Educational status of children and young people in care

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This paper reports on research investigating the educational status and needs of school-aged children in foster care placements. Using clinical data mining, data were collected about school experiences, attendance, educational achievements and needs, health needs and supports provided. The study found children faced enormous barriers to satisfactory participation and attainment at school. Improving educational outcomes depends upon successful linkages between the child protection, education and health care systems.

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Educational participation and attainment for children in out-of-home care are now recognised as pivotal to long-term outcomes. Research has identified that the barriers to educational attainment among young people in care include higher rates of school exclusions and truancy, behavioural problems, frequent placement moves with consequent school disruptions, disadvantaged pre-care backgrounds, lack of co-ordination between educational and child protection professionals, lack of attention to educational needs, and low expectations held by foster carers, caseworkers and teachers (Francis 2000; Goddard 2000; Stein 1994). Many young people in care leave school without educational qualifications, and few go on to attend college or university (Biehal, Claydon, Stein & Wade 1994; Martin & Jackson 2002). While Australian research about participation and engagement in schooling for children in care is limited, Creed, Tilbury, Buys and Crawford (in press) found children in care experienced significantly less school stability and school engagement and had lower educational aspirations compared to children not-in-care. Frederick and Goddard (2010) explored how experiences of abuse and neglect at home affected children at school and found a range of social and emotional impacts such as loneliness, poor academic performance and early school leaving. A Queensland survey of young people (9-18 years) in care found 26% had attended more than three primary schools, 32% had repeated a year at school, and 18% had a problem at school they had not been able to get help with (Child Guardian 2008). In terms of educational attainment, while some young people in care do well, many perform at below average levels on national literacy and numeracy tests (SCRGSP 2009). Lower levels of educational achievement, higher rates of school suspension and exclusion, and early school leaving were found in a study of care leavers in NSW (Cashmore & Paxman 1996).

Low levels of educational achievement have lifetime consequences because education opens up access to the financial, personal and social rewards of employment. Governments around the world are starting to pay much more attention to improving the education of children in care. However, the development of programs and resources is ad hoc in Australia. The aim of this study was to investigate the educational status and needs of children and

young people in foster care in order to contribute to the design of services and strategies to improve the experiences of children in care at school, and their educational outcomes.

METHODS

DATA COLLECTION

A clinical (or case file) data mining method was used, which involves converting psychosocial information held on client files to a quantitative database for research purposes (Epstein 2001). While aggregating de-identified client data for agency record-keeping and reporting purposes is common in human services, using such data for evaluation or research is less common. The procedure involved a researcher visiting the agency to read client files and record relevant information. The data were collected using a standard pro forma and entered into a database. For each child a de-identified record was created containing the following information:

- demographics – age, sex, ethnicity, legal status
- placements and child protection orders
- school enrolment and attendance
- suspensions or exclusions from school
- academic attainment
- educational needs and supports provided
- other health and wellbeing information.

SAMPLE

The study was undertaken with the assistance of a non-government agency that arranges out-of-home care placements and related support services for children in state care as a result of abuse or neglect. Selected for inclusion in this study were children and young people who were:

(a) aged 5-17 years

(b) living in an out-of-home placement arranged and supported by the agency in a defined outer-suburban region

(c) in the placement on 1 February 2009, and

(d) subject to a child protection order.

There were 39 children and young people in the total sample.

ETHICS AND INFORMED CONSENT

The relevant University Human Research Ethics Committee approved the ethical conduct of the research. Consent was obtained from the Chief Executive of the statutory agency with guardianship of the children involved in the research. Confidentiality undertakings were agreed between the agencies and the researchers.

LIMITATIONS

An advantage of the data mining method is the abundance of data and minimal intrusiveness to collection, compared to surveys or interviews. The study was able to extract detailed information on a range of variables that highlight the scope and complexity of education-related needs. However, case file data are not originally collected for research purposes so are generally not standardised and may be selective (Grinnell 2001). The study is limited by having no comparison group to determine the extent of differences between this group and other, similar children. Moreover, the sample may not be typical of all children in care because the role of this placement agency is to locate and support placements for children and young people with complex needs. Therefore children in large sibling groups, children with disabilities, and children who have experienced multiple placement breakdowns may be over-represented in the sample.

RESULTS

Demographic information about the children is shown in Table 1. Twenty-two children were subject to child protection orders granting long-term guardianship to the State, and 17 children were on short-term custody or guardianship orders (up to two years duration).

