

The educational outcomes of children in care – a scoping review

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Article

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Abstract

This article presents a brief scoping review of the literature on the educational outcomes of care experienced children and young people in Australia published since 2010. The review also examines key educational issues and the impact of being in care on the educational experience of children and young people. Twenty-five papers were selected for review, key information extracted and recurrent themes noted. Themes include stigma and low expectations, school disruption and absenteeism, issues within the care and education systems and the importance of good relationships with supportive adults. The review found that young people in care often experience much worse educational outcomes than their peers. Conclusions and recommendations include reforming the care and education systems, focussing workers on building strong supportive relationships with young people, helping them to build resilience and prioritising education. Further targeted research is also recommended.

Introduction

On 30 June 2019, approximately 44,900 Australian children were in out-of-home care (OHC) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2020). They were unable to live safely at home because they were at risk of being neglected or abused, or because their parents were unable to provide adequate care. OHC includes foster care, kinship care, residential care, family group homes and independent living (AIHW, 2020). Children in care are recognised as being one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged cohorts, with most of them coming from families that experience poverty and social exclusion (Harvey et al., 2017; Jackson & Cameron, 2012).

In Australia and internationally, children and young people who are or who have been in care have long been recognised as being at risk of educational failure (Jay & McGrath-Lone, 2019; Luke & O'Higgins, 2018; MacLean et al., 2017; McDowall, 2018). An international scoping review notes that the educational under achievement of children in OHC has been known for decades (Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012).

In the UK, it is evident that looked after children were being failed by the education system as far back as the 1980s. When data started to be collected, the clearest indicator of this was the number of children leaving care with no school qualifications of any kind (Jackson et al., 2005). A 2008 literature review published in the USA found that children in OHC demonstrated several academic risks, which was partly caused by multiple disruptions in schooling due to changes in placements. The authors of this review also found significant limitations in the published literature on the academic outcomes of children in care (Trout et al., 2008). Research also indicates that children in care in Canada have poorer educational outcomes than their same age peers (Dill et al., 2012; Flynn et al., 2012).

Research from Australia has also highlighted poor educational outcomes for children and young people in care. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) data has long indicated that children in care have lower reading and numeracy test scores than their peers (AIHW, 2007; 2011). A 2007 study looked at 47 young people discharged from care in NSW in the 1990s. The study found that these young people were half more likely to have finished Year 12 than their peers in the general population. Almost 20% of the care leavers involved in the study had not completed Year 10 (Cashmore et al., 2007).

There are some similarities in the socio-economic backgrounds of children in care, with many of them coming from families experiencing poverty and social exclusion, or with mental health or substance abuse problems (Jackson & Cameron, 2011; Sebba et al., 2017; Trout et al., 2008). Other issues include a lack of integration between the care and education systems, school changes due to placement disruption, lack of support from responsible adults and stigma (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Sebba et al., 2017). Early research from Australia also points to children entering care because of neglect linked to social disadvantage as well as abuse (Cashmore et al., 2007). Issues faced by children and young people in care include poor school attendance, increased incidence of bullying and suspension, changing schools because of placement disruption and not being listened to by caseworkers and teachers (Cashmore et al., 2007).

Recent research has raised the issue of a lack of case planning and highlighted the importance of children having at least one good relationship with a significant adult. In addition, the ongoing effects of childhood trauma and the importance of placement and school stability have been highlighted as key issues for children and young people in care. Finally, the impact of disruptive care experiences, low expectations of educational achievement, lack of support and stigma of being in care are emphasised as key issues for children and young people (Harvey et al., 2015; Harvey et al., 2017; McDowall, 2018; Mendis et al., 2015; Townsend, 2012; Wise et al., 2010).

Rationale

The review was undertaken to comprehensively examine the current literature and research in the area of educational outcomes for children in care. The international research evidence briefly summarised above, suggests that children and young people with a care experience are one of the lowest performing groups in terms of educational outcomes internationally. Although there is useful data and some research on the poor educational outcomes of children in care, and widespread anecdotal understandings about why this is so, there is not yet inclusive recent Australia-wide research. There are no comprehensive Australian statistics on educational outcomes for children in care (Harvey et al., 2015; 2017). AIHW data, although useful, is not comprehensive and does not consistently cover all states and territories or all educational systems. Little is known about the educational experience and engagement of young people in care.

