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Looked After Children and Further Education in Scotland: a briefing paper

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Introduction

This paper was originally written as Chapter 2 of a forthcoming research report, *Supporting Care Leavers in Further Education* (SFC, 2011). The chapter has been made available in this free-standing form as a briefing paper to explain the wider context for supporting looked after young people and care leavers in FE. The authors gratefully acknowledge assistance provided by Viv Boyle of Fife Council, and formerly of Scottish Government, in clarifying current policy in relation to supporting looked after young people and care leavers.

The paper begins with a brief account of the Scottish education system and the further education college sector in particular. This account is set within the wider policy context of providing opportunities for some of the least academically qualified school leavers. The paper continues with an overview of looked after young people and care leavers and current policy, particularly as it relates to post-school opportunities. The remainder of the paper is allocated to a more detailed discussion of the research evidence in relation to the education of looked after young people and the importance of the further education sector in collaborating with schools and local authorities.

The paper explores in particular the difficulties faced by many young people as they transition from being looked after to their experience of life after care. Important questions are raised about the role of a college education in the process of transitioning from care settings. There is a growing literature exploring the views of looked after young people and care leavers about what constitutes success and how their ambitions are taken seriously and encouraged.

The Scottish education system and the college sector

The Scottish education system is different in origins and structure from the systems in the other UK administrations. Education has always been administered within Scotland and since the introduction of devolved government in 1999 oversight of the entire education system, from pre-school to college and university provision, has been the responsibility of Scottish Ministers who are in turn accountable to the Scottish Parliament.

Most qualifications gained by students at the secondary school stage and in further education colleges are accredited and awarded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)¹. The SQA has devised a means of comparing the levels of and credit-rating different qualifications, known as the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). One use of the Framework is to compute what is known as a 'tariff score', arrived at by adding the credit ratings of awards as a fairer means of comparison where students gain academic and vocational qualifications of different types.

¹ See: www.sqa.org.uk

At the time of writing there were 42 further education colleges in Scotland, two of which had indicated plans to merge. Although this total includes specialist centres, such as the three agricultural and land-based colleges, the national centre for Gaelic language and culture, and an adult education residential centre, most FE colleges are effectively community colleges providing a range of courses in general education, vocational preparation and access to higher education. The college sector operates within a complex web of relationships – with schools and universities, with local authorities, voluntary organisations, community groups and local employers – and it is important in relation to strategic planning for lifelong learning and employability skills, particularly since around one third of students live in Scotland’s most socially deprived areas (Thomson, 2008). The colleges are also geographically optimally located to facilitate participation by their target population, with almost 80% of people in areas of high social deprivation living within a four mile radius of a college (Raab & Storkey, 2001). One study of care leavers in higher education in the UK, the *By Degrees* project, found that 40% of the study population had previously attended an FE college, suggesting that colleges provide an important progression route for looked after young people (Jackson, Ajayi, & Quigley, 2005).

The colleges are collectively supported and represented by Scotland’s Colleges, an umbrella organisation which aims to provide strategic direction within the sector, to act as a bridge in discussions about the contribution of FE to Scotland’s economic development with the Lifelong Learning Directorate of the Scottish Government, the SFC and other interest groups, and to contribute to continuing professional development of the sector’s workforce². Scotland’s Colleges, therefore, has an important role in promoting the principles embodied in the Buttle UK Quality Mark for Colleges.

In 2009-2010 there were 347,357 students enrolled in Scottish FE colleges, of which 55% were female, 5.3% were from non-white ethnic groups and 15% had a disability or additional support needs. Most students (95%) were enrolled on award-bearing courses. While most enrolments were on further education programmes, a small but non-trivial proportion (14%) of students were enrolled on higher education programmes leading to awards at higher national certificate and diploma (HNC/D) levels. It is this aspect of FE provision which makes available additional opportunities for non-traditional students to progress to degree-level courses, in-house³ through validation agreements with a university, through articulation agreements with the newer, ‘post-1992’, universities, or by using their awards as entry qualifications to courses in older universities, with or without advance standing by credit transfer arrangements. In fact most such progression is to post-1992 institutions, a fact which some observers have described as simply maintaining educational inequalities (Field, 2004).

² See: www.scotlandscollleges.ac.uk

³ For example, Edinburgh’s Telford College launched a BA (Hons) in Youth Work, in collaboration with Napier University, Edinburgh: <http://www.ed-coll.ac.uk/news/showNews.aspx?NewsID=98>

In terms of qualifications, higher education accounted for 23% of awards gained in colleges, compared with 48% of awards of further education qualifications; the remaining third of awards were accounted for by National Units (also offered in schools), special needs programme completions and ‘non-recognised’ awards. More detailed statistical information about FE provision is available in the SFC report, *Scotland’s Colleges: A Baseline Report for Academic Year 2009-10* (Scottish Funding Council, 2011).

