

Valuing and improving educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care

Practice Paper

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Introduction

Children in out-of-home care may have a range of needs that require sensitive and planned responses. One of their needs is to have positive and successful educational experiences. The engagement of children and young people in education is recognised as a critical issue that warrants the same level of attention as other aspects of their wellbeing.

This paper examines the research on children in out-of-home care and education. It highlights that education should be a priority for child welfare and education professionals. Children in out-of-home care can have positive and life-changing educational experiences if all stakeholders commit in a coordinated and informed manner to facilitating young people's educational journeys.

Although some of the research findings and evidence in this paper are specific to the experiences of adolescent young people in out-of-home care, the information has broader application to the educational needs and experiences of children in out-of-home care who are of a younger age.

Status of education for children in out-of-home care

Compared to the non [out-of-home] care population, children in out-of-home care in many jurisdictions are an at-risk group for **reduced** educational performance (Forsmana & Vinnerljunga, 2012; Francis, 2000). A number of issues have been raised about young people in out-of-home care, and indicate they:

- may not realise their academic potential and not achieve educational qualifications (see Connelly & Chakrabarti, 2008; Forsman & Vinnerljunga, 2012; Francis, 2000)
- are over-represented in special education (Stone, 2007; Trout et al, 2008). Zetlin (2006) suggests that children in out-of-home care are more often in receipt of special education services than the general population. Conversely, for other young people in out-of-home care they may miss out on special education services because of school changes and not being appropriately assessed. Further, some young people may experience compounded difficulties because of the risks associated with disability/special education and being in foster care (Geenen & Powers, 2006)
- may not perform well academically and may perform below their grade level or underachieve (Trout et al, 2008; Dilla, Flynn, Hollingshead & Fernandes, 2012; Berlin, Vinnerljung & Hjern, 2011)
- can miss out on academic concepts due to instability, placement changes and the associated disruption (Malmgren & Meisel, 2002 cited in Trout et al, 2008, Tilbury, 2010). Kirk and Day (2011) highlight with reference to McNaught (2009) that students can be disadvantaged by 4 to 6 months from school changes due to lack of coordination between welfare and education systems and paper trail/record delays
- are less likely to progress to tertiary or other post secondary education (Kirk & Day, 2011; Forsman & Vinnerljunga, 2012; Dworsky, 2010). For young people

transitioning from [out-of-home] care they may not have the support, resources and academic attainment to progress to tertiary education (Kirk & Day, 2011)

- may have behavioural difficulties which can impact on their education. These issues can lead to in [out-of-home] care youth being at higher risk for outcomes such as drop-out, truancy, repeating grades, suspensions and exclusions (NCES, 2006 cited in Trout et al, 2008; Trout et al, 2008; Connelly & Chakrabarti, 2008; Tilbury, 2010; Allen & Vacca, 2010).

Risks and reasons for educational challenges

Some children in out-of-home care may have educational difficulties. However, *not all* children will experience problems as there is diversity within the out-of-home care population. Some children in out-of-home care will be doing well academically. These children also require consideration (Iversen, Hetland, Havik, Stormark, 2010). For those who do experience difficulties, the reasons or possible risks can be the interplay of a number of factors (Winter et al, 2011; Goddard, 2000).

Child factors or risks are factors that are related to the child. Many children who are living in out-of-home care have experienced significant levels of abuse and neglect. Research has determined that abuse and neglect can have highly traumatic consequences for children's development in a range of domains – motor, social, psychological, language, attachment, peer relationships, neurological, behavioural, academic and scholastic (Tilbury et al, 2007). These experiences can manifest and be exhibited as internalising behaviours (for example, depression, anxiety) and externalizing behaviours (for example, anger, aggression, venting frustration in the school environment) (Altshuler, 2003). Children may also have untreated mental health issues (Wise et al, 2010).

The impact of maltreatment on brain development and neurobiology also highlights that trauma can have adverse effects on a range of cognitive, regulatory and learning capacities (Twardosz & Lutzker, 2010; Teicher, Andersen, Polcari, Anderson, Navalta & Kim, 2003; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2001; cited in Bromfield, Gillingham & Higgins, 2007, p. 35; Harden, 2004). Given this, *some* maltreated children may present in the school environment with a range of difficulties and behaviours, for example, difficulty concentrating and grasping concepts, lack of emotional and impulse control, highly disruptive behaviours, aggressive and angry outbursts, social skill deficits, being withdrawn, low self confidence, lacking interest and disengagement (Cole et al, 2005).