As discussed above, children and young people in OHC are among the most disadvantaged cohorts of children in Australia. Across society, the socio-economic status of a family is the biggest factor influencing the educational opportunities of children in Australia (Lamb et al., 2015). Education is particularly important for children in care as it is at the basis of their future development and wellbeing, recovery from adversity, and is essential for employment (AIHW, 2015). Education is also one of the main avenues through which disadvantaged children and young people can achieve better life outcomes than their families of origin (Lamb et al., 2015).

This paper presents the results of a scoping review that focusses on these questions:

1. What does the current literature tell us about educational engagement and outcomes of children and young people with a care experience?
2. What are the key educational issues for children and young people, their carers, educators and social and welfare workers in the sector?
3. What is the impact of being in care on the educational experience of children and young people?

Method

A brief scoping review was conducted in an attempt to map and synthesise the literature on the educational experiences and outcomes of children and young people who are or who have been in care. The review method is based on the scoping review framework developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). It also broadly follows the recommendations on scoping studies by the Joanna Briggs Institute (Peters et al., 2020).

Colquhoun et al. (2014, p. 1291) state that:

'Scoping reviews are a form of knowledge synthesis, which incorporate a range of study designs to comprehensively summarize and synthesize evidence with the aim of informing practice, programs, and policy and providing direction to future research priorities'

Inclusion criteria for studies

Inclusion criteria were developed taking into account some time and resource constraints for this project. There was some urgency to complete the review as it formed part of a student field placement which was time limited. In addition, the breadth of literature reviewed was purposely limited to ensure a focus on recent, mainly Australian, literature. This decision was made by the authors to acknowledge the lack of recent reviews in this field and the need to complete the review in a relatively short timeframe.

For studies to be included in the review they needed to meet the following criteria:

- The study had to address one or more of the research questions
- The study must have been published in English and published since 2010
- The study needed to focus on Australian research, although selected key international studies were also included to give some comparable context to the Australian research
- The study needed to focus on children and young people in mainstream education

Search strategy

Systematic searches were made in the Medline, Psyc INFO and Embase databases using several search terms for population (children and young people in OHC), outcomes (school engagement, achievement, experience and issues) and context (Australia). See Appendix 1 for more information about search terms and the search strategy.

Additional searches were made in Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Sociological Abstracts, Informit and Scopus using various combinations of the search terms. Since scoping reviews focus on identifying all relevant literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), grey literature searches were also conducted using the Google and Google Scholar search engines.

Frequently cited sources from included articles were also scanned and included if they were considered relevant according to the inclusion criteria. The following journals were hand searched: Oxford Review of Education, Australian Social Work, Research on Social Work Practice and Social Work Research. A subscription to notification alerts from Children and Youth Services Review was obtained.

Further resources were suggested by academics with expertise in this area, which were followed up and interrogated for appropriateness for inclusion.

Data charting and analysis – how were the studies classified?

A total of 25 studies were included in this review. Initially, an annotated bibliography was written for each article. The studies were classified by location, type of study and population studied. Of the 25 studies chosen, 16 were from Australia, 2 from NZ, 1 from Europe, 3 from the UK and 3 were international studies.

The studies are summarised in Table 1 below.

Discussion

The main theme to emerge from the studies in this scoping review was the persistence of poor educational outcomes for children and

