Care To Learn? The Educational Experiences of Children and Young People Who Are Looked After

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Introduction

In January 2002, the Scottish Executive commissioned a consortium of agencies to carry out the *Learning with Care* project. The aim of the project was to develop new materials to assist local authorities to improve educational outcomes for looked after and accommodated children and young people, and to implement the recommendations of the *Learning with Care* inspection report (Scottish Executive, 2001). Save the Children and Who Cares? Scotland worked with the BAAF Adoption & Fostering, the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care, and the University of Strathclyde Department of Educational Support and Guidance, Professional Development Unit and Quality in Education Centre to develop the *Learning with Care* materials. These included a training pack (Hudson et al., 2003; and see Judy Furnivall and Barbara Hudson in this issue), an information booklet (Connelly et al., 2003), quality indicators [see Graham Connelly in this issue] and an education report which will form part of the *Looking After Children in Scotland* materials.

The role of Save the Children and Who Cares? Scotland was to ensure that these materials reflected the views and experiences of looked after children and young people. Twenty-seven looked after children and young people were consulted through a series of focus groups and individual interviews. In addition to informing the *Learning with Care* materials, a separate report called *Care to Learn?* was produced (Ritchie, 2003).

This paper presents the key findings from *Care to Learn?* and the educational experiences of looked after children and young people. It illustrates what young people think works well and what could be improved. It suggests how schools, local authorities and policy makers can better support looked after children and young people, protecting their right to education and a good start in life.

Getting through the school gates

Many of the young people consulted had experienced gaps in their education for a variety of reasons or had dropped out of school early. For some this occurred due to exclusion, but there were other reasons for non-attendance. Many of the young people consulted had changed schools a number of times due to changes in their care placement. Moving from one care setting to another was an extremely stressful time for a variety of reasons:

> *It [care] hasnae been good for your education… If you're tossed about all different schools, you're like, doing other subjects that you havnae done at other schools an' it's quite hard to catch up on all the rest.* (male, 13)

Changes in care settings had the biggest impact on young people living in predominantly rural authorities where distances between one care placement and another were so great that maintaining a school placement was difficult. Complex or difficult transport arrangements can make it difficult to maintain a school place. Transport provision, however, can be an important factor in helping the young person to remain at school:

> *One of the best things education-wise when I was in care, was I was allowed to stay at the same school as long as I wanted to. I had to travel about 12 miles a day to get to my high school, but I wanted to stay at that high school because at that time I couldn't stand any more disruption in my life. Social Services paid for a voluntary worker to come and pick me up and take me back and forward to school and that doesn't happen for all young people and I feel very lucky that I had that privilege. I think it should happen more because it helps your education.* (female, 18)

For some young people, the combination of negotiating secondary school and the pressures of keeping up with exam courses also coincided with extremely challenging personal issues regarding their care:

> *See when you're in care and you've got the stress of being in care and then the school… I don't think they really understand. They're just like, 'There's the work, get on with it'!* (female, 15)

Negative peer pressure and young people's need to follow their peer group can also damage their opportunities in school:

> *I ken I can do all the subjects. I ken I can get 'ones' in every subject if I wanted to but its just over that period of time I couldn't be f**ked with school. Because I thought it was sh*t, no independence, it was no 'cool'… But now I'm like, 'Oh, what have I done?' I want to get back in and get an education. I've*

nothing against the subjects and the teachers… it's just I didn't go because I was out with my mates… I wouldn't have minded going to school… it's just… peer pressure… definitely… So if your mates started going, 'Hey, come to school today', if you're in the same subjects and that, you just get on with it… but it doesn't work that way… your mates are like that, 'F**k school'… (male, 16)

In spite of all these factors which may disadvantage young people who are looked after, many of those consulted felt strongly that success at school was the responsibility of the individual and that the individual had to make the effort if he/she wanted to do well at school:

People have to really want to do something for themselves. I've done sh*t at school, I know I have. But I know people in care homes that have done pretty good. If you want to do good, you will do good… If you want peace and quiet in your room, you should go and tell the person in charge that you don't want people knocking on your door anymore. It's your responsibility what you do in school and what you don't. It's nothing to do with where you are. (male, 16)

Young people found a number of strategies helpful:

- flexible and creative arrangements to enable young people to stay in a successful school placement

- transport provision which enables young people to maintain a school placement where possible

- flexible support to enable young people to take time out of school when personal issues become prohibitive to learning, enabling them to reintegrate into education as soon as they are able

- mechanisms to help looked after young people find positive role models or positive peer pressure, for example, mentoring schemes, budget for sports, arts, clubs or other activities in the school or community.