PLACEMENT HISTORY

Three aspects of the placement experience were examined: placement moves, placement with siblings, and abuse in care. All children in this sample had experienced very high numbers of placement moves prior to their current placement. For example: *8 placements in 4 years; 15 placements since May 2007, 8 placements from 2003 to 2009.* For 22 children it was recorded that they had siblings who were also in care; but only four of these were currently placed with a sibling. Most children had at least some contact with their siblings, particularly if a sibling was placed nearby, but several children had no sibling contact. There was no record of whether the remaining 17 children in the sample had siblings. During their time in care, four

Table 1: Characteristics of children

Age	Range 6 years to 16 years
	Average age 11 years and 6 months
Gender	21 boys
	18 girls
Indigenous status	8 Aboriginal
	1 Torres Strait Islander
Ethnicity	9 Indigenous
	26 Anglo-Australian
	2 Maori
	1 Tongan
	1 Vietnamese

children had experienced abuse or neglect while in one or more foster care placements and consequently had been moved from the placement.

SCHOOL ENROLMENT

In the sample, 24 children were primary school age (below 13 years) and 14 children were secondary school age (13 years and over). Age was missing for one child. Current enrolments (at the time of the data collection) are indicated in Table 2.

Two children were attending school on a part-time basis only, which was attributed to their conduct or special needs. Four children were neither attending school nor engaged in other learning or work: a 15-year-old young person had changed placement and moved too far away from her previous school, but enrolment in a closer school had not yet been organised; a 16-year-old did not return to school after hospitalisation for suicide attempt, and he was seeking employment or TAFE studies; a 13-year-old was suspended; and a 16-year-old was seeking employment.

·SCHOOL HISTORY

During the compulsory school years, most children would change schools at least once when moving from primary to secondary school. A calculation of the number of years of schooling per school attended was made for each child (numerator = age in years minus usual school starting age of 5; denominator = number of schools attended). For the total sample, the range was from 0.75 years (9 months) per school to 7 years per school. The median was 3.1 years per school. Eight children had reasonable school stability, having attended the same school for five years or more. But the remaining children attended multiple schools, some for very short periods. For example, five children attended one or more different schools per year and a 14-year-old young person had attended nine different schools (on average, a different school for each year of schooling). The most school turnover was experienced by an 8-year-old child who had attended four different schools in three years, in addition to having considerable periods at home being 'home schooled'.

Table 2: Current school enrolment

CURRENT ENROLMENT	
Attending State Primary School	17
Attending State High School	7
Attending special education facility	4
Attending private school	2
School of Distance Education	1
Not attending school or other education or training facility	4
Alternative education facility	1
Missing data	3
TOTAL	**39**

Note that school enrolment generally was only recorded from when a child commenced a placement with the agency. Therefore the data on school history is likely to under-represent the number of schools attended, especially for older children who have been in care longer, prior to being placed with the agency.

SUSPENSIONS AND EXCLUSIONS

Under the *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*, students at State schools can be subject to suspension, exclusion or cancellation. The Act makes provision for short (from 1 to 5 days) and long (from 6 to 20 days) suspensions. Decisions about suspensions are made by the school principal and prohibit the student from attending the school for the nominated period of time. Grounds for suspending a student from a State school are disobedience, misconduct or other conduct of the student that is prejudicial to the good order or management of the school (section 284). A decision about exclusion is made by the principal's supervisor, the Executive Director Schools, or the Regional Executive Director. Grounds for exclusion are disobedience or misconduct when suspension is inadequate to deal with the behaviour, or if a student's attendance poses an unacceptable risk to the safety or wellbeing of other students or staff, or if the student's behaviour is persistently gross and adversely affects other students' education. The enrolment of students who have turned 16 years or who have completed year 10 can be cancelled if the student refuses to participate in the educational program provided at the school. Before applying a suspension with a recommendation to exclude, the principal can consider using a Behaviour Improvement Condition which details the inappropriate behaviour and the program to address the issues. Education Queensland policy is that school disciplinary absences should only be applied after consideration of all other options which include whole-school, targeted and intensive behaviour support to facilitate student's positive learning and responsible behaviour.