Table 1. Summary of studies

Study/Date	Location	Type	Population	Key issues	Conclusions
Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) (2017)	Australia	Qualitative-survey	Care providers	Absenteeism, chronic disengagement, low enrolment, lack of school commitment and skills	Implement EIPs, collect data, provide financial support
AIHW (2015)	Australia	Data linking	Children and young people (CYP)	Consistently lower achievement scores, worse with age; no clear link between numbers of placements and lower standards of education	Continue to monitor outcomes, include data for all sectors and states and territories
Crawford et al. (2011)	Australia	Qualitative-interviews	CYP, carers, caseworkers	CYP = relationships most important; carers = lack of support; workers = lack of training, problem-based approach	Give explicit attention to school engagement; disengagement and low outcomes linked; connections vital
Fernandez (2019)	Australia	Qualitative-interviews etc	CYP, carers, teachers	Importance of supportive adults; problems include placement instability, stigma, confidentiality Outcomes improve after 2 years of stable placement	Skills training for teachers/carers, better system co-ordination, trauma-awareness, stable placements, education prioritised, higher expectations
Harvey et al. (2015)	Australia	Research report	Interviews with care providers, survey, lit and data review	Poor data, few care leavers at uni, low expectations, placement instability, trauma, lack of support, absenteeism, 18 too young to leave care	Need to collect national data, care leavers should be equity group transitions out of care better supported
Harvey et al. (2017)	Australia	Qualitative-interviews	CYP – care leavers in higher education	Disrupted care experiences, financial issues, low expectations, mental health issues, desire to be treated like everyone else, sense of resilience, persistence	Guidelines for care leavers and uni staff
Jackson and Cameron (2012)	Europe	Interviews etc. Overview of five country study	CYP	Lack of data about outcomes, lack of integration of care and education systems, lack of support from responsible adults, school changes = problem	Universality of poor educational outcomes across five different education and care systems, systemic focus on vocational training over uni
Jay and McGrath-Lone (2019)	UK	Systematic review	CYP	Young people in care have significantly worse outcomes than their peers in all categories	Urgent need for more research into children with contact with care services
Jones et al. (2020)	UK	Qualitative-interviews	CYP	Persistence of educational disadvantage for young people in care, stigma, low expectations, othering	Review bureaucratic corporate parenting practices, foster a sense of belonging and normality
Lima et al. (2018)	Australia	Data linking	CYP	Kids in care much less likely to get WACE or go to uni, Aboriginal kids do much worse, more placements = worse outcomes, kids in care should be a deet equity group	More support beyond 18 and for care leavers, better co-ordination between agencies, care planning, more longitudinal research with more data
Luke and O'Higgins (2018)	International	Scoping review	CYP	Kids in care have poor outcomes, as do kids in need, multiple placements during secondary school = worse outcome, those in care > 2 years do better than those in need	Being in care is not detrimental to educational outcomes, kids in need also do poorly, more research on pre-care experience of kids in care
MacLean et al. (2015)	Australia	Data linking	CYP	Social disadvantage of children in care mostly accounts for poor outcomes, school attendance is protective; high level of mental health and alcohol and other drug issues in mothers of children in OHC	Public health interventions for all socially disadvantaged children, not just children in care

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Study/Date	Location	Type	Population	Key issues	Conclusions
MacLean et al. (2017)	Australia	Data linking	CYP	OHC kids at significant risk of poor outcomes, no clear link between placement stability and educational outcomes, school changes in year of test = bad, school attendance is protective, kids in care > 5 years = better outcomes	Target interventions to support kids in care, further research looking at educational trajectories and effectiveness of interventions for kids in care
Matheson (2016)	NZ	Qualitative-interviews	CYP care leavers	Personal factors – feeling valued and cared about, school and belonging, future aspirations, sense of resilience, serendipitous events due to other people	Practitioner advice – care leavers need to know they are cared about, have a sense of belonging, aspirations, resilience
Matheson (2019)	NZ	Qualitative-interviews	CYP care leavers	Success factors – positive school experiences, avid readers, stable secondary schooling at good schools, support from school staff	Recommendations – value education, have high expectations; education protective despite significant barriers
McDowall (2018)	Australia	Qualitative-survey	CYP	Fairly positive responses about learning, but > 50% felt educational needs not met, carers biggest source of educational support, lack of inclusive planning by agencies and young people not included	No significant improvements in 5 years since introduction of national standards, need to speak directly with young people independently of care system
Mendis et al. (2015)	Australia	Qualitative-survey	CYP care leaver graduates	Success factors – conducive environment, personal factors (resilience, motivation) good relationships with adults	Relationship with significant adult who values learning, and supports young person is critical, provide support to build resilience
O'Higgins et al. (2017)	International	Systematic review	CYP	Boys, minority groups, kids with special needs more at risk; no clear link between school changes and bad outcomes, caregiver involvement = better outcomes, engagement and aspirations may be protective	Need more longitudinal research + info on pre-care experience,
Sebba et al. (2017)	International	Data linking + Qualitative-interviews	CYP	Teachers most important influence, foster carers support important, issues – stigma, confidentiality, agency, school changes in final years, absences	Being in care is overwhelmingly positive, integrate systems, involve young people in decisions about them
Tilbury et al. (2014)	Australia	Qualitative-surveys + interviews	CYP	Care group – lower aspirations, also by carers, less support, more disrupted schooling, success = relationships with carers, caseworkers, young people's own efforts, structure, feeling successful	Education about more than outcomes, also engagement and experience kids have a right to enjoy; engagement improves outcomes
Townsend (2012)	Australia	Qualitative-interviews + data analysis	CYP	Importance of placement and school stability and quality of schools and relationships	Poor outcomes, being in OHC didn't necessarily help, some children doing well in early years, results declining over time
Townsend et al. (2016)	Australia	Qualitative-interviews	CYP	Placement changes can be problematic-adult support needed; relationship stability important	Support children through transitions, involve them in planning and decisions
Townsend et al. (2020)	International	Systematic review	CYP	Importance of school being safe, relationships with teachers and peers promoted engagement, pre-care issues, stigma, interagency collaboration, kids taking control	Address key findings, train teachers trauma-informed practice, better interagency collaboration, listen to children and young people
Wilson et al. (2019)	Australia	Qualitative-interviews	CYP care leavers	Visibility of otherness, punitive nature of OHC, low expectations, discharge from care too early, educators lack insight into care experience	Extend state care beyond 18, support care leavers via scholarships, fee reductions, listen to care leavers
Wise et al. (2010)	Australia	Qualitative-interviews	CYP, Carers, Teachers	Poor academic performance of kids in care, ongoing trauma impact, importance of good relationships with adults, workers need more training, time and resources, as do carers, better schools	Use trauma informed approaches, systems need flexibility, some children are doing well

