

Making Up Lost Ground: a study of young people leaving care with disappointing school qualifications

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Background

Despite a plethora of policy initiatives, the gap between the educational attainment of children in state care and their peers has widened since 2002 (DCSF 2009) and the current government target, that 20% of looked after children should achieve at least 5 GCSEs grade A*-C or equivalent qualifications by 2011, appears unlikely to be met. Poor educational attainment is one of the factors contributing to the 'deplorable' life outcomes generally experienced by care leavers (Lonne et al 2008:173), including higher levels of depression, anxiety, poverty, homelessness and involvement in the criminal justice system than their peers (Utting 1997, Wade and Dixon 2006, Berridge 2007). Although the provisions of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 have been associated with increased entry into further education and higher numbers in employment or training (Hai and Williams 2004, Dixon et al 2004), 26% of former care leavers aged 19 were not in education, employment or training ('NEET'), in the year ending 31st March 2009, disregarding those whose status was attributable to illness or disability. The introduction of compulsory education or training to age 18, more flexible pathways through the 14-19 education reform programme and the implementation of the Care Matters agenda, offer a timely opportunity to consider the most appropriate ways by which older children in state care can be encouraged and supported to participate in further and higher education and training.

Research Questions

Whilst many children in care do not fulfil their educational potential at school, care leavers can be remarkably resilient and leaving care may provide an opportunity for positive change (Wade and Munro 2008). Some recent research has focused on factors enabling looked after children to overcome their troubled pasts and achieve well (Chase et al 2006, Jackson et al 2008), but understanding of the challenges facing care leavers remains greater than that of effective systems to support their transition to independence (Wade and Munro 2008). This paper reports on a study that focused on care leavers who perceived themselves to have underachieved at school and explored

- factors affecting their decisions in relation to further or higher education and training;
- support they perceived as beneficial in making those decisions, with particular emphasis on the role of supportive adults in their lives; and
- their views on the likely impact of recent or forthcoming changes in legislation, including the role of designated teacher and personal advisor, and the raising of the age of compulsory education or training to 18.

Methods

Since the focus of the study was the young people's perspectives on the factors affecting their decision-making, a qualitative methodology was employed. Data were collected by means of in-depth semi-structured interviews with seven young people aged 16-20 who were or had been in care within the geographical area of the local authority in which the research was carried out. Interviews covered the participants' current living arrangements and routes into care and to their present circumstances. Changes to educational arrangements arising from their personal history were discussed, and their experiences of designated teachers, Personal Educational Plans, pathway plans and personal advisors. Interviewees were asked about their current education or employment, the qualifications they held or were working for, their future plans and barriers to fulfilling their aspirations. Questions explored who they regarded as supportive or otherwise of their educational goals, decisions they might have made differently in retrospect, and the nature of support that they thought would be

helpful. A flexible approach was adopted, to allow participants to focus on aspects of their experiences which they perceived to be of most significance. The research was conducted in accordance with the National Children's Bureau (2009) Guidelines for Research. Approval for the research was granted by King's College London and the local authority.

Frame

The study posits a children's rights framework, consistent with the sociological construction of children as competent agents in their own lives. The justification for this approach is three-fold. Firstly, the participants were of an age at which they were increasingly independent. Whilst the fact that children and adults often have different perspectives does not imply that either view is 'right' or 'wrong' (Holland 2009:232), the perspectives of young people are the driving force behind their decisions and therefore, it is argued, of primary significance. Whilst some ground has been covered since Winter concluded that 'the detailed accounts of looked after children themselves' are missing from the literature (Winter 2006:55), this study attempts to contribute to these accounts. Arguably, this approach is particularly pertinent in respect of the children of corporate parents, who are not only expected to achieve independence earlier than their peers (Stein 2006), but are also often on the receiving end of decisions over which they have no influence. Secondly, research involving young people is an important means by which to engage their participation rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is of particular significance in relation to marginalised groups (Wigfall and Cameron 2006). Finally, as Samuels and Pryce (2008) attest in relation to fostered children, care leavers have a particular sense of identity which renders research into their own perspectives of particular value. Data were analysed using grounded theory.

Research findings

Key themes from the study include confirmation of a strong sense of self-reliance amongst care leavers, coupled with a desire not to be singled out in school. Whilst the young people acknowledged key professionals who had been a beneficial influence, they described feeling overwhelmed by the number of professionals intruding in their lives and then moving on, and regarded processes such as the pathway plan as meeting bureaucratic requirements rather their individual needs. The paper concludes that more flexible pathways through the 14-19 curriculum coupled with compulsory education or training to eighteen may be of benefit to young people who have experienced a disrupted education, but suggests that a universal personal tutor system may be more effective in relation to educational support than a designated staff member for children in care.