

Are we making the grade?

The education of children and young people in out-of-home care

This Research to Practice Note provides a summary of the major findings of a PhD study, undertaken between 2005 and 2010, focusing on improving educational engagement and outcomes for children and young people in care.¹ This five-year study was conducted by Michelle Townsend and funded by NSW Department of Family and Community Services and the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University.

The detailed findings can be found in the full report which can be accessed at: <http://docsonline.dcs.gov.au/internal-services/research--evaluation-and-data/research-to-practice.html>

Background and Research Questions

Education provides an environment for children in care to learn, develop, socialise, and connect with the broader community. The building of protective factors, interests and capacity, in a consistent and normalising environment, can provide invaluable opportunities for children in care, now and for their future. Yet many children in care are unable to make the most of the opportunities offered through school education.

The poor educational performance of children in care has been a concern, internationally, for a number of decades. In Australia, it has received less attention even though the limited research to date indicates that children in care are performing more poorly than their non-care peers and face a range of barriers in engaging with their school life. Spending significant time away from school, falling behind academically, behavioural issues,

social issues, suspension, expulsion, bullying, early school leaving and leaving without qualifications have been found to be more common for this group of children (CREATE Foundation, 2001, 2004; de Lemos, 1997; NSW Office of the Children's Guardian, 2003). Little is known, in the Australian context, of the factors that support or impede the educational engagement and outcomes of children in care, and even less is known about children's views on these matters.

This study sought to develop an understanding of the issues impacting on the educational engagement and outcomes for children in care in NSW. The research and data collection were guided by five main questions:

- What are the educational outcomes for children currently in care?
- What are the factors that affect the educational engagement of children in care?
- How do the various transitions children may experience in care affect their education and how can these transitions best be supported?
- What are the experiences of children in care in their transition to high school and how can this transition best be supported?
- How can the immediate environments of children in care facilitate positive educational engagement and outcomes?

This research has been undertaken at a time when substantial system reforms in NSW are seeking to make significant improvements to children's experience prior to, and once in, care. The study sought to contribute to these improvements by treating children's educational needs as key to improving their well-being whilst they are in care and after they leave it.

¹ "Children in care" is used as shorthand for: "children and young people in out-of-home care".

Reforming Out-of-Home Care

There have been a number of advances since 2009 in improving education services for children and young people in out-of-home care. In response to the recommendations of the Wood Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW each child and young person in statutory out-of-home care should have an individual education plan prepared for them within 30 days of entering care. Community Services' partner with the Department of Education and Communities to ensure that this happens. The Memorandum of Understanding between Community Services and the Department of Education and Communities was revised to include the increased role of non-government organisations in delivering more out-of-home care services. Further details about the reforms in out-of-home care can be found in the Keep Them Safe Annual Reports and the Department of Family and Community Services Annual Reports.

Methods

This research involved a mixed methods approach using different forms of qualitative and quantitative research inquiry. The large-scale data highlighted how children and young people in care are performing on educational assessments (n = 2317) compared with students in the general population. The case studies of children making the transition to high school (n = 56), together with individual and focus group interviews with adults in their lives (n = 187), provide a rich understanding of the complex issues involved in improving the educational engagement and achievement of children in care.

Ethical Considerations

There were some complex ethical issues involved in this research, placing demands on all involved throughout the research to ensure that these were thoroughly considered and responded to (Thomas & O' Kane, 1998; Wise, 2009). The issues included concerns about research with vulnerable groups, obtaining informed consent from children, avoiding harm and distress, managing disclosure, ensuring confidentiality and privacy, and managing the tension between children's participation and their protection (see Townsend, 2011 for more detail

on how each of these issues were addressed). There were several levels at which ethical review took place: the study's supervisory panel, the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee, the NSW Community Services and the State Education Research Approval Process Unit at the NSW Department of Education and Training.

Research Findings

What are the Educational Outcomes for Children in Care?

This study found that the educational outcomes for children and young people in care in NSW were significantly poorer than those of students in the general population. This was evident in their literacy and numeracy results during their primary and early high school periods, and continued into the later years of high school, where young people in care were participating in non-matriculation courses and withdrawing in high numbers.

The performance of students in care closely matched that of Aboriginal children in the general population. Aboriginal students in care had the poorest outcomes; in most tests their results were significantly lower than all Aboriginal children.

The findings highlighted the poor performance in numeracy as a serious issue for many students in care throughout their schooling. The findings also suggest that children who lag behind academically when they enter high school are unlikely to catch up. There was no evidence that placement in kinship or foster care or length of time in care was associated with better children's performance in either literacy or numeracy.