young people in care. In Australia this has been known about since at least 2007, and there has been little tangible improvement according to the studies investigated in this review.

Impact of social deprivation and trauma

The impact of social deprivation and trauma is a consistent theme in the literature and most papers in the study touched on this topic (Harvey et al., 2015; Lima et al., 2018; Luke & O'Higgins, 2018; MacLean et al., 2015; Townsend et al., 2020; Wise et al., 2010). Children and young people in care have almost universally had a difficult start in life. Most children in care are from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, often from families with high numbers of contacts with mental health and alcohol and other drug treatment services (MacLean et al., 2015). Many children have experienced significant trauma, and this can have long-term impact on educational engagement and outcomes.

Stigma and low expectations

The stigma of being in care is addressed in several studies and in all of these studies young people expressed a desire to be able to control who knew about their care status. They also wished to be treated just like young people who are not in care (Fernandez, 2019; Jones et al., 2020; Sebba et al., 2017; Townsend et al., 2020). In one study, young people described the negative impacts of being 'othered', while a further paper comments on the visibility of otherness for young people in care (Jones et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2019). Carers also commented on the stigma faced by young people and the importance of young people being able to control information about their care status (Fernandez, 2019).

Stigma is closely linked to low expectations (CREATE Foundation, 2017). A number of studies mention the importance of young people having high aspirations or adults having high aspirations on their behalf. One study describes the 'soft bigotry of low expectations' and notes that the children in care might lower their educational aspirations to match the lower expectations of those around them (Harvey et al., 2015, p. 6). Another study notes the impact of low expectations on the self-confidence and self-worth of care leavers (Harvey et al., 2017). Other research report how young people face low expectations from teachers and carers (Jones et al., 2020; Mendis et al., 2015). Wilson et al. (2019) use the stark example of a young person who was discouraged from sitting at a scholarship exam because she wasn't perceived as being good enough. Researchers point to the importance of adults having high expectations for children in care and encouraging young people to develop high aspirations for their future (Fernandez, 2019; Matheson, 2016; 2019).

School disruption and absenteeism

The impact of the school disruption often caused by placement changes is another theme addressed in several studies. This is a contested topic, with some research showing multiple school changes contribute to poor educational outcomes, and other studies showing they have negligible impact. A comprehensive review by O'Higgins et al. (2017) reports mixed findings on how educational outcomes were impacted by school changes. Two data matching studies found no clear links between number of placements and educational outcomes (AIHW, 2015; MacLean et al., 2017), whereas, Lima et al. (2018) found that young people in care with more than five placements were more likely to have poorer educational outcomes than those with fewer than five placements.

