Education matters – improving the educational outcomes of children and young people in care

Executive summary

Toni Beauchamp

Centre for Research, Innovation and Advocacy
UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families
Executive summary

Education makes a crucial contribution to the development and wellbeing of all children and young people and is an important gateway to future employment and life opportunities.\(^1\) For children and young people growing up in care, education can provide a pathway out of disadvantage. Young people who successfully complete school are more likely to enjoy a range of positive outcomes including fulfilling employment, financial independence, positive self-esteem and positive relationships.\(^2\)

However, numerous studies in Australia and overseas have found that children and young people growing up in care are at risk of poor educational outcomes including behavioural and disciplinary problems, higher rates of truancy, poor school grades and early school leaving.\(^3\) They are also less likely to progress to post-secondary education or training.

This paper focuses on the policy changes needed to improve educational outcomes for children and young people growing up in care in NSW. It reviews promising policy approaches being used in other Australian states and territories and overseas.

Educational challenges experienced by children in care

There are many factors which contribute to and compound the poor educational outcomes experienced by children and young people in care.

Children and young people generally enter care as a result of abuse and neglect (some children with profound disabilities are relinquished to care). This has a profound impact on their ability to learn and interact in socially appropriate ways. They are often contending with multiple issues, including disability and mental health issues, and have complex support needs that require the involvement of a number of agencies. Children and young people who have been in care have often had a disrupted educational experience due to placement changes and relocation. Additionally, many children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) are not regularly attending school because they have been suspended or expelled.\(^4\)
Some research suggests that carers, caseworkers and teachers may not expect children in care to do well at school and this may be communicated to the child.\(^5\) Parental influences are critical in driving young people’s educational and occupational aspirations. This highlights the importance of building carers’ understanding of their role in supporting the education of children in their care.

The NSW policy context

**Child protection legislative reforms**

The child protection legislative reforms passed through the NSW Parliament on 26 March 2014. Under the reforms, where restoration is not possible, there is increased emphasis on adoption and long-term guardianship. UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families (UnitingCare CYPF) supports the increased focus on permanency arrangements which will provide greater stability for children and young people who can no longer live safely with their birth families.

Under the legislative reforms, long-term guardianship with family or kin is the preferred placement option for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who cannot be restored. Given that Aboriginal children and young people are at high risk of poor education outcomes, providing additional educational support to this group is particularly critical.

There should also be further discussion and debate in the sector regarding the educational support needs of adopted children. As Australia is only just moving towards a greater focus on adoption this is an area that needs more detailed consideration. In the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), there is growing recognition that due to their early life trauma, adopted children and those placed in long-term guardianship may experience a range of challenges in their education similar to those faced by children in OOHC.

In this context, the paper adopts a broad definition of ‘care’ which is inclusive of children and young people in long-term guardianship arrangements (or who are in kinship care).
**Policy framework for education of children in OOHC**

The 2008 *Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in New South Wales* (hereafter the Wood Report) highlighted concerns about the poor educational outcomes of children and young people in OOHC. Based on the recommendations of the Inquiry, as part of the *Keep them Safe Action Plan*, the (former) NSW Government developed several new policy initiatives to improve educational support for children and young people in OOHC.

School principals are required to ensure that within 30 days of entering OOHC all preschool and school age children and young people in government schools have an individual education plan prepared for them. However, our experience is that the implementation of this policy by schools is very variable and our caseworkers often need to advocate strongly for schools to develop the plan.

In 2010, 10 regional OOHC Coordinators were appointed within the Department of Education (formerly the Department of Education and Communities). They are responsible for coordinating and monitoring the educational support for children and young people in OOHC in government schools. Their role also focuses on developing more effective models of improving the educational outcomes of children and young people in OOHC.

Our staff report that the regional OOHC Coordinators play a crucial role in assisting schools to understand the needs of children in care, improving compliance with the requirement to prepare an individual education plan and supporting collaboration with NGO OOHC providers. However, the OOHC Coordinators are very stretched because of the large areas they cover. Also, ongoing funding of these positions is uncertain beyond mid-2016.

The Department of Education also employs OOHC teachers who have a more ‘hands on’ role in working with schools to support children and young people in OOHC. Our experience is that in some areas, the OOHC teachers do play a critical role, for example, in assisting in transition planning and participating in school suspension meetings. However, as the OOHC teachers cover large areas, their work focuses mainly on crisis intervention, rather than building the capacity of teachers and school staff to understand and support children and young people in care.
Policy approaches in other Australian and overseas jurisdictions

In Australia, Victoria and South Australia have made significant progress in implementing policy and practice frameworks to improve the educational experience and outcomes of children growing up in care.

Victoria has implemented a range of initiatives spanning early education and care (ECEC), school and post-compulsory education for young people transitioning from care. The initiatives focus on improving coordination between education providers and child welfare agencies. They also include financial support for young children to access ECEC and waiver of TAFE fees. There is a strong focus on tracking the educational outcomes of each child and young person in OOHC and compliance of schools and case managers with relevant policies.

In South Australia, children and young people in OOHC or in long-term guardianship arrangements also have priority access to educational supports such as waiver of TAFE fees and career counselling. The Department of Education and Children’s Services has provided training to school staff on working with students who have experienced trauma. It has also implemented strategies to reduce the use of suspension and exclusion (of all students). The Department tracks data on the education of children and young people in care throughout all stages of education, including suspension data.

