



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Social Capital and Children in Care

**Citation for published version:**

Gayle, V & McClung, M 2014 'Social Capital and Children in Care' pp. 1-6.

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Author final version (often known as postprint)

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

© Gayle, V., & McClung, M. (2014). Social Capital and Children in Care.

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



# Social Capital and Children in Care

We have known for a long time that children in care underperform in schools. But perhaps focusing on outcomes is part of the problem. **Michele McClung** and **Vernon Gayle** report on research investigating the impact of social capital on children's attainment in schools and make some surprising discoveries.

---

In 2010, an important study was carried out into children in care which examined the factors that had an impact on the educational achievements of looked after children who lived both at home and away from home. The project developed, what is to date, the largest dataset of information for over 1400 care leavers and collected in-depth data on the care and education experiences of 30 looked after children and care leavers.

There were three main findings from the project. First, that the corporate parent has been unsuccessful in improving the educational achievement and life chances of looked after children and that this is, in part, a result of their approach to policy. Second, that looked after children are being disadvantaged as they continue to perform less well academically than the general school population. Third, that the relationship between key care factors and educational achievement shows that a specific combination of care factors determines the educational achievement of looked after children.

A legitimate starting point was to use social capital theory to help explain the low educational achievement of looked after children for various reasons. First, the government and policymakers have identified the development of social capital as a way of combating social exclusion. Second, social capital theory has been used to help explain the educational underachievement of groups of poorer children in the general school population. Third, it seemed appropriate to investigate whether the concept of social capital has anything original to offer in understanding the lives and outcomes of looked after children.

“ The theory identifies three forms of social capital connecting people together. These are bonding social capital, bridging social capital and linking social capital. ”

## Looked after children

---

The term ‘looked after children and young people’ is used to mean those looked after by the state, according to relevant national legislation which differs between England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This study looked at children in Scotland under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Children can be ‘looked after’ whilst remaining at their usual home, or ‘looked after away from home’ in residential care, or in foster care. The majority of children in Scotland are looked after at home.<sup>1</sup> When a child becomes looked after, it becomes the responsibility of the local authority to ensure that the care the child is receiving is better than the care given before the child became looked after. This includes the educational dimension of their care.

Whilst children in public care span a full range of educational potential, they do not in general perform as well as other children living in their local area. Even those looked after children who attend school regularly are unlikely to reach their educational potential, unless active measures are taken to compensate for earlier disadvantages.<sup>2</sup> Four underlying causes for the educational underachievement of looked after children have been identified.<sup>3</sup> These are:

1. Placement instability
2. Poor school attendance
3. Lack of support and encouragement from significant adults in their lives
4. Lack of adequate support with emotional, mental and physical health and wellbeing.

As a consequence, looked after children leave school with fewer qualifications, are more likely to be unemployed, more likely to be homeless and generally more likely to face social exclusion throughout their lives.

## What is social capital?

---

Social capital is potentially a useful concept for attempting to make sense of a range of outcomes, processes and social institutions, and part of its appeal is the way in which it helps us to think about these aspects in new or innovative ways. The theory identifies three forms of social capital connecting people together. These are bonding social capital, bridging social capital and linking social capital.

It is argued that the three types of social capital will produce different outcomes. Social capital helps in bonding fragmented social life, in the bridging of communities to contacts beyond their immediate environment and in the linking of people to formal structures and agencies that they may need for help with opportunities and advancement.

Furthermore, a person’s social capital is affected by trust.<sup>4</sup> Trust is defined as the expectation within a community for regular, honest, co-operative behaviour based on community shared norms. There are two types of trust identified by the theory. First, there is the trust we have for individuals we know. Second, there is the trust we have for individuals we don’t know in the community.

## Looked after children and social capital

---

Children live out their daily lives in a number of domains. These include domains in family settings, school settings, within their peer group, in their neighbourhood and through their leisure time interests and activities. For looked after children, this also includes their care setting. However, social capital for children is primarily developed through relationships with family, carers, friends and with people they interact with at school.

### Family life and placement life

Children first start to develop their social capital at home with their parents and immediate family. For those children looked after away from home, they also develop social capital

in their care placements, although their experience at home may also serve as the foundation to their development of social capital. Children develop bonding social capital through their relationships with families, carers and friends. This type of social capital is valuable for children as it helps them build a sense of shared identity and provides them with security. Families that are rich in social capital are families that have strong family ties and communicate well with each other.

Making the transition from bonding to bridging social capital may not necessarily lead to positive outcomes for all children. Our empirical evidence demonstrates that the lives of looked after children are not necessarily characterised by positive interaction with their families and carers, nor do they always live in environments where they are able to develop trust with family and carers. Many looked after children in our study had unstable lives and often lived in families, or had lived in families, where there was a history of neglect, abuse, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, imprisonment, unemployment and deprivation.