Transitions from school to college and work

Further education colleges are important players in relation to three aspects of Scottish Government policy aimed at young people: More Chances, More Choices (MCMC); the reformed curriculum for children aged 3-18 (Curriculum for Excellence or CfE); and 16+ Learning Choices.

The More Chances, More Choices policy articulated the then government’s commitment to reducing the proportion of young people most at risk of becoming disengaged socially and economically, the so-called NEET (not in education, employment or training) group (Scottish Executive, 2006b). Approximately one young person in seven in Scotland falls into this category, a proportion that is higher than in most other parts of the UK⁴. Care leavers are particularly at risk of being NEET. The table below, taken from the survey of destinations carried out by Skills Development Scotland nine months after the school leaving date, shows the significantly higher risk looked after children have of not being in a ‘positive destination’. Considered in another way, the table also shows the comparative advantage of being looked after away from home compared to being looked after while remaining in the family home (Scottish Government, 2010c).

Table 1: Proportions of school leavers in positive destinations

| | 2008-09 (%) | 2009-10 (%) |
|------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Looked after at home | 49.6 | 49.9 |
| Looked after away from home | 64.1 | 65.4 |
| Not looked after | 86.3 | 87.5 |

The Scottish Government expects that its MCMC policy will be addressed by the entitlements conferred by the Senior Phase of CfE and the 16+ Learning Choices strategy. The Senior Phase of CfE takes place in the final stages of compulsory education and beyond, normally around age 15-18 (Scottish Government, 2008b). The aim of the Senior Phase is that all young people should have the opportunity to extend their education, build up a

⁴ Source: The Poverty Site: <http://poverty.org.uk/index.htm>

portfolio of qualifications, develop skills and have clear, supported pathways to the next stage. Colleges are regarded by government as vital to this aspect of CfE and they are expected to help young people to experience a smooth transition from schools.

The *16+ Learning Choices: Policy and Practice Framework* confirms young people's entitlement to the Senior Phase of CfE and highlights looked after young people and care leavers as a priority group facing significant barriers to learning (Scottish Government, 2010d). The Framework outlines the responsibilities for key partners. For colleges this means:

- Working with local partnerships to ensure the supply of core-funded provision (in relation to type, level and timetabling) matches demand from young people, including those who are attending college for part of their S5/S6 school curriculum, and those going to college for post-16 learning;
- Ensuring learning opportunities are available on a flexible entry basis;
- Ensuring young people's support needs are met in order to improve retention and progression.

The Scottish Government invited the national career guidance agency, Skills Development Scotland, to develop a 16+ Learning Choices Data Hub (expected to go live in autumn 2011)⁵. The idea of the Hub is to have a management information system to match the needs of individual young people and potential learning choices.

A review by Scotland's Colleges considered the learning and teaching challenges facing FE colleges (Scotland's Colleges, 2008). The report recommended that colleges should provide experiences 'regarded by learners as unique to their circumstances, needs and aspirations by building on college responsiveness to the diverse needs of the learner population, on the greater attention being paid to the needs of specific groups and on the student-centred traditions of the sector' (ibid., p.2). These experiences include opportunities to gain vocational qualifications and also introductory courses to acquaint students with college life, develop core skills in literacy, numeracy and IT, and build softer skills in self-presentation, time management and independence. The report pointed out the importance of having skilled staff and providing good continuing professional development opportunities. In relation to looked after young people and care leavers the report highlights the importance of collaborating with local authorities to improve the educational attainment of this group.

The principal role of colleges is in assisting young people to gain vocationally relevant qualifications but even for these students, and particularly for some students who have been socially and educationally disadvantaged, there is an equally important function in providing a safe haven in which to form good relationships, to feel happy and to develop personal confidence. This point is supported by evidence from a small study of 700 learners

⁵ See: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/edandtrainingforyoungple/16pluslc/data>

in 10 colleges which found that while most learners cited improved opportunities as the main reason for entering a college, on closer examination the learners wanted more than access to a better job (Connelly & Halliday, 2001). The students wanted their learning to connect to life as they lived it locally. The subject content mattered less to these learners than the relationships forged with other learners and college staff and the impact that these relationships had on the quality of their life.

