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Understanding the educational experiences and opinions, attainment, achievement and aspirations of looked after children in Wales

Executive Summary

1. Introduction and Aims of Report

1.1 The low educational attainment and future prospects of looked-after children and young people (LACYP) has become an issue of widespread international concern (Berridge 2012; Jackson and Höjer 2013). Within the four UK nations we know that children in public care, on average, achieve poorer educationally than their non-looked-after peers (see Jackson 1987; 2010). This gap widens across all educational Key Stages and into higher education (Stein 2012). As a result, over recent decades in England and Wales there has been an intensification in legislative action and policy development aimed at improving the educational outcomes of LACYP (see The Children Act 1989; The Children Act 2004; The Children and Young Persons Act 2008; The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014; Welsh Assembly Government 2007). This policy drive has particularly focused upon improving working relationships between professionals, practitioners and local services in order to narrow the attainment gap between looked-after children and their non-looked-after peers.

1.2   Since devolution the Welsh Government has developed its own policies and guidance for local authorities, which aim to tackle the issue of the 'underachievement' for LACYP. This has resulted in several types of educational interventions for LACYP in compulsory education. These include: the establishment of the local authority looked-after children's education coordinator to monitor progress; the looked-after children's education support worker to provide catch-up support; a designated teacher in school who supports LACYP; and the Personal Education Plan (see WAG 2007). However, despite these policy provisions, the overall educational attainment of LACYP has yet to be noticeably raised. The lack of marked progress in this area, despite policy interventions, highlights the challenges in addressing LACYPs educational achievement and the complexity of the problem.

1.3   In December 2014 the Welsh Government, on behalf of Welsh Ministers, invited tenders for a study to explore the educational experiences and opinions, attainment, achievement and aspirations of looked after children in Wales. Following a competitive tender process, a multidisciplinary team of researchers at the Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) Cardiff University, led by Dr Dawn Mannay from the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, were appointed to undertake the research project in January 2015. The project was undertaken in partnership with Voices from Care Cymru, The Fostering Network and Spice Innovations.

1.4   This study was undertaken in response to two key objectives set out by the Welsh Government.

- Objective 1: Conduct an in-depth qualitative research study with looked after children, to provide insight into their experience of education and their opinions on what could be done to improve it.

- Objective 2: Collate and report relevant data and literature.

2.   Methodology

2.1   This project was broadly split into two phases. Phase 1 required desk-based research methods to review and collate existing data about looked after children and young people (LACYP) and education. Phase 2 involved engaging with LACYP directly via interviews or focus groups.

2.2   The project uses mixed methods and draws upon a wide range of quantitative and qualitative data from primary data production and existing administrative and academic data.

2.3   The project design was organised at two levels: at a national level, and at the level of individual LACYP.

2.4   The main features of the project design include:

- Collation of the available descriptive statistics from England and Wales relating to the educational attainment of LACYP.

- A short and focused review on what is known about LACYP's and care leavers' achievement, attainment and aspirations.

- A systematic review reporting on randomised controlled trials or quasi-experimental research evaluating educational interventions for children and young people in care or with previous experience of the care system.

- Interviews using creative methods as part of four event days organised with assistance from The Fostering Network (TFN). Two events with primary school children in south Wales and two events with secondary school aged children (one in north Wales and one in south Wales). A total of 39 LACYP were interviewed at these events across the age range.

- Four sets of focus group events with looked after young people and care leavers aged 16-25 facilitated by peer researchers recruited via Voices from Care Cymru. Three of the sessions took place in south Wales and one took place in north Wales. A total of six focus groups were run within these events with 26 participants across the age range.

- Two individual interviews with care leavers in higher education.

2.5 All of the interview data was transcribed verbatim and analysed applying a thematic framework, allowing codes, categories and themes to emerge from the empirical data produced with LACYP.

3. Key findings

3.1 The analysis of the available descriptive statistics from England and Wales relating to the educational attainment of LACYP illustrated a pervasive gap between the educational attainment of LACYP and non-LACYP at all educational Key Stages.

3.2 The review of the literature suggested that the educational experiences of LACYP can be detrimental to their attainment and achievement in a number of key areas including placement and school instability, a lack of sufficient help with education, carers who are not equipped or expected to support with learning, a lack of help with mental or physical health and wellbeing, a pessimistic view of the educational potential of LACYP held by key professionals, and a lack of communication between social services and education providers.

3.3 The systematic review reporting on evaluations of educational interventions for LACYP is the most comprehensive to date. Across the studies educational outcomes mapped onto the following key areas: academic skills; academic achievement and grade completion; homework completion; school attendance, suspension and drop-out; number of school placements; school relationships; school behaviours. The conduct of evaluations was poor, with the majority of studies indicating a high risk of bias and inadequate sample sizes. Therefore, we must conclude that the evidence-base is too limited to recommend investment in any established interventions.

