

Literature review: looked after children



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“Looked after children” is the legislative term for children and young people in public care introduced in the 1989 Children Act and includes children who are subject to supervision and live with family members as well as looked after and accommodated children who live with foster carers or in residential schools or care homes. (Scottish Executive 2007) The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 adopted the term ‘looked after’, taking a lead from the earlier Children Act 1989 in England and Wales, because the expression ‘in care’ had become pejorative and stigmatising. (Connelly, Seibelt and Furnivall 2008) These children have a right to expect to achieve the same educational outcomes the Government want for every child -to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes they will need if they are to succeed in life, learning and work, now and in the future. (Scottish Executive 2004 to date) (Department For Children, Schools And Families 2010)

To allow LAC to achieve these outcomes successfully, local authorities as corporate parents (meaning the formal and local partnerships needed between all local authority departments and services, and associated agencies, who are responsible for working together to meet the needs of looked after children and young people) should demonstrate the strongest commitment to helping every child to achieve the highest educational standards he or she possibly can. (Scottish Executive 2007)

Looked after children and young people face many barriers to their success in education. We take these children into care to improve their life chances, though some do well, despite the difficulties faced in other aspects of their lives, the educational achievement of looked after children as a group remains unacceptably low. (Department For Children, Schools And Families

2010) (Scottish Executive 2007)(Connelly and Chakrabarti 2008)
(Department For Children, Schools And Families 2009)(Coulling 2000)

Table 1 shows both information about the expected levels for most children at different school stages and also a comparison between the assessed levels for looked after children and non-looked after children nationally in 2003. This information has only been made available publicly once and is no longer collected as a result of the developments associated with Curriculum for Excellence. The table shows clearly the overall low achievement of looked after pupils compared with their non-looked after peers.

Table 1: National Assessment Data 2003 (Scottish Government 2004)

School stage

Level attained

English Reading

English Reading

English Writing

English Writing

Maths

Maths

Not LAC

LAC

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Not LAC

LAC

Not LAC

LAC

P2

A or above

52%

29%

42%

20%

76%

57%

P3

A or above

88%

74%

85%

69%

95%

89%

P4

B or above

81%

56%

75%

50%

79%

52%

P5

B or above

92%

73%

88%

64%

92%

73%

P6

C or above

86%

59%

75%

40%

80%

46%

P7

D or above

73%

34%

60%

20%

69%

24%

However, as stated by the Scottish Government, this information is not complete. It only contains information from two thirds of local authority areas. Lack of complete data on Looked after Children is an issue spoken about frequently in articles and reports. (Jacklin, Robinson, and Torrance 2006)

However, it is believed that the overall trends, which show a widening of the attainment gap between children who are and are not looked after, with each school stage, are accurate.

The Social Exclusion Unit's report A Better Education for Children in Care (2003) identified five key reasons why looked after children underachieve in education:

their lives are characterised by instability;

- they spend too much time out of school;
- they do not have sufficient help with their education if they fall behind;
- primary carers are not expected or equipped to provide sufficient support and encouragement for learning and development; and
- they have unmet emotional, mental and physical health needs that impact on their education

These reasons are mirrored in other reports (Scottish Executive date unknown)(Scottish Government 2008)(Connelly, Seibelt and Furnivall 2008) but these also suggest that some LAC face so many difficulties in their lives that schooling seems to be of low priority to them and to the agencies

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providing support. They suggest that schooling is also often given insufficient priority when making and reviewing care plans.

Despite the common perception in society that children in care are simply ‘uninterested in learning’, the vast majority (97 per cent) consider education important, with nearly two-thirds (61 per cent) giving future employment as the reason⁸. Many enjoy school, with around a third (35 per cent) identifying specific subjects or learning as their favourite aspect. (Social Exclusion Unit 2003) The stigma of being looked after can cause isolation, low self-esteem, difficulty in making friends, and bullying. Frequent moves of placement and school disrupt education. Difficult life events can affect concentration and the ability to make relationships. School can, potentially, be a very good and consistent experience for a looked after child or young person. (Scottish Executive date unknown)

The children and young people themselves invariably say that education and educational attainment are important to them. They understand that how well they do at school will have an impact in their achievements in adulthood. (Scottish Government 2008)

However, not all children in care have good experiences of school.

They are 10 times more likely than others to be permanently excluded from school.

Over a third say they have been excluded at some point.

Six out of 10 say they have been bullied at school compared to roughly one in six of all children.

One in eight missed five or more weeks schooling in 2001-2. (Social Exclusion Unit 2003)

We believe the current levels of educational attainment can be transformed if the system is changed so that the joint efforts of all those who care about the learning of these children can have their maximum effect. (Department For Children, Schools And Families 2009)

Executive, S., 2007. Looked after Children & Young People : We can and must do Better.

(Scottish Executive 2004 to date)

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