For example, 28 per cent of children in our study had become looked after as a direct result of neglect or abandonment, 25 per cent had become looked after as a result of school exclusion or non attendance and 20 per cent became looked after as a direct consequence of their inappropriate behaviour. Others lived in a number of care settings resulting in disruption to their lives. For example, just under half (47.5 per cent) of the children in our study who had been looked after away from home at some point had more than two placements and one in ten (10.7 per cent) had more than five.

A significant proportion of looked after children reported not receiving support or encouragement to do well at school from their families or carers. Just over one quarter (27 per cent) of children reported that they had no support at home or felt that there wasn't anyone they could talk to. This was especially true for children who were looked after in a residential setting. A large percentage (43 per cent) also said that no one where they lived asked them about school, or that no one was proud of their achievements. We therefore theorise that these experiences do not reflect traditional family life in the UK

and mean that looked after children are generally not able to develop the same level of bonding social capital as other children who are not looked after. This not only affects their ability to develop bridging and linking social capital, but it also affects their ability to achieve academically. It has been claimed that the type of social capital families offer varies because of their own history and identity.<sup>5</sup> This might help explain why looked after children develop different levels of social capital.

Our empirical evidence shows that the primary reason for becoming looked after and the age at which a child first becomes looked after impacts on the care setting they are placed in (i.e. looked after at home or away from home). From this, we were able to discover that children in foster care who become looked after when they are under 12 years of age, as a result of parental behaviour, had the most enriched lives and the greatest capacity to develop their bonding social capital, although not to the same extent as children in the general population. This might be because the support they get by living

in a family setting helps compensate for their experiences prior to becoming looked after and that this creates a more stable family environment. In comparison, children looked after at home or in residential care, who mostly became looked after when they were 12 years old or over as a result of their own behaviour, do not usually live in supportive and stable environments. Overall, children looked after in foster care were the most academically successful group in care.

#### Schooling

For a child to succeed in education, their social capital has to be developed and resourced, not only through their relationships with family, carers and friends, but through their relationships with people at school. This is why the relationship that children have with teachers and fellow pupils at school is important for the development of their social capital. Even if a child does not achieve a high academic level, they can still derive considerable support from positive school experiences, especially since school is often a bridge into other community resources such as clubs and activities.

Our evidence highlights the fact that looked after children have a more disjointed and negative experience at school than other children have. They were also found to have more chance of being excluded from school. Indeed, 80 per cent of looked after children in our study were excluded at least once, compared to less than one per cent in the general school population.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, looked after children said teachers expected less of them – 23 per cent of the children in our study reported that teachers expected less of them

because they were looked after, while 20 per cent reported being treated different by other children at their school. Additionally, almost half (43 per cent) of all of the children who participated in the study had experienced bullying. Consequently, the experience that these children had at school may have impacted on their development of social capital and on their ability to attain academically.

If we accept that children looked after in foster care have better access to social networks, it is unsurprising that they perform significantly better academically than all other looked after children. In Scotland currently, a significant measure of literacy and numeracy levels in secondary schools is the percentage of children attaining qualifications in English and maths at SCQF level 3 or above. As Figure 1 shows, less than one in ten children looked after at home (6.7 per cent) or in residential care (8.6 per cent) attained maths or English at this level, compared with just under half (42.9 per cent) of those in foster care attaining both English and maths. At this point, it is worth noting that 91 per cent of the general school population attain English and maths at SCQF level 3 or above.<sup>7</sup> This is a crucial finding, as English and maths at SCQF level 3 is often a requirement to gain entry to low level employment and foundation level college courses. Our results demonstrate that children looked after at home are the least likely of all looked after children to gain entry to either college or employment.

“ Even if a child does not achieve a high academic level, they can still derive considerable support from positive school experiences, especially since school is often a bridge into other community resources such as clubs and activities. ”

**Figure 1: English and maths at SCQF level 3 by Placement Type**

SCQF Level 3 or above in English and maths		At home	Foster care	Residential care	Total children
	No.	55	103	30	188
	%	29.3%	54.8%	16.0%	100%

Despite the general findings reported in Figure 1 above, further multivariate investigation shows that placement type is not the primary factor in determining educational success.