One study suggested that school changes had a negative impact in the final two years of school (Sebba et al., 2017), while another shows poorer test results if the school change happened in the year of standardised testing (MacLean et al., 2017). Research focussing on care leavers described school changes as a problem (Harvey et al., 2017), which is supported by evidence from an international scoping review (Luke & O'Higgins, 2018) which found that multiple placements are detrimental to educational outcomes.

Research focussing on the opinions and views of children and young people indicates that school changes are an issue for them because it disrupts relationships with their peers and teachers and influences both their experience and engagement of school (Fernandez, 2019; Tilbury et al., 2014; Townsend, 2012; Townsend et al., 2016). Chronic disengagement is a key factor in absenteeism, which is another issue raised in some studies (Association of Children's Welfare Agencies [ACWA], 2017; Harvey et al., 2015; MacLean et al., 2015; 2017; Sebba et al., 2017). A NSW study indicated that 7.4% of school aged children in care were not enrolled in school (ACWA, 2017), while recent estimates suggest that the overall percentage of young people of school age children not enrolled in any formal education is approximately 1.5% (Watterson & O'Connell, 2019). In contrast, other studies showed that children in care had better attendance than their vulnerable peers, and that regular school attendance is a key protective factor for educational outcomes (Luke & O'Higgins, 2018; MacLean et al., 2015).

The impact of school changes on educational outcomes is not clear-cut, and further targeted research is recommended. The evidence suggests that regardless of outcomes measured by test results, children and young people usually find placement and school changes disruptive and upsetting, particularly in the final years of schooling. Placement changes and associated issues of school disruption and absenteeism are often due to issues within the care or education systems or lack of integration between them (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; McDowall, 2018; Sebba et al., 2017). The literature also includes further discussion around problems in schools and the care system and some of these are outlined below.

Care and education systems

Some authors noted issues within schools including the lack of implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEP) and the lack of skills among school staff to support children with complex trauma backgrounds (ACWA, 2017; Wise et al., 2010). Similarly, another study points to a lack of understanding among school staff about the issues faced by children in care (Wilson et al., 2019). Harvey et al. (2015) point to lack of educational assistance as one of the key reasons for poor school outcomes.

Research also highlights issues in the care system, including a lack of support and training, inclusion in planning for carers, training for caseworkers. Other issues include unclear funding guidelines, poor communication between agencies and inadequate education resources. Caseworkers raised issues around lack of time spent with children due to the reactive and regulatory focus of their work, also reporting that their emphasis was on the psychological needs of young people rather than education (Crawford et al., 2011; Wise et al., 2010). Wilson et al. (2019) note the often punitive nature of the care system as a barrier for effective work on educational issues for children in care.

A number of studies reported that children and young people in care were concerned they weren't being listened to or involved in

decision making about education or things that affected their education (McDowall, 2018; Sebba et al., 2017; Townsend et al., 2016; 2020; Wilson et al., 2019). Other authors noted a lack of integration between the care and education systems and how this negatively impacts on education (Fernandez, 2019; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Sebba et al., 2017).

Managing transitions

The research suggests there are issues at each level of educational transitions. One study looked at the difficult transitions between primary and secondary school for children in care and stressed the need for children to be supported through all changes (Townsend et al., 2016). Research on Australian care leavers emphasised the need for further support beyond the age of 18 and positive interventions to make the transition to tertiary study easier. Other issues include the need for care leavers transitioning to university to be included in equity frameworks, and the need for better data collection about care leavers (Harvey et al., 2015; 2017; Lima et al., 2018; Mendis et al., 2015). The research looking at young people transitioning from OHC and eventually into tertiary studies found that, against all odds, some young people succeeded (Harvey et al., 2015; 2017; Matheson, 2016; Matheson, 2019; Mendis et al., 2015).

The importance of relationships and agency

The importance of relationships with key adults is one of the most common themes raised in the studies. Many of the papers stress the importance of a good relationship with at least one supportive adult. Other themes emerging included relationships being the most significant influence in career development for young people (Crawford et al., 2011) and the importance in a young person's life of a relationship with significant adult who values learning and provides emotional support to the young person (Fernandez, 2019; Mendis et al., 2015; Townsend et al., 2016).