Settling in at school

Even when young people were attending school, many had experienced difficult relationships and distress, in some cases leading to behaviour difficulties and exclusion. Often there were complex issues behind the young people's difficulties at school. Just because a young person is attending school, there is no guarantee that he or she is progressing or even coping. For some young people, difficulty in settling in appeared to be linked to the social and emotional resilience of the young person and the ability to cope with school. However, the evidence

provided by the young people suggests that very often they experience high levels of stress and at times felt threatened by encounters with both staff and other pupils in the school community because of their 'looked after' status. There was a strong consensus amongst the young people that they should not be treated differently from other young people in school:

> *It's like, 'Excuse me, I need space just like everybody else.' Because you feel like you're not any different, the only difference is you don't actually stay with your mum and dad and everybody else does.* (female, 15)

Many young people described the negative attitudes of teachers towards them. Whether or not teachers had intended to offend or upset them, the young people were highly sensitive to the behaviour, language and tone used by the teachers:

> *You're branded… They don't stop to think… Because nine times out of 10 it's not the young person's fault. It can be through a death, it could be through a breakdown or anything at all. But they automatically think, 'Oh that's a bad child', 'that's a disruptive child'… If they're not thinking, 'That's a bad child' they're thinking 'oh I feel so sorry for them' and they bring pity… It becomes patronising.* (female, 15)

The young people reflected exceptionally low levels of confidence in how teachers handle sensitive situations. Various examples of inappropriate or insensitive conduct of teaching staff were described and these focussed on the handling of bullying, discrimination or confidential information. Due to the complex and sensitive issues which loom large in the lives of the young people consulted, confidentiality was obviously of enormous concern. Difficult and traumatic experiences in their lives had become part of a bureaucratic process over which they had little control:

> *The teachers have information anyway. I don't know how, they must get it off the police or something. Every teacher's got it. I know they know. It's up to me what I tell them. It annoys me sometimes, because it's got nothing to do with them. Makes me angry.* (male, 14)

Children and young people have the right to privacy (UNCRC, article 16), but the fact that they feel uncomfortable about teachers (or other pupils) knowing their 'care status' arguably says as much about the stigma and discrimination encountered by those who are known to be 'in care' as anything else. This points to the need to raise awareness and to address myths and preconceptions about being in care.

In some instances, the attitudes of other pupils could be described simply as

curiosity, although sometimes this curiosity might be expressed inappropriately or insensitively to the young person. Sometimes these situations would become more unpleasant, developing into bullying or on-going harassment:

> *It's either people are being really horrible, you know, bullying them, because they're in the care system – they're being really patronising.* (male, 19)

The group of children under 12 years old talked much less about suffering bullying or harassment at school as a result of being in care. In general, they appeared to feel much better about being at school than they did about being at the residential unit where they lived. For some young people, school is a welcome respite from the care environment, whilst for others, the stresses of the care environment have an increasing impact on their mental health and ability to cope with school.

When discussing how they responded to the various triggers which caused them upset at school, a wide variety of strategies were described. The majority of these were fairly self-destructive depending on how they felt at the time or what personal resources or skills they had to draw on; they appeared to be linked, directly or indirectly, to the deterioration of that young person's school experience. The negative scenarios described included: social isolation, walking out of school, negative consequences of being secretive or lying to friends, standing up for yourself or 'being tough', hitting back or hitting out. Not all responses were negative however:

> *In maths (my teacher) says if I get annoyed with something, instead of staying in the class and getting in more trouble, I should walk out of class and go and speak to someone. I think they (other teachers) should do that…* (male, 14)

Whilst the majority of young people felt very strongly that looked after young people should be treated the same as other young people, there was also a recognition that sometimes additional support is needed. Young people wanted above all to be recognised as individuals rather than seen as 'looked after' and to have their needs addressed sensitively and flexibly as individuals, rather than as members of a particular group:

> *Sometimes it's better to be treated differently. It depends. If it's really difficult for them and they want that extra support or if they want that wee bit more… not sympathy, but if they feel like they want someone on their side. Then maybe they can have a teacher to talk to. Maybe they want that wee bit extra from their teacher. Someone that you can go and talk to rather than a social worker or a residential worker.* (female, 15)

One of the key things which contributed to a positive school experience was the good relationships which young people had with some teachers or staff members. The key message on this issue seems to be that where a young person has a strong relationship with a member of staff, whatever their job title might be, that relationship should be encouraged and supported by the school:

My maths teacher, when I moved into foster care, he was there for me when my guidance teacher wasn't. He was understanding about it. (male, 19)

There was one [teacher] at [high school]. She was a support teacher… Any time I got in trouble she would… take me out for a cup of coffee or something like that… then we'd go back to school and I'd get on with the rest of the school day. (male, 15)

Young people's ideas of what would make school easier for them included:

- training and support for teachers in managing challenging behaviour

- training and support for teachers on diversity and discrimination

- confidentiality policy/ protocols in schools and care settings clearly communicated to the young people;

- PSE (personal and social education) insert on diversity and discrimination including insights into the care system

- professional counselling and support for young people experiencing bullying, isolation, difficulties in managing aggressive or destructive behaviour, depression or severe anxiety

- flexibility in support relationships within school setting

- prior consultation with young people on professionals to be involved in care reviews and hearings.

Ready to learn

For those young people who had managed to attend regularly and settle into school, educational outcomes were still well below average levels of attainment. Young people described specific barriers to learning. Some described negative or inconsistent learning experiences in early childhood which had affected their feelings about school. The learning environment at school did not suit all young people's learning styles:

I can't sit long, I get bored at school. I am a fidget. I had this guy [teacher] that told me to sit down and not move and just draw. Mr X, he allowed me

to play the radio and walk about for a while if I was getting bored. That helped me a lot because I wasn't sitting about getting fidgety. I always do get fidgety no matter where I am. (male, 15)

A number of young people talked at length about the lack of support that their typical classroom experience had provided them with:

If there are two people in the class and they can do it, they (the teachers) think the rest of us can do it. She knows a few of us can't do it, but she's like, if they can do it, you'll have to catch up with them. It's hard. No-one complains. If you don't pick it up then, that's that. If you're off for a day you're expected to do it, catch up with the other folk for being off. [I'll be] half way through it then they'll go onto another subject… then I'll be halfway through that and they'll go on….
What would be your choice of how to improve that situation? (facilitator)
I'd have two teachers – one's a helper… and the other is the teacher. (male, 14)

There were mixed views on whether being in foster care helped you to do better in education or not, based on their diverse experiences of foster care. Residential care homes were experienced by many as being too distracting to allow serious efforts to study:

I have to do my homework in the dining room or my bedroom and have no space in either but I would like somewhere to do my homework so I can get peace and quiet. (female, 15)

Most of the children under 12 who were consulted were positive about the help and support that they get from care staff in the residential unit. In contrast, the older young people who were staying in the residential units had very mixed experiences about how much support they received from care staff.

Many young people described feelings of low confidence or low self-esteem in relation to learning. One young person described how the high expectations of a carer did not sit comfortably with his fragile self-confidence:

My social worker expected me to get the first credit out of my residential school, I couldn't achieve that because I felt so pressurised to live up to the standard that everyone was expecting. He didn't say it in those words, but it was exactly what he meant. I was too scared I would be letting them down. (male, 15)

Poor academic performance in schools where academic subjects appear to be the focus of learning seems to have led some young people to believe that what

they were learning at school was not useful or worthwhile. Low confidence in their academic ability whilst at school meant that it was difficult for some to continue to value school:

I don't think [I] will do anything with the subjects I've got. If I'd got technical I think it would have done a lot. The subjects I've got there's not much point going to school. Because the job I want to do – all the subjects I'm doing won't help in it. There's no point going to school just to learn some stuff that you probably won't use. All the stuff we learn in maths, stuff like that, we won't use it. (male, 14)

Young people gave their views on what could help their own, and others', learning:

- early diagnosis of learning difficulties and additional support when learning has been severely interrupted or inadequate

- adaptation of classroom techniques to correspond to young people's diverse learning styles and behaviour needs

- opportunities to take part in outdoor education, sport or arts activities

- a quiet time and space for learning in residential homes with the active support of carers

- negotiated ground rules and incentive systems in residential homes linked to exam revision and homework

- care staff actively supporting each young person's school programme, including extra-curricular activities and events such as sports days or school shows

- budgets for extra tuition where necessary.