Downey (2007) explains that the impacts of harm can manifest in two interconnected ways on children within the school setting – academic performance and social relationships. Academically a child may have reduced cognitive capacity, have difficulty with concentration due to tiredness from sleep difficulties, memory problems and linguistic and language issues which impact on their capacity to communicate and gain information. Social relationship impacts may become overt in the child's capacity to make and sustain positive peer relationships, make a positive attachment to school personnel and the school setting, and difficulties with teachers and peers due to issues of power and control (Downey, 2007). The

impact of maltreatment can contribute significantly to children having difficulty at school (Frederick & Goddard, 2010; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Wise et al, 2010; Cole et al, 2005).

Besides the impact of harm, other pre [out-of-home] care circumstances can affect a young person's educational experience. For example, poverty and economic disadvantage may restrict opportunities for children (Flynn et al, 2010) as does a lack of educational encouragement and preparation for children from significant others. When children enter out-of-home care they may have experienced a range of disadvantages which they bring to both the out-of-home care and school settings (Borland et al, 1998; Rutter, 2000 cited in Harker et al, 2004; Frederick & Goddard, 2010; Wise et al, 2010; Winter et al, 2011).

In [out-of-home] care factors can also contribute to why children in out-of-home care may have academic problems (Winter et al, 2011). For some children, being in out-of-home care results in a *journey of disruption, discontinuity and commitments* comprised of placement changes, school transfers, court appearances, contact visits, therapeutic services and other requirements (Tilbury et al, 2009; Frederick & Goddard, 2010). At times, these demands can and will create discontinuities for children with schools, teachers, peers and friends (Trout et al, 2008). The timing of these changes may not always be optimal for these children in terms of curriculum and engagement (Jackson, 1989 cited in Goddard, 2000). For some children, these changes may also lead to an escalation in behavioural difficulties when at school. They are attempting to manage feelings of stress, loss and having to adapt to unfamiliar people and environments (Sullivan, Jones & Mathiesen, 2010).

In addition, high mobility, placement and school changes can result in children not having a constant supporter of their education, who can advocate for their educational needs and is well-informed of their capabilities and limits (Allen & Vacca, 2010; Zetlin, Weinberg & Kimm, 2004). A lifestyle characterised by instability is recognised as a contributing factor to educational difficulties (Jackson, 1998; Francis, 2000; Jackson and Thomas, 2001; Evans, 2003 cited in O'Sullivan & Westerman, 2007).

Absences for any reason can lead to a heightened risk of children disengaging with, or not feeling a sense of belonging to, a school (Smithgall, Jarpe-Ratner & Walker, 2010; Wise et al, 2010). How engaged children feel at school, whether this be at an "emotional", "cognitive" or "behavioural" level can influence their perception of school and ultimately their willingness and motivation to attend (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004, p 60).

Further compounding the discontinuity issue is that there may be a lack of effective communication between professionals involved in a young person's life about their educational attainment and needs when changes take place (Vacca, 2006, cited in Vacca, 2008, Harker et al, 2004). Delays in the transfer of information about a child's educational status may result (Zetlin, Weinberg & Kimm, 2004). Harker et al (2004) also adds that insufficient monitoring and record keeping of in [out-of-home] care children's educational progress and schools attended can occur. Some schools may not even be informed of a child's out-of-home care status. Education and school stability has also not always been a priority when professionals are organising out-of-home care placements (Harker et al, 2004).

Some research has suggested that type of placement may be related to educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care. Provisionally, it has been suggested that children

in family and kin placements are more likely to achieve better educational outcomes than other types of placements such as group homes and therapeutic foster care (Berrick, Barth & Needell, 1994; Zima et al., 2000 cited in Cheung et al, 2012). This suggests that children in some types of placements may be particularly vulnerable.