Looked after children in Scotland

In 2010 there were almost 16,000 children looked after by Scottish local authorities, representing just over one percent of the child and youth population. This figure was a four percent increase on the previous year and the number has been increasing since 2001 (Scottish Government, 2011).

Approximately 40% of these children are looked after at home, 30% are in foster care, 20% in kinship care and 10% in residential care. These proportions have remained relatively stable in recent years but they represent a change when compared with earlier years. In 1976, for example, a higher proportion of children were looked after in residential settings – 36% compared with 22% in foster care (Scottish Government, 2011). The proportion in formally recognised kinship care placements with relatives has also grown in recent years. These proportions are also different in different countries, though it is not easy to compare care regimes internationally. One study compared five countries in Europe and showed that higher proportions of children were cared for in residential settings in Denmark and Hungary, while foster care was more prominent in Sweden and family based care was more commonly used in England and Spain (Hojer, et al., 2008).

Children and young people are looked after for varying lengths of time, with more than two-thirds having been looked after for one or more years. The care history of a child may include more than one episode of care with return to the family home in between, or movement between different care settings.

Looked after children face a range of challenges that are potentially damaging for their education. These challenges include moves of placement and school, absence and exclusion from school, time away from formal education, inadequate support for learning difficulties and lack of encouragement (Connelly, McKay, & O'Hagan, 2003; Voice of the Child in Care, 2004). As a group, looked after children and young people face considerable hardships which may affect their capacity to lead satisfying lives in adulthood. These issues include poor mental and physical health, drug and alcohol addiction, experience of homelessness, poor familial and work relationships, involvement in criminal activity and teenage pregnancy (Cocker & Scott, 2006; McLeod, 2007; Scott & Hill, 2006).

The looked after child's journey through the care system is not always a smooth one and may feature periods in different kinds of setting, returns to the family home and placement breakdowns. On the other hand, stable placements lead to better outcomes in education, career and relationships and improved wellbeing (Biehal, Clayden, Stein, & Wade, 1995; Meltzer, Lader, Corbin, Goodman, & Ford, 2004).

The process of leaving care can also be characterised by discontinuity, leading to insecurity. Young people who are looked after move to living independently at a younger age than is typical for their non-looked after peers. Reaching the minimum school leaving age for many signifies a turning point in their lives and the possibility of being independent is understandably attractive, though agencies have been criticised for not doing enough to provide options that mean young people feel supported (Dixon & Stein, 2002; Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2008). Local authorities provide help to allow young people to plan for leaving care but research has indicated that only about half of young people feel well prepared for leaving care (Dixon & Stein, 2005). Planning for leaving care is more limited for young people on home supervision compared with those looked after away from home (Stein & Dixon, 2006).

Also, while help with accommodation and finance is typically provided, support for education appears to be more variable. Poor outcomes are associated with previous placement instability and limited support from family, friends or professionals; conversely, consistency of placement and support, and social skills training, are beneficial (Stein & Dixon, 2006). One survey found that many young people thought that leaving care had a negative impact on their health, particularly as they did not have enough money to eat well and were depressed as a result of isolation (Ridley & McCluskey, 2003). Therefore, for young people who are looked after, the transition from school to college may coincide with other major life transitions and can produce challenges which go beyond finding suitable accommodation, and include financial pressures, relationship difficulties and worries about health.

Looked after children and care leavers: the legal framework

The statutory origins of the terms of 'looked after and 'care leaver' lie in the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Most looked-after children fall into one of two categories - looked after 'at home' or looked after 'away from home'.

A child is looked after at home where there is a Supervision Requirement with no condition of residence through the Children's Hearing system. The child or young person continues to live in their normal place of residence, typically the family home. A child can also be looked after at home under the terms of a permanence order granted by the court under provisions of the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007. This is an order which gives the local authority the right to determine where the child will reside but the order can vest parental

responsibilities and rights in other individuals. Thus, the child's parents could retain some parental rights and the local authority could decide that the child may reside at home.

A child is looked after away from home (i.e. away from their normal place of residence) where there is a Supervision Requirement with a condition of residence through the Children's Hearing system, or where accommodation is provided under Section 25 of the 1995 Act (voluntary agreement) or is the subject of a permanence order under Section 80 of the 2007 Act. The child or young person is cared for away from their family home, e.g. in a foster care placement, residential children's house, residential school, secure unit or kinship care.

There is an added complication in the use of the term, 'looked after', in the sense that a child looked after at home, their family and school, would not identify with the more familiar term 'in care' which has been typically reserved for foster or residential placements. This causes confusion in schools, and perhaps also in colleges. Just as families often continue to share the care of children looked after away from home, local authorities and collaborating agencies are in the position of sharing the care of children who are looked after while remaining in the family home. A further confusion exists in relation to kinship care. Schools, in particular, can find it hard to distinguish between children looked after in a legal sense and private arrangements involving extended family.