This is echoed in studies that emphasise the importance of good relationships with teachers, carers and caseworkers (Tilbury et al., 2014) and with both teachers and peers (Townsend, 2012; Townsend et al., 2020). An international review suggests that caregiver involvement in schooling is associated with better outcomes (O'Higgins et al., 2017). A European study also indicates that having a close supportive adult is a key protective factor for young people (Jackson & Cameron, 2012).

Relationships with key adults can contribute to building resilience in young people with adverse experiences (Sebba & Luke, 2019). Several papers mention the importance of young people's feelings of resilience or personal factors or their own agency. One study found that many young people regarded their own efforts as central to their possible success (Tilbury et al., 2014). In another study, individual agency was a key theme. Many young people took an active role in their educational progress and felt it was up to them (Sebba et al., 2017). This was also described as children taking control, although the authors noted that this was often paired with a strong desire for good relationships with adults (Townsend et al., 2020). Matheson's (2016) study directly addresses personal factors and found that care leavers in tertiary education had high aspirations and a sense of resilience, although many also felt luck played a role in their educational success. Key themes from two further studies were the student's sense of resilience and their motivation and determination to succeed (Harvey et al., 2017; Mendis et al., 2015).

Addressing the research questions

The literature overwhelmingly tells us that children and young people in care have poor educational outcomes (ACWA, 2017; AIHW, 2015). Outcomes for children in care are worse than their peers in the general population. Research is equivocal about whether their outcomes are worse than other children from similarly disadvantaged backgrounds (Luke & O'Higgins, 2018; MacLean et al., 2015). The research also tells us that some young people in care do have successful outcomes.

For many children and young people, key issues are around the importance of good relationships with supportive adults whether those adults are foster carers, teachers and school staff or case workers. Adverse key issues include placement changes and associated school disruptions, particularly in the last years of school. Stigma associated with care status is another important issue contributing to low expectations of young people in care by others. Many young people want to control who knows their care status and to be listened to and included in planning. Other young people talked about their own efforts and had a sense of agency or taking control. For care leavers at university this was described as resilience, persistence and motivation.

Further critical issues raised by carers, social workers and service providers include chronic disengagement and systemic issues, including a lack of skills and training for school staff, inadequate training and support for carers and caseworkers, lack of focus on education within care systems, inadequate resourcing, administrative and managerial pressures on practice and poor communication between agencies (ACWA, 2017; Crawford et al., 2011; Wise et al., 2010). Addressing these issues is further hampered by a lack of data collection, particularly standardised Australia-wide data (ACWA, 2017; AIHW, 2015; Harvey et al., 2015; Lima et al., 2018).

Several articles examine the variable impacts of being in care on the educational experience of children and young people. In one study, two young people reported that being in care had positive impacts on their educational and life experiences, although many others commented on the school disruption that placement changes caused (Tilbury et al., 2014). Similarly, Townsend et al. (2016) found that some children experienced coming into care as positive for both their wellbeing and schooling, while others found it more difficult. Fernandez (2019) found improved scores and better adaptive functioning after 2 years of stable care, while the children in the study spoke about the challenges of constantly moving schools and how it affected their education, friendships and relationships. Another study found that being in care was overwhelmingly a protective factor, with 25 of the 26 young people involved reporting that coming into care had helped them in their education and in their lives (Sebba et al., 2017).

Limitations

A well documented limitation of scoping reviews is that there is a risk that some research has been missed and that this may bias the outcomes (McGinn et al., 2016; Sucharew & Macaluso, 2019). Time constraints, both of the publication dates and of timeline for completion of this review, were also limitations of the review.

Another limitation for any qualitative research on children and young people in care is that those involved are usually engaged in some way in education or contactable by researchers. This is particularly true of studies involving care leavers in tertiary study, that is, participating in tertiary study is one measure of a good outcome

and thus engagement. Some authors, such as Jones et al. (2020) and Townsend et al. (2020), address this explicitly, and it is a real issue for all researchers.

Conclusions and implications for practice and research

The key conclusive finding from this review is the continuing and pervasive nature of poor educational outcomes for children and young people in OHC. This is well documented in most of the studies examined, and is the outcome which requires close attention by policy makers and practitioners within the OHC sector.