The expectations and aspirations of those significantly involved in a young person's educational journey can impact on educational attainment. Some research has reported that carers and teachers may not expect children in [out-of-home] care to do well (Martin & Jackson, 2002; Harker et al, 2004; Francis, 2000), or expect difficulties in particular areas (e.g completing homework requirements, be a victim of bullying) (Elliott, 2002). Elliott (2002) cites Rosenthal & Jacobson's (1968) work on the Pygmalion Effect and the self-fulfilling prophecy and explains that a person's perspective can "create and maintain a child's performance level" (p. 58). Low expectations or a lack of appreciation of the importance of education can also be promoted by peers, which (if young people are mixing with peers with these attitudes) can be influential (Harker et al, 2004). Social workers have also been identified as not giving sufficient priority to in [out-of-home] care children's education progress and needs (Francis, 2000) and/or focusing on other facets of the young person's life and wellbeing (The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc, 2008).

With regard to transitioning from school to work Tilbury et al (2009) highlights that "at the age of 17 or 18 years, when many young people are leaving school and starting work or further study with the help of their parents, children in out-of-home care generally negotiate these changes when the formal supports of the care system such as a case worker, financial assistance and a foster home, are ceasing (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004; Stein, 2006)"(p. 477). Many young people may lack support from significant others and their community (Lips, 2007 cited in Allen & Vacca, 2010). Such issues can and will impact on a young person's aspirations, attainment and ultimately, achievements. Importantly, many young people in out-of-home care may aspire to high education but may not have the means or support to progress this goal (Dworsky, 2010).

Key messages

- Children in out-of-home care are an at risk group for less desirable educational outcomes compared to the non [out-of-home] care population.
- Research has reported that children in out-of-home care may not reach their academic potential, be over-represented in special education, perform below their grade level and are less likely to progress to tertiary or other post secondary education. However, there is variation in the capability and academic attainment of children in out-of-home care.
- Some children in out-of-home care may have behavioural difficulties which can heighten their risk for outcomes such as drop-out, truancy, repeating grades, suspensions and exclusions.
- The following risks, barriers or reasons have been suggested for why children in out-

of-home care may have educational difficulties.

- The impact of abuse and harm can affect all domains of the child's development – motor, social, psychological, physical and cognitive. Harm can also impact on a child's learning and academic performance and social relationships.
- A child's pre [out-of-home] care circumstances, for example, lack of educational encouragement and preparation by significant others, can impact on their academic and social capacity.
- Out-of-home care factors can contribute to a child's academic problems. Placement changes, school transfers, court appearances, contact visits, attendance at therapeutic services and other commitments can cause considerable disruption and discontinuity to a child's education and connectedness to the school environment. Absences for any reason can impact on a child's progress.
- When children do change school, insufficient communication and/or delays in transfer of information by professionals (about a child's educational status and needs), may occur. Also, insufficient monitoring and record keeping of children's educational progress and schools attended may result, and some schools may not be informed that a child is in out-of-home care.
- When professionals organise placements, school stability and the educational needs of children in out-of-home care are not always prioritised.
- Some research has suggested that some carers, social workers and teachers may not expect children in [out-of-home] care to do well due to their care history. They may not have high expectations of these children which may be directly or indirectly communicated to the child.
- Some young people in [out-of-home] care may not have anyone who is actively considering and discussing their education and career aspirations with them.
- Young people transitioning from school to work or post-secondary education may not have the emotional, housing and financial support that young people in the non [out-of-home] care population may have to progress goals.

The importance of education for children in out-of-home care

The successful and positive completion of education for children is vital for increasing their chances of successful life outcomes. Simply put, good educational attainment can lead to a fulfilling adult life (Pecora et al, 2006 cited in Driscoll, 2011).

Young people who are *not* able to successfully complete secondary education are at risk of unemployment, being unable to progress a career or higher education, poverty, being a

recipient of government assistance, having poor self esteem, being less likely to participate in recreational interests, emotional and psychosocial difficulties, homelessness, criminality, isolation and relationship problems and health issues (Mondy, 2009; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004; Berlin et al, 2011).

“Youth that have spent at least a third of their formative years in State care have very high excess risks, compared to general population peers, for example, suicidal behaviour, severe criminality, substance abuse and welfare dependency in young adulthood. In regression modes, roughly 50% of these excess risks can be statistically “explained” by poor school performance in primary school (Berlin et al., 2011; Vinnerljung, Berlin & Hjern, 2010” (Forsman & Vinnerljunga, 2012, p.1084).

In many countries adequate completion of schooling is essential for young people to have the opportunity to enter and procure employment in the labour market (Wise et al 2010). In particular, in today’s technologically savvy society, competency in reading, math, technology and science is increasingly becoming *imperative* to employment. Young people who do not acquire these basic competencies will be severely disadvantaged (Trout et al, 2008).