The term 'care leaver' is defined in Section 29 of the 1995 Act which sets out a local authority's responsibilities to provide 'aftercare' support to young people who cease to be looked after. The precise wording in the Act is as follows: 'A local authority shall, unless they are satisfied that his welfare does not require it, advise, guide and assist any person in their area over school age but not yet nineteen years of age who, at the time when he ceased to be of school age or at any subsequent time was, but who is no longer, looked after by a local authority'.

Section 29 was amended by Section 73 of the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001 which gives duties to local authorities to carry out an assessment of the aftercare needs of a young person. These duties are spelled out more fully in *Regulations and Guidance on Services for Young People Ceasing to be Looked After by Local Authorities* (Scottish Executive, 2004). The process by which the assessment is carried out is known as Pathway Planning. The provision of pathway planning is uneven; only 51% of young people ceasing to be looked after over their minimum school leaving age during 1 August 2009 and 31 July 2010 had a pathway plan on the date they were discharged, and only 69 % had a pathway coordinator (Scottish Government, 2011). More information, including a useful handbook of good practice in pathway planning, can be found on the website of the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum⁶.

⁶ See: <http://www.scottishthroughcare.org.uk/bestpractice.php?page=Pathways+Practice>

The Protection of Children (Scotland) Act 2003 requires relevant bodies, including colleges, to safeguard children, young people and vulnerable groups to whom they have an increased duty of care. This duty requires educational institutions to have procedures in place for protecting children and young people from harm or abuse, for responding appropriately to disclosures and complaints, for training staff, and for liaising with other relevant agencies.

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009 gives legal force to the entitlement of looked after children and young people to have 'additional support' in relation to their education.

...a child or young person has additional support needs if the child or young person is looked after by a local authority (within the meaning of section 17(6) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 (c36).

The effect of this change in the law is that there is an assumption of the entitlement to an assessment of additional support needs where a child or young person is looked after. This means that there is a requirement for the local authority which provides a looked after child or young person's education to conduct an assessment. Such an assessment may conclude there are no individual needs or may specify needs implying varying degrees of professional intervention. Assessed requirements place obligations on other organisations, such as health authorities and private fostering agencies. It is the responsibility of the 'home' local authority to meet the financial requirements of any assessed additional requirements.

The Act also stipulates that support can include that which is beyond educational support, for example, multi-agency support from health, social work and voluntary agencies, as well as support during the transition of young people to further learning, training and employment. A college, as an identified 'appropriate agency', has specific duties. One duty is the requirement to comply with a request from the local authority to assess the expected needs of a young person with additional support needs (prior to their entry to college) for their course. This responsibility sits alongside the duty of the appropriate agency to respond to requests for information from the local authority to help with 'transitional planning' for young people with additional support needs while they are still at school. The Act is supported by the *Supporting Children's Learning Code of Practice* (Scottish Government, 2010b).

Looked after children and care leavers: the policy context

Current Scottish Government policy in relation to looked after children derives from the *Looked After Children & Young People: We Can and Must do Better* report and a suite of supporting materials identifiable by a distinctive branding depicting a green swirl on a light blue background (Scottish Executive, 2007). The report's findings were framed within five key themes, deliberately to emphasise the rights of looked after children and young people

and care leavers to the same good life prospects envisaged by Ministers for all of Scotland's children. These themes are:

- Working together
- Becoming effective life long learners
- Developing into successful and responsible adults
- Being emotionally, mentally and physically healthy
- Feeling safe and nurtured in a home setting

The report's themes and actions for improvement highlighted the important connection between wellbeing and success in education. The report also made explicit use of the concept of the 'corporate parent,'⁷ a term encapsulating the duties and unwritten obligations of local authorities and their partners in sharing the parenting of looked after children.

The Scottish Government published guidance for corporate parents in *These are our Bairns: A Guide for Community Planning Partnerships on being a Good Corporate Parent* (Scottish Government, 2008c). This guide introduces the notion of the wider 'corporate family' and outlines actions and outcome measures for services. Good corporate parenting is defined as: '[accepting] responsibility for the council's looked after children and young people; [making] their needs a priority; [and seeking] the same outcomes any good parent would want for their own children' (p.3). It is clear that FE colleges are regarded as being an important part of this wider corporate family, providing opportunities for progression in general and vocational education, and helping young people to make a fresh start and overcome barriers to learning⁸. In order to help children's services to evaluate their effectiveness as corporate parents, HMIE has developed a self-evaluation guide, *How Good is Our Corporate Parenting* (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, 2009).

*Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC)*⁹ is a national programme that aims to improve outcomes for all children and young people in Scotland by providing a framework for all services and agencies working with children and families to work in a co-ordinated way. The GIRFEC approach is based on eight indicators of wellbeing: safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included (SHANARI). These *wellbeing* indicators are regarded as the basic requirements for all children and young people to grow and develop and reach their full potential. Since the GIRFEC framework is aimed at planning services for children and young people of all ages, it also has relevance for partners collaborating in the transitions from school and care settings to college.

⁷ Elected Member Briefing Note No 2 Corporate Parenting:
<http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/library/589-elected-members-development/625-briefings/view-category/>

⁸ For more advice see: www.corporateparenting.co.uk

⁹ See: www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/childrenservices/girfec

Core Tasks for Designated Managers in Educational and Residential Establishments in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2008a) enumerates the responsibilities Ministers expect educational and residential establishments to undertake in fulfilling their role as corporate parents. This guide identifies 27 'core tasks' and suggests that the 'designated manager' should attend 'multi-agency training' and should act as an advisor to colleagues. Support for briefing a range of staff is available through the Looked after Children Website¹⁰ maintained by Learning and Teaching Scotland and training materials in the form of an interactive DVD-ROM (Furnivall, Connelly, Hudson, & McCann, 2008).

One chapter in the Guidance is aimed specifically at further and higher education establishments. It suggests that the remit for a senior member of staff should include responsibility for strategy, systems development and the management of operational activities. Emphasising the importance of partnership working, it covers information sharing, confidentiality, continuing professional development and meeting identified needs. There is currently no published review of the designated manager role.

Partnership Matters describes the roles and responsibilities of agencies supporting people with all forms of additional support needs at or as they prepare to go from school into college or university or from college or university into employment (Scottish Government, 2009c). This guidance aims to ensure that students (including looked after young people and care leavers) with additional support needs are supported by the appropriate organisations during their transition phases into and out of college and university. It is specifically aimed at staff associated with the range of support measures which students with additional support needs require. The guidance proposes that effective partnership working by all the organisations involved in supporting a student with additional support needs will help to reduce the barriers which may prevent their access and participation in learning.

The education of looked after children and young people

Evidence of low attainment by looked after children, and the related lack of attention to education by professionals, was first highlighted in England by Sonia Jackson (Jackson, 1987). The concerns have since become a significant aspect of public policy within the different UK administrations (Department of Education and Skills, 2007; Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety Northern Ireland, 2007; Scottish Executive, 2007; Welsh Assembly Government, 2007).

The origins of specifically Scottish interests in the education of looked-after children came with the publication of a study highlighting a tendency to concentrate on behaviour rather than academic performance in child care reviews (Francis, Thomson, & Mills, 1996) and of a review of research, policy and practice (Borland, Pearson, Hill, & Bloomfield, 1998).

¹⁰See: www.lookedafterchildrenscotland.org.uk/index.asp

That review led directly to an the inspection of the education of 50 children in residential care settings in five of Scotland's 32 local authorities (Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools and Social Work Services Inspectorate, 2001; Maclean & Gunion, 2003). The *Learning with Care* report pinpointed significant weaknesses in relation to the support in education for children who had been removed from the family home with the aim of improving their welfare. For example, statutory care plans were found to be of varying quality, or were missing; they typically included little useful information about education, and were not routinely shared with schools. The report recommended that local authorities should develop an integrated policy covering education and social work to ensure that the educational needs of looked after children were met effectively. It set in train a sequence of policy and practice reforms that continues 10 years later.

An important theme in the literature over many years has been the damaging effects of unstimulating intellectual conditions and low educational expectations of looked after children (Berridge, 1985; Berridge & Brodie, 1998; Jackson & McParlin, 2006; Kahan, 1994). Many young people report being stigmatised by other pupils and teachers as a result of being identified as looked after. The corrosive effect of stigma on mental health, self-confidence and access to opportunities emerged as a strong theme in a study of the views and experiences of success of young people in residential care carried out by researchers on behalf of Who Cares? Scotland (Siebelt, Morrison, & Cruickshank, 2008). The research led to a media campaign funded by Scottish Government in 2010 aimed at dispelling myths associated with being in care and promoting positive images of looked after children¹¹. Bullying is also a common experience; in one small study in England a quarter of young people surveyed about their views of education felt that the bullying they experienced at school was the worst thing about being at school (Morgan, 2007).

