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Three strong women: from care to university

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Abstract

The poor educational 'outcomes' of looked after children have been a matter of increasing concern for a number of years (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001). The very low achievement of the average young person in care has been an issue at government level, with demands being made for improvements in this area (HMI & SWSI 2001, Scottish Executive 2003). In England, Wales and Scotland the government has set academic achievement targets at secondary school level for children looked after by local authorities. It has also required that all schools appoint a 'designated teacher' to act as a 'champion' for all looked after children in their school. However, the progress of looked-after children into further education (FE) and higher education (HE) has not received the same attention from the government, especially in Scotland.

Keywords

Residential care, education, Scotland

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Introduction

The poor educational 'outcomes' of looked after children have been a matter of increasing concern for a number of years (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001). The very low achievement of the average young person in care has been an issue at government level, with demands being made for improvements in this area (HMI & SWSI 2001, Scottish Executive 2003). In England, Wales and Scotland the government has set academic achievement targets at secondary school level for children looked after by local authorities. It has also required that all schools appoint a 'designated teacher' to act as a 'champion' for all looked after children in their school. However, the progress of looked-after children into further education (FE) and higher education (HE) has not received the same attention from the government, especially in Scotland. In England, however, over the last four years, a major research project has been following the progress of a cohort of young people from care who have entered university (Jackson, Ajayi & Quigley, 2005). The research is identifying the issues facing young people from a care background and monitoring the experience of the group as they progress through university. It is also examining what supports the young people should be receiving from their local authorities in terms of their responsibilities as 'corporate parents'. The study by Martin and Jackson (2002) also identified the factors which assisted looked after children and young people to achieve educational success. In Scotland, while there has been a concerted push by central government to improve the

school education of children in care by requiring local authorities to report on attainment at Standard Grade, there has been no similar concern about the progression of young people to further and higher education and how best they might be prepared, encouraged and supported.

This paper will contribute to this debate by seeking to explore some of the factors that might make for educational success by looking at the experiences of three young women who have been in care in Scotland and who have since progressed to university. By letting these young women tell their own stories it is hoped that practitioners and researchers will gain a helpful insight into the crucial factors for them as individuals.

Approach

This paper quotes extensively from interviews with three students who have spent a number of their teenage years in care. One interview was with Lindsay (aged 20) studying on a university-based nursing course. The other interview was with Jean (aged 26) and Toni (aged 21) who were halfway through social work courses at universities in the west of Scotland. Two of the three women have been active in advocacy organisations of young people in care, and have spoken publicly about their own experiences. In this article, however, names have been changed.

The interviews focused on these three women's experiences of care, their experiences of school and the support they received for education while in care, and what had encouraged them to aim for university. The interviews also intended to shed light on aspects of resilience that writers such as Gilligan (2000, 2001) and Daniel (2003) have promoted in recent years; for example the importance of 'mentoring' and the way that success in recreational activities as well as formal school success are 'protective factors' which may increase the capacity of a young person to cope with the adversities of life.

It has long been acknowledged that social workers and all those involved in the care of children and young people should pay serious attention to what children and young people have to say about their care experiences. A recent *Who Cares? Scotland* study (Boyce, 2002) indicated that many young people had positive attitudes towards education but did not always find support from their carers. This paper strives to present the personal stories of these three women about their care and educational experiences, and their views about what was important for them. By using extensive quotation to illustrate the highlighted themes, it presents their real voices.

Findings

Brief biographies of the interviewees

Lindsay (currently a student nurse) lived in a children's home with her brothers for about four years from the age of thirteen to sixteen, when she moved into 'supported lodgings'. Jean (currently a student social worker) had just two years in care, living in a children's home until the age of sixteen when she went to live with her father for a few months before returning to her home town and living with the family of her best friend. Toni (also

a student social worker) is one of three sisters and she lived in two foster homes for a total of four years before moving into supported lodgings for a further two years.

Lindsay and Toni attended school regularly and were both active in out-of-school activities and enjoyed generally good school experiences and success in exams. Jean however, by her own account, was a persistent truant for most of her last year or so of school. She did not gain any school qualifications and worked for a few years after leaving care at the age of 16, before going into further education.

Experiences of school and support for education while in care

While Toni and Lindsay had positive experiences of school, Jean did not share this.