Conversely, young people who *successfully* complete school are more likely to enjoy a range of positive adult outcomes such as fulfilling employment, financial independence, positive self esteem, a sense of personal competency and independence, and other social and relational benefits that stem from success (Mondy, 2009; Altshuler, 2003; Hook & Courtney, 2011).

The benefits of education are however much more than academic attainment. Attendance and participation in school offers children the opportunity to engage in a range of social experiences which can provide essential developmental scaffolding for their social, emotional and academic learning. Schooling allows children to develop positive relationships, partake in exciting and enjoyable activities, establish supportive relationships with adults, be in a forum where they can develop and refine their social and behavioural skills and be part of a community that can afford them with a sense of connectedness and resilience (Gilligan, 1998; Hunt, 2000). Schooling also assists in preparing young people as public citizens (Labaree, 1997).

The regularity and predictability of the school environment can also be enormously beneficial for children in out-of-home care because it can be a source of stability and consistency when other facets of their life are not (Gilligan, 1998; Driscoll, 2011; Fernandez, 2008). For vulnerable groups of children, which include young people in out-of-home care, the school community is critical. As Zetlin et al (2004, p. 920) explains “schools can address the risk factors and build protective supports for students by creating a learning environment that includes a caring school community, effective teaching, an engaging and effective program, and an environment that provides all students with the behavioural skills and supports needed to succeed in school (Osher et al., 2000)”.

Positive, supportive teachers can be very beneficial to traumatised children who may not have had quality relationships with other adults. These relationships can contribute to children having the experience of positive, caring and reliable adults who see their worth and emphasise this. These relationships can also, in part, contribute to assisting with the

development of children's resilience. Teachers can be a source of academic and social support (Harker et al 2004; Fernandez, 2008) and influential role models (Merdinger et al, 2005).

Key messages

- Positive educational experiences and attainment for children is vital for enhancing the likelihood of positive adult outcomes. Young people who *successfully* complete school are more likely to enjoy adult outcomes such as employment, financial independence, positive self esteem and positive relationships.
- Young people who are *not* able to successfully complete secondary education are at risk of unemployment, an inability to progress a career or higher education, poverty, being a recipient of government assistance, poor self esteem, less likelihood of participation in recreational interests, emotional and psychosocial difficulties, homelessness, criminality, isolation, relationship problems and health issues.
- School provides children with *much more* than academic instruction. The opportunity for children to participate in a range of social experiences provides an essential developmental foundation for them in terms of their social, emotional and academic learning. School can also provide a regular, consistent and safe environment for children.
- Children have the opportunity to develop positive relationships with school staff. Teachers can be particularly influential for children in facilitating their engagement in the school environment.
- Children's educational engagement should be a *major* practice goal.

Practice tip

What can case workers and carers do?

- Be positive about education and try to model and facilitate pro-education attitudes. Create a positive learning culture. Show enthusiasm!
- Enquire about a young person's schooling, their progress, their perception of their school and their level of connectedness with staff.
- Celebrate progress and achievements. Encourage, encourage, encourage....
- Discuss education as a pathway to great things, explore aspirations and dreams! Cultivate their motivation and aspirations.
- Help make learning fun!
- Find ways of learning that make sense or are relevant to the young person.
- Be an advocate for the young person.
- Have a variety of interesting books and other learning media available. Participate

with the young person in using the above. Read to and with the child.

- Explore a young person's interests and facilitate opportunities for participation in these interests.
- Become informed about what is available for the young person within and outside of school.
- Participate in and contribute to school events.
- Have a nice, quiet designated study space for the young person.
- Liaise with the school and meet promptly over any issues or potential difficulties. [Actively undertake planning and implement strategies in partnership.]
- Case workers are to: consider school choice and the importance of school stability; minimise disruptions; and advocate and arrange for appropriate support and assistance (specialised assistance may be required).

Assisting young people in education

Given the importance of education for children in out-of-home care, it is **imperative** to consider what can assist them to achieve to their potential and have positive, happy school experiences. A range of suggestions have been provided in the literature, as outlined below.