I can't remember how many schools I've been in. I think school has been an enjoyable experience so far, but I don't think that I've done my best at school because of all the moves I've had and I've lost education. (Female, 13) (Ritchie, 2003, p. 13)

The effect of frequent placement moves on children's perceptions of their educational progress was illustrated by a survey of 2,000 children and young people in public care conducted by the Who Cares? Trust (Shaw, 1998). The research found that the perception of doing worse in education increases as the number of care placement moves increases, and also, significantly, the perception of doing better is particularly high - at 60% - where young people experienced only one placement. Moving care placement *per se* is not necessarily disadvantageous, since moves can also be positive experiences, but rather it is likely to be the reasons for and nature of the move and its physical and emotional effect on the child or young person that have damaging consequences for education. It is difficult to provide a nurturing living environment when placements are inconsistent and unplanned. Research on young people leaving care shows that those who experienced high levels of placement

¹¹ See: www.givemeachancescotland.org

instability had the worst adjustment to employment, social relationships, financial management and housing (Biehal, et al., 1995). In interpreting the findings of such research it is important to recognise that it tends to highlight negative consequences and does not give prominence to the experiences of young people who do succeed and adjust well, despite disadvantages earlier in life. This is also a disadvantage of cross-sectional research which does not include a life-span perspective.

Care standards¹² draw attention to the rights of children to receive good educational experiences and have adequate study facilities, including access to computers and the internet. There has been significant effort in Scotland to raise awareness about the importance of giving extra attention to the education of looked after children, particularly following the publication of the *We Can and Must do Better* report. This effort has included a more strategic approach to highlighting the responsibilities of corporate parents among elected members and professionals in social work, education and health, and the widespread provision of training. There is compelling evidence that focusing on education can be effective in improving outcomes (Brodie, 2010; Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children's Services, 2008; Gallagher, Brannan, Jones, & Westwood, 2004). There is also evidence that looked after children who have higher educational attainment experience more stable, satisfying adult lives and are less likely to experience mental ill health (Happer, McCreadie, & Aldgate, 2006; Martin & Jackson, 2002).

Educational outcomes: attendance and attainment

Attendance and attainment are only two examples of educational outcomes and while they are important tools in monitoring trends, it is also important to be aware that they have limited use in describing the wider achievements of looked after children. Looked after children in Scotland had almost twice the average number of absences from school in 2008-09 as those not looked after: 45.0 half days compared with 25.0 (Scottish Government, 2009a). But it is the absence from school of children looked after at home (average number of half days' absence = 58.7) which accounts significantly for the poor overall outcome, while children looked after away from home have absences only a little higher than their non-looked-after peers (28.1 half days compared with 25.0).

Table 2 shows the percentage attendance at school of looked after children during two years. What is evident is the better and improving attendance of children looked after away from home while those looked after at home continue to have poorer attendance.

¹² See: www.nationalcarestandards.org

Table 2: Percentage attendance at school of looked after children

| | 2003-2004 (%) | 2009-2010 (%) |
|------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Looked after at home | 84.7 | 85.0 |
| Looked after away from home | 91.4 | 93.0 |
| Not looked after | 93.1 | 93.3 |

A standard measure of attainment that has been reported annually is ‘the academic attainment of young people aged 16 or over who ceased to be looked after during the year’. Table 3 below shows a comparison of the percentages of care leavers on three metrics - those gaining no awards as a result of taking external examinations administered by the Scottish Qualifications’ Authority (SQA), those who gained at least one award at the most basic level (SCQF Level 3) or higher, and those gaining awards in both English and mathematics at the most basic level or higher – in 2003, 2006 and 2008 (Scottish Executive, 2003, 2006a; Scottish Government, 2010a).

Table 3: Academic attainment of care leavers over 16 in Scotland: change from 2002-03 to 2007-08

| | 2002-2003 ¹³ | | 2005-2006 | | 2007-2008 | |
|--|-------------------------|------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | Home | Away | Home | Away | Home | Away |
| No awards | 67% | 47% | 386 (55%) | 242 (43%) | 389 (55%) | 223 (39%) |
| At least one award at Level 3 or higher | 33% | 53% | 319 (45%) | 320 (57%) | 322 (45%) | 353 (61%) |
| English and Math at Level 3 or higher | 27% | | 195 (28%) | 231 (41%) | 182 (26%) | 263 (46%) |

The most striking feature of this table is the high proportion of care leavers who gained no qualifications by the time they left school, compared with 3.3% of all children in Scotland who left school in 2008 without qualifications (Scottish Government, 2010e). Also evident is the significantly lower attainment of young people looked after at home, compared to those

¹³ The total number of care leavers in 2003-03 was 1,138. Only percentages were presented within categories in the statistical report. The proportion gaining both English and maths was not reported by home and away from home.

placed away from home. The table also shows encouraging signs of improvement in attainment during this relatively short five-year period.