Most of the children in this sample (61%) had been suspended from school at some point, as indicated in Table 3. The two young people who were excluded were aged 15 years and 16 years. The age range for children with multiple suspensions was 8 years to 16 years. It is concerning that three 8-year-olds had been suspended from school for various periods on multiple occasions: one child had violent outbursts; two children enjoyed reasonably lengthy periods of school stability until placement changes led to school changes and behavioural deterioration. Four other primary

Table 3: Suspensions and exclusions

Multiple suspensions, no exclusions	22
Multiple suspensions and at least one exclusion	2
No suspensions or exclusions	14
Missing data	1
TOTAL	**39**

school-aged children (one 10-year-old and three 11-year-olds) had also been suspended. The reasons recorded for the *suspensions or expulsions were:*

- violence towards other children (some serious, some less so)
- *threatening a teacher*
- smoking on school grounds
- vandalism – graffiti, destroyed a shrub
- disobeying rules – swearing, disrespectful to teachers.

> *For some children in care, school provides a settled and structured environment that balances out the instability they may experience in other parts of their life ...*

ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT

Academic attainment can be measured in a variety of ways: school reports, educational tests, completion of the school year, completion of year 10 and year 12, and Overall Position (OP) scores. Each student's school report contains achievement information about each learning area studied. The report may also contain information about extracurricular activities. Achievement codes describe the student's overall achievement for each learning area studied against what is expected at the time of reporting. Achievement ratings in Years 1-3 are Very High, High, Sound, Developing, Support Required. In Years 4-10 the ratings go from A (very good) to E (very limited). Effort and behaviour are also reported from A (excellent) to E (unacceptable). *Recent school reports were located on file for 15 children, and notes on academic progress were also recorded for all but three children. Academic achievement was limited for most children, with grades of D and E mostly recorded. One child received mostly As and Bs. One child had been selected for participation in a program for gifted children but a violent outburst and an incident of self-harm at school put this in jeopardy. Notes recorded included:*

- Marks improved despite two suspensions
- Enjoys school, positive reports from teachers, below average on literacy and numeracy
- Effort and behaviour are good but all subjects achievement level D
- Beginning to display acceptable classroom and playground behaviour

- Generally enjoying school and performing well but behind peers academically

For older children, once Year 10 is completed or attempted, consideration was given to options for appropriate educational, vocational, training, work experience and personal development activities. There was one young person in the sample who was undertaking Year 11 and aimed to get an apprenticeship. The other young people aged 15 years or more had not completed any accredited course of study. Given generally low levels of academic attainment, there was no record of discussion about attending university for any young people in the sample. Test results from national Literacy and Numeracy Tests for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 were located on file for one child only.

EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

The main vehicle for responding to the educational needs and supports of children in out-of-home care in Queensland is the Education Support Plan (ESP). In recognition of the importance of education on children's development, and the impact that being in care has on educational attainment, every child who is subject to a Child Protection Order granting guardianship or custody to the Chief Executive of the Department of Communities, and is enrolled in a state or non-state school, should have an ESP. The plan outlines goals, strategies and how to access services and programs that will help children and young people reach their academic potential. Education Support Plans focus on:

- participation – setting goals to ensure the child or young person is able to participate in appropriate education programs
- wellbeing – setting goals to help the child or young person become emotionally, mentally and physically ready to participate in education, and
- academic achievement – setting achievable goals to help the child or young person reach their full academic potential.

The school principal is responsible for the development, monitoring and review of the plan, and is allocated an ESP budget. Plans are reviewed annually, or more often if circumstances change significantly. The Child Safety Officer is required to sign and retain a copy of the ESP and ensure that a copy is provided to the child or young person, if appropriate, and provided to the child or young person's carer (Department of Child Safety *Education Support Plans fact sheet*).

Education Support Plans were not routinely found on the placement agency files. *Of the total sample, 24 children had a current ESP either on file or referred to in a case note. There were eight children with previous (2008 or earlier) versions of an ESP on file or referred to, and for seven children there was no record of an ESP existing (they may*

have had another type of education plan – see below). For two children, the departmental worker advised an ESP was not applicable because the child was enrolled in a private school. Professionals from an agency providing therapeutic services to children were involved with the development and implementation of ESPs for five children. The needs of children identified in ESPs were complex, and included:

- learning support teacher

- tutoring or teacher aide (12 children received tutoring, mostly for maths and reading)

- behaviour plan

- cognitive assessment

- structured lunch time play program – social skills development

- play therapy

- indigenous liaison officer support

- 'flexible attendance package' (i.e. part time school).