To begin with, Driscoll (2011) highlights that one of the challenges in working with in [out-of-home] care young people about their education is that some can be very autonomous and not receptive to assistance, due to their experiences of adults letting them down. Young people may also express an over-estimation of their academic ability as a means of managing poor self esteem (Kinard, 2001). These issues can make it quite challenging for those who want to assist young people with their education. Professionals, by necessity, do require good skills in engagement to manage these barriers.

Young people and others have offered suggestions on what can assist them with education and future aspirations, namely:

- someone who can positively fuel their motivation, tenacity and determination about school (Tilbury et al, 2009; Harker et al, 2004)
- the provision of encouragement and support from significant people (for example, carers, parents) and professionals within the school (Tilbury et al, 2009; Driscoll, 2011; Harker et al, 2004; Merdinger et al, 2005; Martin & Jackson, 2002); tangible and overt praise of accomplishments by carers can help (Harker et al, 2004)
- someone who can promote the value of education and has expectations about educational achievement (Harker et al, 2004)
- someone significant who is trustworthy, consistent, really invests in them and thinks they can achieve (Tilbury et al, 2009; Driscoll, 2011)
- opportunity for information provision, discussion of goals, plans and aspirations (Tilbury et al, 2009)

- a sense of security, stability of life which includes placement and housing (Tilbury et al, 2009; Driscoll, 2011; Harker et al, 2004)
- happy, positive and engaging school experiences (Tilbury et al, 2009)
- being able to have the opportunity to have ‘normal’ experiences like other young people (for example, participation in extra-curricular activities) without being singled out (Martin & Jackson, 2002; Hunt, 2000)
- having educated carers who understand the importance of education and strategies for achieving this (Martin & Jackson, 2002)
- easily accessible social workers who are available for advice and show a genuine interest in young people (Martin & Jackson, 2002)
- encouragement of regular school attendance (Martin & Jackson, 2002)
- cessation of negative stereotyping and discrimination of children in out-of-home care (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Some children have reported that unfair labels and opinions of them are held based on their in [out-of-home] care status (Martin & Jackson, 2002)
- increased support from teachers and to *all* children in [out-of-home] care, irrespective of academic level (Martin & Jackson, 2002) and
- greater financial and housing assistance in order to progress to higher education (Martin & Jackson, 2002).

Relationships and the encouragement of schooling is an important theme. “A network of supportive relationships which can provide a point of reference and a sense that somebody cares about them and their progress” is **imperative** (Martin and Jackson, 2002, p. 123). This can be accomplished by linking young people with consistent, supportive adults at school and at extra-curricular activities (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Higher achievers in Martin & Jackson’s (2002, p. 128) research underscored the importance of having at least one significant person who took an interest and mentored and encouraged them in their pursuits – a ‘guardian angel’. Undoubtedly, carers have a **critical** role. A high level of commitment and skill may be required by carers (Jackson & Ajayi, 2007). It has been suggested that carers’ capacity and resource requirements for providing an educationally positive environment for a child should be assessed (Maclean & Gunion, 2003).

O’Sullivan and Westerman (2007, p. 19) offer a number of recommendations on what may assist young people in out-of-home care. This encompasses suggestions for government, social workers and carers. For *government and local authorities* this includes consideration of the “number of placement moves that are made without first securing a school”, reporting on children who do not have a school for more than 20 days, setting targets for in [out-of-home] care children, access to a data base for professionals involved, agreements for storage of educational data. Suggestions for *social workers and foster carers* include being informed of the young person’s recent educational attainment; monitoring of achievement, carefully choosing the right school for a young person, limiting placement and school moves (especially in more senior schooling years), providing more support and assistance (for

example, tutoring) to children who have had a number of school and placement changes (or changes in schools during their senior years) to address any missed concepts.

Practice tip

What can schools do?

The Cole, O'Brien, Gadd, Ristuccia, Wallace & Gregory's (2005) report 'Helping traumatized children learn' provides a comprehensive discussion of what schools can do to assist children who have been harmed. Some examples of the strategies offered are outlined below.

- The school and staff being trauma sensitive.
- Recognising and understanding trauma manifestations on children's behaviour and learning.
- Providing opportunities within school for children to experience choice and empowerment.
- Working collaboratively with families and carers.
- Providing positive behaviour supports and understanding why a particular child may be displaying particular behaviours.
- Assisting children to learn how to manage and regulate their feelings and behaviours.
- Actively recognising a child's strengths and talents as a platform for success.
- Undertaking strategic planning at school for trauma-sensitive processes to be part of the classroom process.
- Intercepting bullying.
- Ensuring adequate training and support of staff.
- Collaborating and communicating with other relevant professionals.
- Recognising the challenges of trauma-sensitive approaches.
- Examining different learning approaches.
- Ensuring children receive timely and appropriate assessments.
- Establishing positive relationships with the child.
- Making plans for the child's educational needs.
- Linking children to relevant and enjoyable extra-curricula activities.