Young people value education, though not always in traditional ways and education may not be their immediate priority. Looked after children and young people are not a homogeneous group; some young people, because of their particular experiences or because they are especially resilient, will cope well in education despite facing disadvantage. Others will need significant emotional support and specific help to overcome gaps in basic schooling. Cameron studied the experiences of 54 high achieving looked after young people and found that an important feature of resilience was the capacity to ask for help. For example, being able to ask for and receive help from a foster carer, residential worker or social worker to complete a college or UCAS application could be a significant first step in being successful in post-school education (Cameron, 2007).

Progressing to college or university

One small-scale study found that 67% of the 77 looked after young people consulted wanted to carry on with their education after leaving school, 10% did not want to carry on and the others were undecided. One young person said:

I want to further my education to help further my life, my career aspects, so to get myself out of poverty and so I can start a fresh life (Morgan, 2007, p. 27).

The young people identified both barriers and supports in relation to a college education. The supports included being settled in housing, having the necessary funds to support themselves and being supported by social workers. A quarter of the young people said that avoiding making an issue of being in care would help.

This point is an important reminder to professionals that while some young people coming from a looked after background will need additional support to pursue their education beyond school, and will benefit from staff with a significant awareness of their needs, help should be provided in ways that are non-stigmatising and which encourage autonomy. This includes recognising that young people are capable of doing things by and for themselves.

Support interventions need to aim to increase young people's resilience and also to prevent the development of problems (Iwaniec & Sneddon, 2006, p. 266).

Some looked after young people are more ready for greater degrees of independence than others. The report *A Sense of Purpose* noted that many young people struggle to leave care and find a confident transition to independence because the care system has, in effect, deskilled them (Barry, 2001). There is a difficult balancing act to be achieved in providing protection and support in a way that does not result in stunting the growth of independence. Stein observed that the difficulties associated with being in care and of leaving care mean that there is inevitably low participation in post-school education among

this group of young people: ‘care leavers are expected to undertake their journey to adulthood, from restricted to full citizenship, far younger and in far less time than their peers’ (Stein, 2006, p. 274). Since the focus for looked after young people at age 16 to 18 is the process of leaving care and becoming socially independent, it is understandable that some find it difficult simultaneously to maintain their attention on college studies.

Table 4 below, taken from a report compiled by Skills Development Scotland, shows the destinations of school leavers three months after leaving school, comparing looked after and not-looked after young people (Scottish Government, 2009b).

Table 4: Destinations of looked after children three months after leaving school

| Higher education+ | 2.6 | 35.5 | 34.9 |
|------------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| Destination | Looked after (%) | Not looked after (%) | Total (%) |
| Further education | 27.9 | 27.0 | 27.0 |
| Training | 15.4 | 4.9 | 5.1 |
| Employment | 8.5 | 18.6 | 18.4 |
| Voluntary work | 0.4 | 0.2 | 0.2 |
| Unemployed seeking work | 35.8 | 11.1 | 11.5 |
| Unemployed not seeking work | 6.5 | 1.5 | 1.6 |
| Unknown | 2.9 | 1.2 | 1.2 |
| Total leavers = 100% | 1,043 | 52,489 | 53,532 |

+ This figure includes HNC/D level courses in further education colleges.

What is particularly striking is the disparity in the proportions of young people from looked after and not-looked after backgrounds entering higher education. There are two cautions which should be applied: first, the data on looked after young people appear to be incomplete when compared with similar data supplied by local authorities’ social work services; second the 2.6% in the table represents about 27 individuals, a figure which is likely to underestimate the true number of students with a care background in further education. The contrast in the proportions unemployed is also striking. The table also shows the significance of further education courses for looked after young people and care leavers.