ESPs are seen as a mechanism to obtain funds to assist with meeting these needs. However, for several children, the ESP noted that the child had a specific need, but resources to implement the plan were not available. For example, no funding was allocated for tuition because a child attended a private school (ESP funds are allocated to state schools), and ESP requests for funding for 'expressive therapy' and a teacher's aide were declined.

There are other types of plans. Children with disabilities may have an Individual Education Plan (IEP), which brings parents or carers, professionals and the student (where appropriate) together to consider the student's performance and to determine needs and learning priorities. The professional judgement of specialist support staff is required to determine whether the IEP would assist. For children in care, the IEP would be integrated with the ESP (that is, not two separate plans). There were four children in the sample who had an IEP on file or referred to. Young people in care may have their ESP integrated with a Senior Education and Training (SET) Plan, which maps out a personalised learning path for a student's senior phase of learning. SET Plans aim to help young people establish the necessary path to achieve their career goals by working towards either a Queensland Certificate of Education, a vocational qualification, or a viable employment option. It is not clear whether SET planning occurred for eligible young people in this sample, because there were no SET plans on file, but this could be because SET planning was incorporated into the ESP.

HEALTH NEEDS

This sample of children and young people had complex health needs. The involvement of health and therapeutic services was recorded for 34 children, for a range of physical

and mental health concerns (see Table 4). Some children had multiple diagnoses. In order to respond to these assessed needs, children and young people received services from a variety of agencies and practitioners, in both public and private sectors (see Table 4). Medications were also prescribed, including anti-psychotic drugs and medication for ADHD, depression and enuresis.

DISCUSSION

School is important to children and young people – both to their enjoyment of each day that involves attending school, and to their long-term futures. It is difficult for children to achieve stable schooling when their living circumstances are unsettled, yet little attention seemed to be paid to keeping school consistent (or at least having changes coincide with the end of term) when professionals were seeking to locate a new placement. In general, placement stability is associated with better child development outcomes: children benefit from consistent and uninterrupted care giving and suffer from the reverse. While stable placements are associated with positive outcomes in the transition to adulthood, other connections and continuities are important, such as contact with siblings, maintaining leisure activities, cultural connections and school attendance. Decisions made about placement with no consideration of school stability are very problematic. In particular, mid-term school moves should be avoided. School stability is important to both educational attainment and social skills development. For some children in care, school provides a settled and structured environment that balances out the instability they may experience in other

Table 4: Assessments and services

Assessments or diagnostic labels	Services
Reactive attachment disorder	Psychiatrist (for both assessment and treatment)
Post-traumatic stress disorder	
Trauma	Counsellor (psychologists and social workers for mental health issues, sexual abuse)
Enuresis	
Obesity	Therapeutic caseworker (disability services)
Asthma	
Delayed menarche	Play therapist
Hearing and vision deficits	Health worker (family planning)
Challenging behaviours	Orthodontist
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD)	Optometrist
	Paediatrician
	Speech therapist
Intellectual impairment	Physiotherapist
Autism	Continence clinic
Asperger's syndrome	Intellectual disability ascertainment
Sexualised behaviours	Sleep assessment
Self harm and suicidality	

parts of their life (Martin & Jackson 2002). School can provide friendships, positive adult guidance, and a sense of achievement. While changing the educational setting in a planned way can be beneficial, unnecessary changes can make school an unpleasant and unrewarding experience. For children in foster care, frequent school change is associated with an increase in behaviour problems – particularly externalising behaviours such as aggression, offending and defiance (Sullivan, Jones & Mathiesen 2009). The social needs of children at school are important, given the overlap between social development and educational development. Children need stability at school so they have opportunities to make and keep friends.

Stability for children in care can also be enhanced through efforts to avoid suspensions and exclusions. While the number of suspensions for this sample was high, it should be noted that several children with behavioural problems at school were not suspended because – consistent with the policy – the school, carers and/or the agency had taken preventative action such as putting behaviour management plans in place, involving carers when problems arose and tutoring assistance. There was considerable variability between schools within the region in their willingness to respond to the needs of children in care, with several schools putting a lot of effort into keeping children at school, involving carers and others in education or behaviour plans.