Wise et al's (2010) 'The Care-system Impacts on Academic Outcomes (CIAO) project' which entailed a survey of carers (n=199) and teachers (n=21) and in-depth case studies of young people (n=6) concluded with several recommendations of how education for children in out-of-home care could be improved. It was recommended that attention be given to strengthening the out-of-home care system, educational provision and cross-sectoral

linkages. Examples include¹ resourcing and emphasising education in the out-of home care system, training key people on trauma related impacts, improving mental health access, teacher training, provision of evidence-based alternative education, effectively identifying young people who drop out of school, improving the effectiveness of case management across systems and others.

Allen & Vacca (2010) suggest that a nurturing and cohesive school environment that facilitates the success of every student would be ideal. It is also recommended that insights and ideas could be canvassed from the success of the German system (that is, *Kinderhaus*) which entails substantial support and nurturing of these children by consistent, long-serving staff. Frederick and Goddard (2010) also stress the importance of school-based assessment and intervention. They recommend greater resourcing of professionals within the school environment.

Berlin et al (2011) advocate that assistance and interventions be employed while children *are at school and in [out-of-home] care*, to interrupt possible poor adult outcomes. Assistance should be for both academic/learning issues and self esteem (Kinard, 2001). Early intervention may also be advantageous. For example, Pears, Fisher & Bronz (2007) reported some improvements in the social competency and self-regulation of children in out-of-home care from participating in therapeutic playgroups. Merdinger et al (2005) also highlight (from their research with 216 former children in out-of-home care that were attending higher education) that factors that boost resilience were important, such as, stability at school, engaging school curricula, quality support and the opportunity to be part of pro-social activities and groups.

Hook and Courtney (2011, p. 1864) indicate the age of exiting [out-of-home] care may be worth considering in terms of support issues. "The number of years a youth remained in [out-of-home] care from age 18 to 21 is positively associated with employment and wages. This association is largely explained by youths' educational attainment". However, it has yet to be established whether extending the age that children remain in foster care will improve educational attainment (see Dworsky, 2010). Tangible assistance by way of housing, financial support, tuition waiver and scholarships may assist, given that some young people have reported that these issues can inhibit their progress (Dworsky, 2010). The importance of re-examining transition and post [out-of-home] care support to include educational, career and vocational support has also been emphasized (Tilbury et al, 2009).

In relation to financial assistance, Elliott (2009) discusses children's development accounts (CDAs), where money is put aside for higher education. These accounts can assist in addressing the concerns of young people about their financial capacity to undertake further education. These accounts can also have the additional advantage of indirectly raising expectations that a young person will continue on to higher education. This means that higher education becomes more realistic and doable to young people, rather than purely a dream or aspiration. While the evidence is not established on whether such initiatives may improve academic outcomes, "CDAs show promise for providing a way to help children that

¹ See Wise et al (2010, p. 57) for a detailed explanation of the recommendations and importance of viewing these in their entirety.

are at risk² for having academic difficulties make decisions about attending college that are in line with their aspirations. Increased expectations for college may lead to better performance in school” (Elliott, 2009; p. 283).

Practice tip

What can teachers do?

Downey’s (2007) comprehensive report on ‘Calmer Classrooms’ provides substantial information for teachers on the issues associated with responding to children who have been harmed. A number of practice recommendations (pgs. 18-25) for teachers are offered which are briefly summarised below.

- Establish a relationship with children who have been harmed.
- Learn about the child and develop an understanding of their history.
- Effectively manage your own emotional reactions – stay calm, do not get into conflictual power struggles.
- Use the phrase ‘I see you need help with’ when behaviour issues present (p. 19).
- Establish consistency, routine and boundaries.
- Carefully consider forms of behaviour management given the history of these children.
- Use calm directions and natural consequences with these children.
- Aim for inclusion in classroom activities not ‘time out’ (p. 20).
- Attempt gentle connection with the child when they appear disengaged or distracted.
- Offer choices rather than engaging in power battles.
- Praise and recognise improvements, accomplishments and good choices.
- Establish connection with carers, exchange information and communicate regularly.
- Be clear about your own role and professional boundaries.
- Have a plan for responding to challenging behaviour (safety, remaining calm, promote awareness and responsibility, consequences). [Also document these response strategies in the ESP and the case plan.]
- Recognise that other children in the classroom may require debriefing. If a child is hurt, discussion with parents may be required on the issues without compromising confidentiality.