Fulfilling potential

Even when young people had managed to progress through school, very few then went beyond compulsory education into further or higher education. A number of young people left education early due to a crisis or negative school experiences; some felt they were not wanted at school anymore, some felt no motivation to continue and there seemed to be little support in making big decisions which would have a very serious impact on their future life chances:

I think the biggest mistake I ever made was leaving when I did. I wish I stayed on. If you think about it, if you stay for fifth and sixth year, you can look back and say I regret staying on, which wouldn't be as bad as if you didn't

stay on. You had the chance… I think if I'd stayed on for a couple of years I could have went on and done a higher course. (male, 19)

At a time when the majority of young people are staying on at school and remaining within the family home with all the support that provides, many looked after young people seem to make decisions to leave school as early as possible, damaging their long term opportunities. None of the young people who had already left school had managed to establish themselves in stable long term education, training or employment. For those who did progress to further education, they experienced a lack of emotional and financial support and were not able to cope at the same time as coping with leaving care:

The more I think about it, the support that I had when I was doing my standard grades, I didn't really have at college, and I think that if I had the same support I would have probably passed with a higher mark on my course. I was still in the unit but because I was in further education there wasn't as much support. (male 19)

The experience of the looked after young people consulted indicated that life and education had become much less straightforward on leaving school and around the age of leaving care. Responsibility for the young person's educational development had become much more vague and the focus, both for young people and their carers, seemed to shift from school and education to more pressing practicalities of independent living. There was often ambiguity about who should provide what for the young people, which in some cases was never resolved.

Young people advocated:

- a strong focus on education at reviews including through care and after care planning

- planning should consider the following on-going support needs for the young person's educational progress:

  - *practical support needs*: for example, access to information about courses, help with applications and interviews

  - *financial support needs*: for example, access to grants, bursaries and benefits

  - *emotional support needs*: for example, someone to encourage the young person to apply in the first place, someone to believe in them and who then has an on-going interest in their progress, providing encouragement, advice and respite when they feel vulnerable or discouraged.

Conclusion

The key issues described by the young people consulted touch on three areas: the care setting, the school environment, and the interface between the two.

Supporting Young People 'At Home'

- When young people feel secure, happy and well supported in their care environment they seem to be far more likely to settle in and make progress at school. The young people's support needs do not decrease when they enter secondary school; indeed the support seems to be required more than ever as young people face a period of increased stress and change.

- Young people highly value carers who take a personal interest in their school life and who will support them in school activities.

- Young people would like to feel they have peace to do homework, support in getting up and out to school in the mornings, and recognition and rewards for the efforts they make in their education generally.

- When things are not going well at school, young people appreciate when carers take time to find out more about the difficulties they face, seeking out appropriate support and advocating on their behalf.

- Looked after young people may have fairly complex needs at different times in their life which affect their school experience. They would like to feel that therapeutic and emotional support is available to them in a non-threatening and non-stigmatising way.

Supporting Young People 'At School'

- Where a young person has a strong relationship with a member of staff, whatever his or her job title might be, that relationship should be encouraged and supported by the school. Similarly where there is a poor or volatile relationship between a young person and a member of staff, contact between them should be minimised.

- School staff, carers and the young person could work together to identify strategies for the young person's reintegration or 'catching up', which do not risk further alienating the young person and which promote a positive attitude towards school.

- Young people would like to feel confident that information about their personal circumstances impacting on their school experience is dealt with sensitively and professionally, in such a way that respects their dignity and privacy, and does not disempower, distress or embarrass them.

- Young people would like to feel confident that teachers and fellow pupils will not treat them differently because they are in care and that bullying or discrimination at school will be handled sensitively.

- Young people want above all to be recognised as individuals rather than seen as 'looked after' and to have their individual needs addressed sensitively and flexibly, rather than because they belong to a particular group.

- Action to address the difficulties of those who are looked after should not be seen as measures which will only have positive outcomes for a minority of children in the school. They can also be part of a wider strategy to address difficulties faced by children in school more generally.

When 'Home' and 'School' Come Together

- When professionals work together to support looked after young people, young people appreciate when their right to have some control and ownership over the process in their lives is respected.

- Young people also appreciate when professionals approach reviews or hearings with sensitivity, respecting the young person's dignity and privacy.

- On leaving school young people are still in need of financial and emotional support, and need to know that they can access this support easily and as required.

Many of the issues raised by the young people will be familiar to professionals. Some of these issues have been grappled with for many years, in an attempt to find a balance which is in the young person's best interest. *Care to Learn?* is not simply trying to articulate old familiar messages, but is attempting to recount how policies and practices are experienced by the end-user – the young person who is looked after.

Many local authorities already have a strong policy and practice framework relating to the education of looked after young people. Whilst the framework is important, the findings from this consultation suggest that each young person experiences 'the system' differently and so the framework must be flexible enough to take into account the needs of the individual. Otherwise the framework itself can become a barrier.

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