behaviours which make (traditional, classroom orientated) learning difficult. For readers coming to the topic of 'education in care' for the first time, I would recommend starting with this chapter. More than the policy history and research review, it sets the context for why it is critically important that 'corporate parents', be they governments, local authorities or schools, understand the challenges faced by young people in care, and invest appropriately to support them through their education. 'Knowing about trauma does not solve the problem, but it does provide a robust theoretical model from which to develop more effective and appropriate ways of living and working with children who suffered such harm' (p.146).

The fourth and final part of the book looks at the education of young people making the transition to adulthood. Chapter 13 presents the findings of the important *By Degrees* study (2003), which led to the establishment of the Buttle Quality Mark for further and higher education institutions. Chapter 15 talks to the important issue of lone asylum-seeking and refugee young people, and the critical role carers play as advocates for education. This latter theme is at the centre of subsequent chapters, looking at the self-reliance of care leavers. Across these concluding pages the message is clear: educational success is important, and young people in care need to be encouraged and supported to achieve it.

Overall this book is an accessible and often engaging introduction, recommended in particular to policy-makers and managers. While of value to front-line education and social care practitioners, the book is limited in its discussions of specific techniques that could be used with children or young people. The purpose of the book is, I believe, to present a case for accelerated investment in educational support for children and young people. This is not just about access to specialist support in school, but a wider challenge to put education at the centre of care. That means recruiting (or retaining) social care professionals and carers who value and promote education, and who are able to support

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children to overcome any difficulties they may encounter. The editor acknowledges that there are some important subjects missing from this book. The studies included focus primarily on children in foster care, and the challenges and opportunities of residential care are rarely discussed. Those interested in the early years will also find little here. The book would benefit from some exploration of the reasons why progress to improve educational outcomes has been so slow. There are tantalising hints, with references to professional and societal attitudes, but no substantive discussion. However, if I reflect on the improved profile of this agenda in recent years, including important legislative and policy developments across the UK, I am reminded that we are making progress. This book, which reminds us that we all have a part to play in supporting looked after children, should help move the agenda on further still.

### **Endnotes**

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