Better coordination, collaboration and communication between systems (child welfare, justice, education, health, employment) and information exchange have also been advocated (Hook & Courtney, 2011; Francis, 2000; Mondy, 2009). One mechanism for involving key stakeholders is Education support plans (ESPs). ESPs or Personal education

² Elliott (2009) is referring to all children who may be vulnerable to not progressing to higher education, not just children in care.

plans (PEPs) are recognised as providing a means in which planning occurs about a young person's education needs. However, at times these plans have been criticised for being too inflexible, not always being relevant to particular children and not actively involving young people in their formulation (Hayden, 2005). This suggests that attention needs to be directed at addressing these potential limitations so as to capitalise on the opportunity for focused examination of children's educational needs. Tilbury et al also recommend that explicit consideration of a young person's engagement within school, and what may need to occur to facilitate his/her engagement, should be part of discussions.

In Queensland, the ESP aims to ensure that a child in out-of-home care is enrolled and participating in an educational program that meets their individual learning needs, maximises their educational potential and improves their well-being.

The ESP however, in and of itself, is only a planning tool. Rather, it is the ESP **process** that is more likely to benefit children and young people in out-of-home care, particularly where the school, the carers, the Child Safety Officer and the child or young person **jointly** develop and implement identified educational strategies, and regularly review and revise these strategies.

Mondy (2009) also highlights the importance of young people having access to relevant education and employment programs that suit their learning needs. At times alternative learning programs and sites may be required for young people.

Sullivan et al (2010) add that it is important to adequately prepare and train school and child welfare staff on the issues and barriers to education that may be pertinent to children in out-of-home care. Teachers may not have the knowledge, awareness or skills to respond effectively to the range of behaviours and issues that young people in [out-of-home] care may present (Wise et al, 2010). Actual programs and supports within schools may be minimal (Wise et al, 2010). Teachers may be unaware that a child is in out-of-home care, have minimal information about the background of the child, and have inadequate training and guidance on how to work with children in out-of-home care. Support for teachers' needs can be very lacking (Zetlin, MacLeod & Kimm, 2012). Some teachers, particularly those who are new and inexperienced may require guidance and supervision from more senior colleagues, and professional development on optimal ways of responding to the difficulties experienced by children in out-of-home care. These could include topics such as "the challenges that foster youth face...[and] skills to de-escalate a potential crisis on a school campus" (The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc, 2008, p. 16). Likewise, professionals working in early education may benefit from increased awareness (The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc, 2008).

Finally, resources to support education within placements are important. For example, a place to study and the provision of books and relevant equipment (Harker et al, 2004; Martin & Jackson, 2002).

Building educational success for young people involves the combination of support (for example, tutoring assistance), resources (their learning environment has the appropriate resources for them to utilise), engagement (activities and processes are used which

effectively engage them in learning) and modelling of desired behaviours (carers, staff, case workers model appropriate behaviours and actively encourage their learning (Mondy, 2009)).

Interventions for academic issues

There are few evidence-based interventions that have been reported in the research literature (Flynn et al, 2010; Trout et al, 2008; Forsmana & Vinnerljunga, 2012). As such, the information provided in the section below should be considered cautiously.

Flynn et al (2010) explored the effectiveness of tutoring by foster parents (n=68) by conducting a randomised field trial focused on reading and math of primary school children in out-of-home care (n=77). Forty-two children were randomly assigned to the tutoring, intervention group and 35 children in the waitlist, control group who were to receive tutoring one year later. The tutoring approach was based on “Michael Maloney’s (1998) Teach Your Children Well” which involves clear and well-structured teaching materials and rewarding of positive behaviour during learning tasks. Tasks involved supervision of computer tasks and listening to a child read out loud (Flynn et al, 2010, p. 268). Foster carers were trained in the above method. Carers provided 3 hours of tutoring to a child each week for 30 weeks. Flynn et al (2010) report that the children who received tutoring did make considerable improvement in reading and math.