The role of Buttle UK in supporting progression in education

The Frank Buttle Trust (renamed Buttle UK in 2011) launched the Quality Mark for Care Leavers in Higher Education in 2006, following a recommendation in the *By Degrees: Going to University from Care* research report (Jackson, et al., 2005). In order to gain the Quality Mark, higher education institutions should demonstrate a commitment to providing support to students with a care background during the application process and while on course. Although the details of its commitment are drawn up by the individual institution in the form of a 'plan of action,' there is a requirement to demonstrate progress in relation to collaboration with local authorities and leaving care teams, and to encourage aspiration in education among looked after children. Six of the Scottish universities have been awarded the Quality Mark. Buttle UK has published practice guidelines for universities and partner agencies (Buttle UK, 2010). The guidelines take account of recommendations in the *By Degrees* report:

- Every student should have a named personal advisor for the full duration of his/her course;
- All HEIs should have a comprehensive policy for recruitment, retention and support of students from a care background;
- More HEIs should develop further compact arrangements with local authorities to increase participation of care leavers who should be specifically invited to open days and summer schools;
- All institutions should have a named liaison person who can be contacted by leaving-care teams and personal advisors;
- Student welfare/support services should contact new students known to have been in care and be proactive in offering any necessary help with financial, study or personal needs;
- Admissions tutors and widening participation officers should be better informed about the care system and understand that examination grades may reflect difficulties overcome as much as the applicant's level of ability.

Since 2008, UCAS, the body which administers applications for undergraduate places in universities across the UK, has included a voluntary question which allows applicants to declare a looked after background. The purpose is to allow university support staff and course selectors to direct additional help to applicants and to provide information about summer schools, scholarships and accommodation. There are at least three problems apparent in this system: first, we do not know how the question is interpreted and therefore whether a looked after background is deemed a hindrance or a help by this approach; second, this approach understandably does not take account of students applying directly to a university (e.g. by an articulation agreement with a college); and, third, UCAS, for reasons that are not entirely clear, has not published any of the data it has collected in 2008, 2009 and 2010.

One of the requirements of the pilot programme funded by the SFC was that the five participating colleges should take part in a trial of a Quality Mark for further education involving 28 colleges throughout the UK. Funding for the trial was provided by the following government agencies or departments the Learning and Skills Council, The Department of Business, Innovation and Skills and the Department of Children, Schools and Families (England); the Scottish Funding Council; the Welsh Assembly Government; and Northern Ireland's Department for Employment and Learning.

Conclusion

This paper has explained the use of the term 'looked after' and outlined current policy in Scotland in relation to the 'corporate parenting' of looked after children and care leavers. The poor educational outcomes of looked after children in general have been described, as well as the improvements seen in recent years, particularly for children looked after away from home. The importance of the further education sector in providing both progression opportunities and also help to overcome gaps in schooling within an adult environment has been highlighted. Almost a third of looked after school leavers progress directly to FE and colleges have an important role in reducing the unacceptably high proportion unemployed and seeking work.

Local authorities have 'corporate parent' responsibilities and this legal requirement extends to all local authority services, e.g. schools, that have involvement in the lives and wider development of looked after children. The legal requirement also extends to health authorities. A wider range of agencies is expected to co-operate with local authorities and a term with no absolute legal status, the 'corporate family', has been coined to highlight this responsibility. FE colleges and Skills Development Scotland are regarded as being an important part of this wider corporate family, providing advice and opportunities for progression in general and vocational education, and helping young people to make a fresh start and overcome barriers to learning.

Colleges also have clear legal duties for looked after children and young people in one particular respect, in the terms of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009. A college, as an identified 'appropriate agency', has specific duties. One duty is the requirement to comply with a request from the local authority to assess the expected needs of a young person with additional support needs (prior to their entry to college) for their course. This responsibility sits alongside the duty of the appropriate agency to respond to requests for information from the local authority to help with 'transitional planning' for young people with additional support needs while they are still at school.

The provisions of the *16+ Learning Choices: Policy and Practice Framework* also place obligations on colleges. These are aimed at a wider group of young people than those for whom local authorities have special corporate parent responsibilities but the obligations do

indicate the kinds of tasks that colleges need to engage in when seeking to make supportive provision available for looked after young people and care leavers.

- Working with local partnerships;
- Ensuring learning opportunities are available on a flexible entry basis;
- Ensuring young people's support needs are met in order to improve retention and progression.

These tasks also seem to fit well with the provisions of Buttle UK's Quality Mark for further education institutions.

As part of the wider evaluation work of which this paper forms a part, the researchers asked themselves two questions. Does this group of young people define success in the same way as service providers, policy makers, researchers and academics do? What is the relevance of any difference in interpretation in relation to the experience of the pilot projects? The literature reviewed in this paper goes only part of the way to answering these important questions, since it is clear that there are considerable individual differences in experience and perception. We can conclude two things: first, we should be cautious in conflating attainment and achievement; and, second, it is vital that the voice of looked after young people and care leavers should be considered in interpreting their experience of education.

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