Overseas, in the US, the 2008 *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act* brought national attention to this issue. The law requires child welfare agencies to help children stay in their original school when placed in foster care unless it is not in their best interests. If changing school is not in a child’s best interests the state must ensure their immediate enrolment in the new school and swift transfer of all records.

This spurred development of state laws and programs to improve educational outcomes of children in care across early childhood education, school and post-secondary education. There is a focus on improving collaboration between schools and child welfare agencies and oversight of the educational status of children in care. Many states have appointed education advocates who work with schools to maintain school enrolment, promote academic progress and provide training to carers to support the education of children in their care.
These measures are having an impact. In Washington State, college enrolment among young people in foster care (in the first year after high school graduation) rose from 16% in 2005-2006 to 20% in 2008-2009. ‘On-time’ high school completion rates (by the end of 12th grade) also increased by 6%.6

Similarly, in the UK there has been a strong policy focus on improving the educational outcomes of ‘looked after children’ spanning early education and care (ECEC), school age education and promoting participation in further education and training.

Cumulatively, initiatives such as the pupil premium, designated teachers and virtual school heads (VSH) are having a positive effect and resulting in better procedures and interagency practice.7 The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills found evidence that the VSH have made a strong contribution to improving educational outcomes for looked after children, including increased levels of attendance and reduced numbers of exclusions.8

The way forward – policy recommendations for a stronger future

Improving education outcomes requires focused attention across all stages of a child’s education from the early years, through school age education and support for further education and training. UnitingCare CYPF has identified seven key action areas to promote improved educational outcomes for children and young people growing up in care. All of these strategies should be inclusive of children in OOHC and those placed in long-term guardianship (or who are in kinship care).
1. **Provide free early education and care for children in care in the two years prior to starting school**

- The NSW Government provide free early education and care, to children in OOHC and those in long-term guardianship arrangements in the two years prior to starting school. The funding for free early education and care should cover at least three days a week.

2. **Ensure that all teachers have training on working with children and young people with complex needs and understanding trauma**

- All teacher training courses include increased content on understanding trauma and working with children and young people with complex needs.

- The Department of Education ensure that teachers in all primary and secondary schools have ongoing professional development on trauma and working with children with complex needs.

3. **Strengthen the role and number of OOHC Coordinators and OOHC teachers**

- The NSW Government provide ongoing funding for the regional OOHC Coordinator positions.

- The NSW Government increase the number of OOHC support teachers and Coordinators to increase their capacity to provide training and support to teachers including training on trauma-informed practices.

- The role of the OOHC support teachers and Coordinators should be expanded to include support for children in long-term guardianship arrangements.
4. Strengthen coordination and collaboration between schools, OOHC providers and health services

- The NSW Government develop a new protocol to guide joint agency work to address the educational needs of children and young people in OOHC. The protocol should encompass all schools across the government, Catholic and independent school sectors based on an agreed framework and commitment to improving education outcomes of children in OOHC. The development of the protocol should involve strong consultation with the NGO sector.

- A robust reporting and monitoring system should be developed to ensure that the cross-agency protocol is implemented effectively at both regional and state-wide levels.

- The NSW Government develop mechanisms to improve the integration of assessment and support across the OOHC, education and health systems and increase support for children who exhibit or are at risk of developing severe emotional and behavioural disturbance.

5. Focus on reducing suspension and exclusion of children and young people in care

- The NSW Department of Education review policies and procedures relating to suspension and exclusion and their application to children and young people in care. The focus of this review should be on reducing both the incidence and duration of suspensions for this group of vulnerable students.

- The NSW Department of Education review and strengthen supports available for children in care who exhibit or are at risk of developing serious emotional and behavioural problems.
6. Support young people who are transitioning from care to participate in further education and training

- The NSW Government implement strategies to assist young people who are transitioning from care to participate in vocational education and training. This should include assistance with the costs of education and training to young people who are transitioning from care, including fee waivers (or scholarships covering the full cost) for TAFE and access to career counselling. It should also include reviewing relevant policies relating to enrolment in TAFE to address barriers to participation.

- The NSW Government investigate and implement extended care arrangements for young people in OOHC to the age of 21 years.

7. Strengthen processes for data collection and oversight of the educational progress of children in care

- Students in care should be recognised as a NSW Department of Education equity group that is tracked. The Department of Education and the Department of Families and Community Services (FACS) should work together to develop a framework for collecting and monitoring data on the educational experiences and outcomes of children and young people in care (including children in OOHC and those in long-term guardianship arrangements).

- The data system should track the educational progress of all children and young people in care (in both government and non-government sectors) across early childhood and care, school and post-secondary education and training. This data should be publicly reported on in the annual reports of the relevant Departments and on their websites.

- The data system should include information and monitoring of suspension, expulsion and partial attendance. It should also include specific attention to the education experience and progress of Aboriginal children and young people in care.
• The NSW Department of Education review and strengthen processes to support compliance with policy requirements relating to individual education plans. This should include a focus on ensuring that the plans are developed in a timely way and with participation by the child or young person, their carer and caseworker.

References

1 AIHW, 2015, Educational outcomes for children in care, linking 2013 child protection and NAPLAN data, Cat. no. CWS 54, Canberra.
2 Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, 2013, Valuing and improving educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care, practice paper, Queensland Government.
5 Ibid.
7 Brodie, I., 2010, Improving educational outcomes for looked after children and young people, Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services, London.