Zetlin et al (2004) evaluated the impact of an education liaison worker whose purpose was to assist with resolving educational issues of children in out-of-home care. The person who was appointed as the liaison worker was a special education teacher from the education system. This worker liaised with a number of systems involved with a child over education issues (for example, child welfare staff, law). They reported “that having a liaison from the school district accessible as a resource for CWA workers to identify and address educational problems lead to positive results for foster youth in the treatment group in terms of academic achievement” (p. 427).

Forsmana and Vinnerljunga (2012) undertook a scoping review of interventions aimed to improve the academic achievements of in [out-of-home] care children (aged 6-15 years). They identified eleven studies on this issue. Besides the two studies that are reported above (i.e. Flynn et al, 2010 and Zetlin et al, 2004) which were included in their review, they identified seven other studies (9 in total including Flynn et al, 2010 and Zetlin et al, 2010 studies) which did yield some positive results/outcomes for the children involved. Although these studies have their limitations (minimal replications, small sample sizes, insufficient robustness to the research design) they do highlight *provisionally* some promising interventions for children in out-of-home care.

For example, tutoring programs which involve training carers or others, on particular instruction techniques and processes, may prove beneficial. Likewise, initiatives such as the Letterbox Club which entails sending to children in out-of-home care monthly packages of level-appropriate books, maths games and other interesting literacy materials can produce positive effects in reading and maths (Forsmana & Vinnerljunga, 2012; see also Winter et al, 2011; Griffiths, 2012). Also, individualised programs tailored to the young person’s particular learning needs (e.g. Kumon, (O’Brien & Rutland, 2008 or Helsingborg project) can produce

improvements (Forsmana & Vinnerljunga, 2012). What this scoping review highlighted was that with appropriate assistance and support, children in out-of-home care with educational difficulties can benefit from assistance (Forsmana & Vinnerljunga, 2012).

Key messages

The following suggestions have been offered in the literature on how to assist children in out-of-home care with their education.

- Consistent encouragement and support of young people in relation to their education.
- Access for young people to at least one person who is trustworthy, consistent and really invests in monitoring, advocating for and motivating them in relation to their education.
- Provision of a happy, positive and an engaging education environment for young people.
- Provision of appropriate assessment and assistance for young people for their educational needs.
- Encouragement of regular school attendance and increased support from teachers to all children in [out-of-home] care irrespective of academic level.
- Minimisation of the number of school changes for children in out-of-home care. For children who have had a number of school changes, additional support may be required to remedy any gaps.
- Employment of strategies which aim to boost young people's resilience.
- Improved monitoring and recording of school changes and absences of young people in [out-of-home] care.
- Education and support for teachers, case workers and other professionals involved with young people in [out-of-home] care regarding the impact of harm and educational issues.
- Improved communication, collaboration and coordination between all sectors involved in a child's life regarding education issues.
- ESPs need to be made meaningful to young people and strategies employed to better facilitate their participation and involvement.
- Employment of appropriate interventions to assist young people with attainment difficulties. Provisionally, evidence of the effectiveness of particular types of interventions is emerging – for example, tutoring programs, individualised assistance, liaison workers, letterbox club.
- Better support and assistance for young people who are transitioning from [out-of-home] care in order to progress education or employment.

Conclusion

The research clearly demonstrates that children and young people in out-of-home care face many additional educational challenges (than the non out-of-home care population) with respect to their educational needs and performance. The risks and reasons for educational challenges, are often multifaceted, including child factors, pre [out-of-home] care circumstances and in [out-of-home] care factors. Perhaps of most significance, is the reported lack of effective communication and planning among the professionals and carers involved in the child or young person's life about their educational attainment and needs, despite educational support planning in Queensland.

The research further identifies many practical strategies, able to be implemented by case workers, carers and teachers, to improve the educational opportunities and outcomes of children and young people in out-of-home care. Strategies of particular importance include involving the child or young person in educational planning and review processes wherever possible (in Queensland, this occurs through the ESP process) *and* proactively engaging all stakeholders (the child or young person, teachers, case workers and carers) in planning, implementation and review processes.

It is anticipated that this paper will promote the knowledge and understanding of all relevant stakeholders, with a view to creating more positive and successful educational experiences and outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care in Queensland.

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