3.4 The majority of LACYP we interviewed with were aspirational and had lots of ideas about careers and employment. However, for some participants, the development and realisation of ambitions was at risk because of unresolved emotional problems, limited opportunities and resources, and unstable or unsupportive relationships with carers, teachers and social

workers.

3.5 LACYP discussed their experiences of placement moves and school moves, which have disrupted their routines, and engendered inconsistent relationships with family, carers, professionals involved in their lives and their peers.

3.6 Even where LACYP had been able to move placements and stay in the same school, travel distance often limited their access to after school clubs, events and social activities with their peers.

3.7 LACYP discussed the disruptions to their day in the form of visits to the school from social workers and other professionals and meetings that were scheduled in school hours and on school premises.

3.8 A lack of resources and access to funding for educational equipment, particularly ICT was recognised as a key barrier.

3.9 Young people discussed the educational qualifications of foster carers, and felt that they should have a set of basic skills to enable them to support LACYP's education. Some young people detailed a lack of support from foster carers and cases where they were placed in a position of helping foster carers with literacy.

3.10 LACYP displayed an awareness of the stigmas that come with their status as 'looked after'. This status was understood increasingly as they grew in age, to be seen by others (peers and adults alike) as a problem, troubled, different, and unlikely to achieve much.

3.11 Stable care and school placements and consistent relationships and routine featured as key aspects in enabling LACYP to fully participate in learning and school and college life. Similarly, parity and equity of support and access to resources and opportunities were also key.

4. Conclusions/Recommendations

4.1 The collation of descriptive statistics, review of the literature, and the contributions of LACYP generated evaluations, ideas and suggestions for policy and practice, which have informed the recommendations.

4.2 The findings set out 17 key recommendations. These recommendations apply to a number of stakeholders and inform the objectives set out by the Welsh Government for the project.

- Recommendation 1: The evidence-base for educational interventions remains limited, and we would recommend that Welsh Government support and invest in randomised controlled trials to generate scientifically robust evaluation. Interventions subjected to evaluation do not necessarily need to be novel and could encompass existing approaches and practices.

- Recommendation 2: Education for LACYP should be prioritised and the arrangements for moving schools should be expedited more quickly.

- Recommendation 3: LACYP should not be exposed to the all too common disputes over finances and responsibility.

- Recommendation 4: Decisions around remaining in the same school and commuting or

moving to a new school as a result of a placement move should be discussed with LACYP, their views taken into account, and decisions made on an individual case-by-case basis.

- Recommendation 5: There needs to be more of a focus on the importance of foster carers' own experience of education with consideration given to providing opportunities for foster carers to gain additional educational qualifications.

- Recommendation 6: Training for foster carers should include explicit teaching on how to support children with their homework, providing dedicated time to undertake positive educational activities with children, as well as the importance of attending school meetings.

- Recommendation 7: LACYP should have an ambassador for their education, who has the power to hold agencies to account, possibly working independently of the local authority.

- Recommendation 8: All meetings for LACYP (for reasons related to their care circumstances) should be held outside of school hours.

- Recommendation 9: Efforts to minimise the impact of disruptive home circumstances on LACYP's learning should be focused on providing extra learning provision, one-on-one support and advocates.

- Recommendation 10: Projects that work on increasing aspirations and mentoring (possibly by care experienced individuals) should be considered as a form of support for LACYP.

- Recommendation 11: Training for educators, careers services and social workers should be considered in relation to countering the propensity for low attainment and career expectations for LACYP.

- Recommendation 12: Communication between social services and education providers needs to be timely and comprehensive to avoid delays in providing LACYP with effective support.

- Recommendation 13: The individual needs, requirements and opinions of LACYP should be considered when places for them are made available on interventions and programmes.

- Recommendation 14: Intervention programmes should have comprehensive plans for negotiating their end point to minimise distress for LACYP.

- Recommendation 15: Universal programmes that are open to all children and young people rather than restricted to LACYP should be considered as they may be less stigmatising and more beneficial for a wider demographic.

- Recommendation 16: LACYP need opportunities to meet with others who are looked after and these should be regularly held. Provision in this area is currently available from The Fostering Network and Voices from Care Cymru and these should be considered as best practice models to develop further support for LACYP.

- Recommendation 17: LACYP should have access to computers and to a wide range of reading materials.

References

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Report Authors: Dawn Mannay, Eleanor Staples, Sophie Hallett, Louise Roberts, Alyson Rees, Rhiannon Evans and Darren Andrews

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

For further information please contact:

Launa Anderson
Social Research and Information Division
Welsh Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ
Tel: 029 2082 5274
Email: launa.anderson@wales.gsi.gov.uk

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