So it was good in a way that I was still at my high school, my guidance teachers were great, the school were very supportive, they knew what was going on; (Toni).

I played a lot of sports, did a lot of music and drama and things like that. That was the full point of me going to school was to do my sports and my PE and my music, that was what I enjoyed about it; (Lindsay).

For the first while I went to my old school by taxi and then I think it must have been after the term finished I moved schools to the high school in the town where the unit was, and then I didn't go and that was it..., I didn't actually feel that I went to the school ever. I think I can remember being in a couple of the classes but I can't actually remember it ever being a significant part of my life. It was more an inconvenience; (Jean).

It is interesting to note that while Lindsay and Toni stayed at their previous school when they went into care, Jean had to move to a new school.

Both Toni and Lindsay reported having good friends at school who were a positive influence on them, while Jean reported that her friends were not school attendees.

Yeah - I think I had a good group of friends as well, you know a few of them were really good at school and I think they were a good kind of role model for me; (Toni).

Yeah, I kept a lot of my friends from school. I lost friends when I first went into care, but later found out as I got older that they weren't really friends in the first place. I made a lot of new friends who accepted me for who I was; (Lindsay).

We did meet people from the school who didn't go to school, so we would go along to, like, empty houses and do what you did, which would be drinking or whatever, taking drugs and things like that; (Jean).

It appears that the group of friends with whom the young women associated had real consequences for them, in terms of school attendance.

The role of interests and activities at school was one factor which contributed to the positive experiences of Lindsay and Toni.

We had our netball team training on Tuesday and they played on a Wednesday. So we had that after school. We used to do our yearly concert as well; (Lindsay).

I did really well at English because I always loved English, so I did really well at the classes. I liked doing gymnastics after school as well; (Toni).

Another recurring theme was the encouragement of supportive people from a range of areas in their lives.

I got a lot of support from [residential] staff. I got a lot of...not praise as such, but a lot of constant reminders that I was doing well in the activities I was involved in, like my sports; (Lindsay).

My older sister, she did really well at school so she was also like a role model as well. I had a lot of support from the teachers, so I think that's what kept me going; (Toni).

I think I was quite lucky because I have had the same friends since like primary 7 and even though I was away and came back and things like that I still kept in contact with them; (Jean).

One point which emerged from the interviews was that while Lindsay and Toni had good attendance at school prior to their reception into care, Jean had disrupted attendance.

Yeah. But prior to going into care I had really poor attendance anyway; (Jean).

Lindsay and Toni both left school with Standard Grades and Highers, while Jean left with no qualifications.

Factors which encouraged them to aim for university

At the time of the interviews, all three young women were progressing well through higher education. One feature apparent in each of them was their own sense that they believed that they had the ability to tackle a university course. Each of the young women had a strong sense of self-belief.

When I first moved into the children's unit, I was really quiet and, because of my situation, I got a lot of hassle and when I was in care, you get kind of bullying I would say. You need to be able to look after yourself. You need to learn to be able to speak up otherwise you just get walked all over. It made me a stronger person, and it made me realise that in order to go anywhere, then you need to speak up, you can't just sit back; (Lindsay).

I remember when my sister bumped into my social worker just a couple of years ago and had said to her I was doing social work, she looked surprised and I think

she said 'Oh, she always wanted to save the world.' I think I had always been that way inclined; (Toni).

Aye, I think I'm quite strong. I don't get knocked down easily, I don't know if I'm over-confident, but I think I'm strong. And for all that the teachers had said, 'No, you're not capable.' But I always knew; (Jean).

The importance of key people and supportive relationships in encouraging support on the road to university was an important theme which emerged.

I had staff members that encouraged me from day one because I am not particularly thick, I'm not daft and I knew that there were two roads that I could have taken; (Lindsay).

I can relate it directly to a key worker who I had for a period of time. I was a member of a girls club before I went into care and during the time in care we went on holiday to Malta as a group of girls and my key worker. My key worker was different, do you know what I mean, she wasn't like the rest of the workers. She was like, I don't know, alternative maybe. She was really positive; (Jean).

There was a woman especially, who took me under her wing. She was very positive, really interested and you know, she was kind of proud of what I had come from and what I was doing, so that was kind of inspiring; (Toni).