In 2004, a *Partnership Agreement: Educating children and young people in the care of the state* (Queensland Government 2004) was negotiated between the then departments of Child Safety and Education in response to poor educational outcomes for children in care. According to the agreement, the special circumstances of children in care should be taken into account in decisions to suspend or exclude. Children in care are often suspended for behaviour problems related to their past experiences and environment, including likely experiences of trauma, loss and disrupted attachment related to abuse and neglect or being in care. Positively responding to their behaviour recognises that the behaviours may be related to their unfamiliar or uncertain care environment, their age and development needs, capabilities and cultural needs, to their neurobiological development, or to undiagnosed mental health conditions associated with their individual experiences of abuse and neglect.

Early intervention and management of potential challenges for individual children is a key to improving a child in care's educational experience and reducing the risk of interruptions to their schooling. The Education Support Plan should be used to develop early intervention responses to negative, unacceptable or anti-social behaviours that manifest in the school setting. Despite the high number of suspensions, there was limited use of alternative education options. Records indicate that there was very little school refusal or failure to attend school on a child's part; non-attendance or

part-time attendance was more likely to be the result of a school decision. It is concerning if this becomes (another) experience of rejection for children who have difficulty regulating their emotions and behaviours.

This examination of the educational status and needs of children in out-of-home placements shows that these children face enormous challenges to achieving educationally. None of the children were doing really well, and keeping them at school required a lot of effort on the part of the responsible professionals and the carer. It is important to note that with the right assistance, both the educational experience and academic results can improve. File notes provide many examples of children who start to do well academically and whose behaviour becomes more settled when there is a plan that is supported. This demonstrates the need to understand and accommodate the cognitive, emotional and behavioural consequences of maltreatment and placement in out-of-home care. However, there were other cases in which plans were not followed through; resources were devoted to assessment but not to activate the plan. There remained high levels of unmet needs, indicated by the reasonably common progression recorded in case files, that an assessment is conducted, an educational or developmental need is identified, an intervention plan is developed, but then funds to implement the intervention are not available or not approved.

In most cases, the file records show lengthy delays at multiple stages of developing and implementing education support plans and other case plans. The most frequent reason for the delay related to the process of seeking financial approval within the care system. There are also delays in engaging professionals to conduct assessments, and delays in accessing treatments or interventions. Often delays are because there are various parties with some, or all, of the decision-making powers (that is, parents, statutory agency, school, health professionals, as well as carers and children) so the coordination task is time-consuming. There are also multiple systems to be negotiated for obtaining approvals and accessing services. There were a few examples of children not getting access to services or opportunities because parents withheld their agreement (for example, a parent did not approve eye tests for reading glasses, a parent did not approve changing to a private school). The extent of health problems experienced by the children that impact upon schooling suggests that considerable attention to the linkages between child protection, education and health systems is required.

There were few copies of school reports or education support plans held on file for current clients. This suggests it would be difficult for the placement agency or carer to maintain continuous oversight of educational issues for a child. Yet agency caseworkers and carers were often in close touch with school, sometimes daily. If carers are to have a proactive role in encouraging educational achievement, it is

important that they receive copies of past educational information, school report cards and test results, and that these are passed on if the placement changes. Principles for record-keeping are important here, so that children themselves and/or their parents have access to educational records when the young person turns 18 years or stops being subject to statutory intervention. Otherwise, this important information pertaining to a child is 'everywhere and nowhere'.

CONCLUSION

Education is a right for all children, and an important gateway to future well-being. It is essential, therefore, that children and young people who have the state as their 'corporate parent' get every opportunity to benefit from education. Policies and programs that aim to improve the education of children in care are at an early stage of development in Australia. In Britain, programs for children in care have been established such as Personal Advisors, mentors, educational specialists, financial bonuses for school attendance in the post-compulsory years, educational grants and scholarships, alternative education and training programs, and financial support for care leavers in higher education (National Leaving Care Advisory Service 2004). Initiatives in the USA and Canada include education advocates to work with schools to maintain school enrolment and academic progress for youth in care, training for foster carers to provide tutoring to children in their care, and the 'Foster Care to College Partnership', which comprises online and mailed educational resources for foster youth and carers, college preparation seminars, and training for social workers and carers on educational planning (Flynn, Paquet & Marquis 2010; Washington State Institute for Public Policy 2009).

The capacity of children in care to achieve educationally depends upon successful coordination between multiple elements of the child protection, education and health care systems. Clearly, a great deal more investment is required in Australia to support educational access and outcomes for this disadvantaged group. ■

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