Another important finding is that some young people in OHC do have successful educational outcomes. They are the young people who are participating in or have completed a post-secondary qualification at university or other institution. There are common themes among those who have done well. These include good relationships with and support from key adults, and a sense of resilience combined with high aspirations and persistence. A stable placement while attending a good school in the final years of secondary education also helps.

Implications for policy and practice

It is beyond the scope of this review to make recommendations around social disadvantage and its impact on educational outcomes. Stigma and low expectations can perhaps be best addressed through awareness raising and better education of agency and school staff. School disruption and other issues raised in the literature tend to reflect issues in the care systems and the way resources are allocated, managed and prioritised. Much of the research includes recommendations about providing better services to young people by better training of staff, stabilising placements, reviewing corporate parenting practices, better integration of the care and education systems, valuing education and providing more support for young people transitioning out of the care system. The authors can only loudly echo these concerns.

Practice recommendations for individual workers include the things that have helped the young people reported on in the literature included in this review. These include the often repeated theme of the importance of good relationships with supportive adults. This stresses the importance of individual practitioners taking responsibility for the support of children in care. If a social worker or support worker is not in a position to develop an ongoing relationship with a young person, they need to be aware of how important it is to facilitate such relationships with other appropriate adults like carers, teachers and other school staff. Of course, workers can only address these issues if they work in an organisation that supports them to facilitate such relationships and prioritises ongoing educational support. There is a need for all workers in the sector to be aware of and trained to manage the ongoing impacts of trauma on children and young people in care. Workers should also try to minimise placement changes that lead to school disruption, especially in the final years of school. They should contribute to a culture that values education, supports young people to build resilience and has high expectations of them.

Further research

There are gaps in the research presented, which may reflect a real lack of research or flaws in the search process. There is little research on the experiences and views of carers and workers in the sector. There is limited research on the views of teachers or

social workers, which would be beneficial to establish some benchmarks upon which to build policy and practice improvement. There are very real gaps in data collection with no standardised Australia-wide data on children and young people in care, and very little follow up when they leave care.

Young people who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are frequently mentioned in the literature and attention is drawn to both the high numbers of Indigenous children in care and the entrenched disadvantage they face. The authors found no research specifically addressing educational issues faced by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children or young people in care.

Current evidence on the impact of school changes on educational outcomes is equivocal and further targeted research could help clarify this. While three data matching studies from Western Australia were included in this review, the authors found no research encompassing the voices for children and young people in OHC or their carers, educators or social workers from Western Australia. Further qualitative research based on the cohorts in the data matching studies could focus on the impact of school changes on the educational outcomes of young people in care.

The findings of this scoping review are not new findings. The 2010 report which informed the National Standards for OHC raised similar issues around stability, supporting transition from care, better training and support for carers and workers, improvements in practice and relationships, more inclusive decision making and improved access to support services (KPMG, 2010). This lack of progress in addressing known issues, further reinforces the need for urgent reforms and further research.

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Appendix 1

Systematic searches were made of the Medline, Pysch INFO and Embase databases using the following search terms:

Table A1. Search terms

	Population	Concept	Context
	Children and young people who are or have been in care	Educational engagement and outcomes; care impact on educational experience	Australia in the last 10 years
Key terms	Foster children Children in care Out of home care Kinship care Foster care	Educational experience Educational engagement Educational outcomes	Australia
Search terms	'Out of home care' OR 'foster care' OR 'foster child'* OR 'kinship care' OR 'children in care' OR 'alternate care' OR 'looked after child'*	AND 'Educational achievement' OR 'Academic achievement' OR 'academic success' OR 'educational experience' OR 'educational engagement' OR 'educational outcome'* OR 'Tertiary education' OR 'secondary education' OR 'primary education' OR 'access and equity'	AND Australia*

A total of 415 articles were found after duplicates were excluded. Of these, 19 were short listed for inclusion after title and abstract checking and brief reading of the text.

Additional searches were made of ERIC, Sociological Abstracts, Informit and Scopus using various combinations of the search terms. An additional 93 articles were found. After deleting duplicates, checking abstracts and scanning texts a further 15 articles were selected. Grey literature searches, input from experts, reference list scanning and hand searching of journals provided further articles.