One surprising aspect was how social workers were perceived. They were not seen as supports at any stage and were sometimes even viewed as impediments to the progress of the young women.

I remember saying to my social worker that I was going to be a social worker and she just kind of laughed and made it kind of sound like, 'No you'll never do that'; (Toni).

I only remember having had three Panels in my life, one directly after I was taken into care, one a few weeks later and then one leaving and that was it. That was the whole involvement of the social worker. There was no social worker ever; (Jean).

My social worker and landlady at the time were not encouraging me to go away to Pakistan. They were saying, you know it's dangerous. You know you don't want to do this, but they did tell me that if I did go away for a year then I wouldn't get any support when I got back, that would be my whole leaving care services finished; (Toni).

Discussion

The stories and circumstances of these three young women vary in a number of ways. However, one area in which they had similarities was in their own self-belief. This self-belief saw them through problems when they were moving out of residential care and

trying to find their way into higher education. For example, two out of the three had extremely difficult circumstances on starting university. One of them found it very difficult to access any financial support from the social work department, despite making considerable efforts and having advocates trying to help her. The strength of character and influence of their strong personalities resonates with the studies on resilience, where a positive outlook is often identified as a key protective factor (Daniel, Wassell & Gilligan, 1999).

One area of note is that birth parents played very little part in their lives, and all of them had strong bonds, and contact with siblings. In Toni's case, her mother was dead and in the other cases while there was some parental contact, there was clearly no plan or desire to return to parents or birth family. Toni's mother, however, though dead, was still a significant figure for her. At one point in the interview, she reported that her mother was 'a good role model' and that part of her drive to achieve was 'to make her mum proud'.

All of the women had a degree of stability in their placements. According to Lees, 'educational stability and placement stability are closely interrelated' (Lees, 2001, p. 275). Lindsay spent her two years in care in the same children's home, although she did leave very soon after her 16th birthday and did not receive any further social work support. She did not seem to need it and found considerable practical and emotional support from her friend's mother. Toni had two foster placements and although the latter one was experienced by her as extremely emotionally deficient, she was expected and enabled to attend school. Jean had a relatively long placement in a residential unit, staying for four years and then progressing to supported lodgings provided by the social work department. She was not pushed towards fostering, most likely because she was part of a sibling group, and she benefited from constant encouragement from the residential staff.

One common factor was that other sources of support, crucial to their positive personal and educational development, were available to them. This was also highlighted by Martin and Jackson (2002):

The most frequent advice given by our sample was to emphasize the necessity for a child to receive positive encouragement from significant others. Seventy-four per cent of participants stressed the vital importance of residential carers, foster carers or parents showing an active interest in their education and giving them support and encouragement to do well... This might seem obvious. However, many of the participants remarked on the exceptionally low expectations and lack of interest in education among the staff in the residential homes where they had lived; (Martin & Jackson, 2001, p. 124).

All three women in this study report good friendships with peers, and the presence of one supportive adult (who was neither family nor social work personnel) who helped their transition out of care and into university. Once again, this highlights the importance of supportive relationships as protective factors in the positive outcomes for young people in adversity (Daniel, Wassell & Gilligan, 1999).

In terms of social work department staff, the encouragement of residential staff was also important in underpinning their ambitions. It is unfortunately noteworthy that social

workers were not significant supports in any of the experiences of the young women and at least one social worker was experienced as dismissive when the young person expressed her ambitions.

Their experience of school attainment and their routes to higher education were varied; Toni and Lindsay had positive school experiences and achieved a good level of qualifications, while Jean truanted throughout her last year at school and left without a single qualification. However, Jean seems to have been aware that 'she could do it' and after a few years made rapid progress, gaining entry qualifications through FE colleges and subsequently embarking upon her degree. At the time of the interview, this former truant and school drop-out was on her way to her second degree.

Conclusion

It was through my teaching and research for SIRCC that I got to know, and became impressed by, these three young women, and wanted to find out what they thought had been important in enabling and encouraging them to go to university. It is my conviction that Lindsay, Toni and Jean are all outstanding individuals, people of compassion and enthusiasm, who are able to provide a great deal of inspiration. I am sure they will make a significant contribution to their chosen professions, as well as having much to say to young people in care and those who work with them. I hope that child care professionals will learn from their stories and will be left with the same encouraging and positive impressions as I was of these three strong women.

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