This research established that some children in care were doing well academically.

From the early schooling data (Years 3 and 5), at least a third of the students in care were identified as performing strongly in the literacy and numeracy tests.

In contrast with these early positive results, the findings from the Year 10 and 12 tests, and the interviews with stakeholders, do not indicate a continuation of this positive trajectory for many

students in care. In the first four years of high school, there appears to be a decline in performance or a change in student intentions, motivations and circumstances, beyond the well-documented decline following the transition to high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Mizelle, 1999).

Just over one in five students in care who were attempting the School Certificate and one in five students in care attempting the Higher School Certificate left school before completion.

What are the Factors that Affect the Education of Children in Care?

Children's immediate Environments: Home and School

A key factor for many caseworkers, carers, education staff, policy makers and managers influencing the education of children in care was children's early years with their birth family. This included their experiences of abuse, neglect, trauma, problematic attachment and disadvantage. These, along with their care experiences, were seen as having a continued effect on children's ongoing social, cognitive and emotional development.

To do well with their education, children in care said they needed to live with a kind, safe family who cared for them and made them feel that they belonged, with carers who supported their schooling, homework, reading and extra-curricular activities. Similarly, adults contended that a high quality placement, with carers committed to education and facilitating homework and reading, was key for children's positive educational progress.

In the school environment, attending a caring and inclusive school, potentially non-government, with engaging learning and supportive teachers was important for children. Children indicated having good friends and feeling safe in the school environment and not being bullied or yelled at by teachers, facilitated their educational engagement. Adults argued that the school's ability to understand the needs of children in care, and respond appropriately to these needs and

behaviours, were the paramount factors in children's educational progress.

Gaps in children's schooling and time spent away from school were also factors adults felt that negatively affected children's education.

Children also focused on their relationships with siblings; living together or attending the same school as their siblings was important to children and seen as a positive contributor to their educational progress.

Adults in the care and education sectors considered that a number of other factors affected children's education:

- The first was the extent to which professionals in the care and education sectors, are committed to, and prioritise the education of children in care.
- The second factor was the stability and resources in children's placement and schooling to support children's educational needs. Stability, especially in relationships, was also important to children. Children were clear that they wanted to participate in all decisions related to any changes in their school or placement.

Children's Care Transitions and Their Education

This research found that the transitional points in the care system included in this study - entering care, placement change and restoration - all had a direct effect on children's education by detracting from their learning and school life. The majority of these transitions resulted in a school change. The findings from this study suggest that multiple transitions, over time or concurrently, can be more difficult due to the cumulative effects of change across children's functioning and coping mechanisms. Multiple school transitions (attending more than 4 schools) were significantly associated with poorer academic and behavioural functioning.

By the time the children in this study were in their first two years of high school, they had attended an average of 4.6 schools, and had had 5.5 placements and 3.4 caseworkers. Transition was an inherent aspect of their care experience and children indicated that these changes provided

adjustment challenges for them. Not all transitions were negative, however; many offered them safety and a fresh start, and provided a better environment for them to live in and learn.

Children indicated that having the reason for the change explained, together with their participation in decisions about placement, school change and schooling options, were important in facilitating their successful adjustment to their new circumstances.

Likewise, adults in the care and education sectors indicated that entry to care provided a genuine turning point in the lives of some children, whose well-being improved as many of the issues they faced while they were living with their birth parents diminished. Many adults viewed transitions as an opportunity to access educational and other required interventions to support children.

The Transition to High School

For most of the children in this study, their overall experiences of the transition to high school were positive.

They reported that high school offered them a number of benefits including: new friends, broader learning opportunities, greater responsibility and independence. Many of the challenges were normative, faced by all children making the transition to high school, and included their capacity to adjust to the different environment of high school from the primary school setting (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Mizelle, 1999; Wassell, Preston, & Jones, 2007).

The study found, however, that not all children in care successfully made this transition and adjusted to a more complex high school environment. A third of the children reported low school engagement after the transition to high school, with problematic peer and academic issues. Some children in care faced additional impediments in negotiating this transition due to the cumulative effects of instability, attachment, academic and social difficulties.

Children with academic difficulties in primary school often had difficulties in meeting the

increased scholastic demands. Change in placement and/or school during the high school transition period particularly posed significant adjustment challenges for children.

There are also aspects about the high school setting that can make the transition more difficult. Adults from both sectors argued that high schools are less well structured than the primary school in meeting children's social, emotional and academic needs. Obtaining support for children in care was viewed as more difficult to secure in the high school setting.

Exacerbating this for children was the need to form new relationships with adults after losing significant relationships with primary school principals, teachers and aides.