**Figure 2: Estimated Probability**

Note: the parent/child column refers to whether a child is looked after as a consequence of their behaviour or their parents'

1 or More at SCQF Level 4 or Above			Probability
Foster care	Child	Under 12	0.72
Foster care	Child	Over 12	0.52
Foster care	Parent	Under 12	0.81
Foster care	Parent	Over 12	0.63
Residential care	Child	Under 12	0.55
Residential care	Child	Over 12	0.34
Residential care	Parent	Under 12	0.67
Residential care	Parent	Over 12	0.45
At home	Child	Under 12	0.49
At home	Child	Over 12	0.28
At home	Parent	Under 12	0.61
At home	Parent	Over 12	0.39

In Figure 2 above, we have reported the estimated probability that a looked after child with certain characteristics will attain one or more awards at SCQF level 4 or above. This approach helps us to compare groups more easily.<sup>8</sup> Our empirical findings demonstrate that overall, children in foster care are more likely to attain than those looked after at home or in residential care. Age on becoming looked after (under 12 or over 12) also impacts on this, as does the reason for becoming looked after (child or parental reasons). In our model, we demonstrate that the least successful child was a child looked after at home who became looked after when they were 12 years old or over as a result of their own behaviour (estimated probability of 28 per cent attaining one or more at SCQF level 4 or above).

The most successful child at this level was a child looked after in foster care who became looked after before they were 12 years of age, as a result of parental behaviour (estimated probability of 81 per cent attaining one or more at SCQF level 4 or above).

We note that children in residential care who became looked after when they were under 12 years of age, as a consequence of the behaviour of their parents, performed better than children in foster care who became looked after when they were over 12 years of age, irrespective of whether their behaviour or the behaviour of their parents resulted in them becoming looked after (estimated probabilities of 67 per cent, 52 per cent and 63 per cent accordingly). Another significant finding is that children looked after at home, who became looked after when they were under 12 years old, as a result of the behaviour of their parents, performed very similarly to children in foster care who became looked after when they were over 12 years of age, as a result of the behaviour of their parents (estimated probabilities of 61 per cent and 63 per cent accordingly). This raises questions over whether it is children who have specific key factors when they come into care, resulting in them being placed in specific destinations, that can be associated with educational achievement and the propensity to develop social capital, rather than the

experience that children have when they are looked after at home, in residential or foster care influencing their academic achievement and accumulation of social capital.

## Summary and conclusion

---

In summary, social capital, linking social capital and trust – in this paper, social capital theory – has been used to explore the low educational achievement of looked after children. It has also been used to consider the differing levels of achievement for children looked after at home and children looked after away from home in foster care and residential care. However, it needs to be recognised that social capital theory is not without its critics.<sup>i</sup>

The development of social capital is key in understanding young people's educational performance. We therefore conclude that our empirical findings have implications for those with parental responsibilities for looked after children (i.e. the corporate parent). First, it needs to be recognised that the looked after population is not a homogenous group. We would argue that the corporate parent needs to further consider how to improve the life chances of specific groups of looked after children to ensure that they are, at least, equal to those of all other looked after children. An emerging feature of the empirical data is that being looked after at home is a distinctive experience that has specific consequences for educational achievement. We strongly recommend that in future, researchers take care to recognise that this is a distinctive group of children in care.

Michele McClung is Principal Officer of Planning, Performance and Research within Education Services at Glasgow City Council. Vernon Gayle is Professor of Sociology and Social Statistics, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh.  
Contact: michele.mcclung@glasgow.gov.uk

## References

1. Scottish Government. (2005a) Childcare Statistic Publication Notice – Children's and Social Work Statistics 2004-05. Edinburgh: HMSO.
2. Jackson, S. (1999) Educational Success for Looked After Children: The social worker's Responsibility. *Practice*, 10:4, pp47-57.
3. Jackson, S. & McParlin. (2006) The Education of Children in Care. *The Psychologist*. Vol 19. No 2. pp90-93.
4. Maxwell, D. Sodha, S. & Stanley, K. (2006) An Asset Account for Looked After Children. London: Institute for Public Policy Research.
5. ONS. (2001) Social Capital: A Review of the Literature. London: ONS.
6. Baron, S. Schuller, T. & Field, J. (eds.) (2000) *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
7. Schools and Social Capital Network. (2005) *Social Capital Theory: A Review*. Scotland: Applied Education Research Scheme
8. Scottish Government. (2005b) Childcare Statistic Publication Notice – Exclusions from School 2003-04. Edinburgh: HMSO.
9. Scottish Government. (2012) SQA Pre –Appeal Exam Results 2010/11. Edinburgh: HMSO.
10. Gayle, V. Berridge, D. & Davies, R.B. (2003) *Econometric Analysis of the Demand for Higher Educations*. London. DFES.
11. Morrow, V. (1999) Conceptualising social capital in relation to the well-being of children and young people: a critical review. *The Sociological Review*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
12. Schuller, T. & Field, J. (2000) *Social Capital: A Review and Critique* In: Baron, S. Schuller, T. & Field, J. (eds.) *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.