Figure 1 outlines the strategies that children and adults recommend to support children in care as they make the education to high school.



Figure 1: What children and adults say helps the transition to high school?

Implications for Policy and Practice

A key conclusion from the research is that the educational underperformance of children in care cannot be solely attributed to the individual child; a significant proportion of the reasons lie in the ways in which the home, school, and particularly the care and education systems prioritise and support children's education. This suggests that guidance and support for the education of

children in care must come from working together across government and stakeholder groups to enrich the individual environments of children. Figure 2 (on page 6) outlines the key factors that can support improving the educational engagement and outcomes of all NSW children and young people in care.

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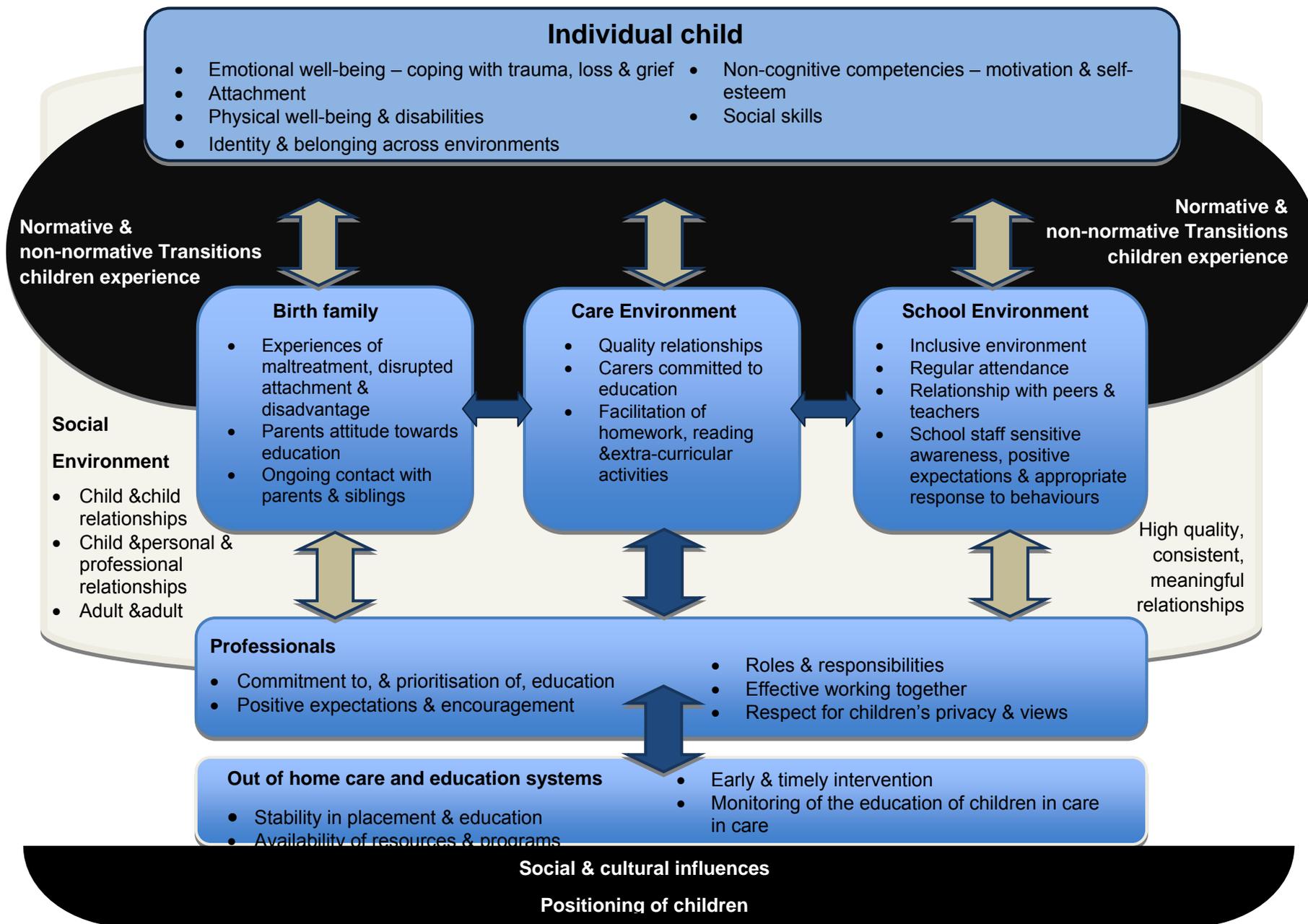


Figure 2: Factors That Support the Educational Engagement and Outcomes of Children in Care