

Exploring the educational experiences and aspirations of Looked After Children and young people (LACYP) in Wales

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CASCADE Research Briefing

Number 7: March 2016



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Key messages for policy and practice

- Older young people and care leavers in our study often felt that their education had not been prioritised and that their potential was not recognised by carers, teachers and social care professionals. It is important that those that work and live with LACYP encourage them with their education, have high expectations of their educational potential, and support their aspirations.
- Many LACYP found that having meetings related to their care circumstances during school time was distracting, stressful, stigmatizing and meant losing time in lessons. Meetings, where possible, should be held outside of school hours to allow LACYP to 'fit in' and not feel singled out or different, and to allow them to participate fully in education.
- Outside of the classroom, the ability of foster and residential carers to support LACYP with school work was found to be crucial. Training for carers needs to emphasise the importance of LACYP's education and opportunities for carers to gain additional literacy and numeracy skills and educational qualifications should be prioritised.
- Decisions about school moves should be made in consultation with LACYP. Some of the LACYP in our study preferred the idea of having a fresh start, others wanted to remain at their current school to maintain friendships, which may be a strong source of support and stability.
- When a child or young person enters care or moves placements, children's social care and education providers need to communicate early and effectively to ensure that LACYP receive effective and timely support. This support should suit the individual child or young person and not act to single them out or stigmatize them, which many of our participants found hindered their participation in education.



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Background

Research has shown that on average looked after children and young people (LACYP) achieve significantly poorer educational outcomes than their non-looked-after peers. This gap in attainment widens across all Key Stages. In 2015 18% of LACYP in Wales achieved 5 GCSEs grade A*-C or equivalent (including a GCSE grade A*-C in English or Welsh first language and mathematics), compared to 58% of all children (Welsh Government 2016). Further, figures for care leavers not in employment, education or training (NEET) in Wales are extremely high: 48% compared with 11.5% of the general population of school leavers (WAO 2012).

Previous research on LACYP and education has identified several key issues that hold LACYP back, including:

- placement and school instability,
- a lack of help with education,
- a lack of support with mental or physical health and wellbeing,
- a pessimistic view of their educational potential
- ineffective communication between social services and education

The research study

In January 2015 the Welsh Government commissioned a study on LACYP and education. The research was undertaken by CASCADE over a six month period. It was a mixed-methods study, undertaken over two distinct phases. Phase One was made up of a statistical and literature review to help understand more about the achievement and attainment of LACYP, and a systematic review which examined the effectiveness of educational interventions with LACYP.

Phase Two used qualitative methods to explore LACYP's experiences of education, their aspirations, and their opinions on future changes and successful interventions. A total of 39 LACYP aged 7-16 took part in a series of activity days where individual interviews using creative methods were conducted. A further 26 young people in care and care leavers took part in six focus groups. These focus groups were facilitated by peer researchers supported by a CASCADE researcher. The peer researchers were care experienced themselves and were trained in focus group facilitation and research methods by CASCADE researchers. In addition, two care leavers who were in higher education took part in telephone interviews.

This briefing focuses upon some of the findings from Phase Two of the research, exploring LACYP's experiences and aspirations. An additional briefing will focus upon the findings of the systematic review and young people's opinions of the interventions identified by that review.

Key findings: aspirations

The majority of LACYP who participated in our research discussed a wide range of aspirations, ambitions and plans for the future. Often this was expressed in terms of jobs or careers that were familiar to them, that family or friends did or were related to hobbies. For example, one boy aged 12 expressed his ideal job as involving a combination of his personal interests with knowledge of a job that family members had done:

"I want to be an architect ... because I like art and most of my family are builders".

Another theme around LACYP's future aspirations was a desire to help people. Many participants wanted to do something that would make a difference to people's lives or make a positive contribution to society through a future job or career:

"I'd like to be a fireman, just in case there are fires around the place. I could go there and help out and actually save people and actually be a hero"
(Male, age 11)

The desire to help others was sometimes motivated by LACYP's own difficulties in their care experience and a commitment to stopping similar things happening to other LACYP in the future:

"I want to work with kids in care when I'm older because I know what it's like and I've been through it most of my life. So I can actually be one of those people who turn around and say 'I understand', and actually do understand" (Female, 16+ group)

However, some of our participants were less able to clearly express their aspirations and hopes for the future. LACYP have less control over their day-to-day lives than many children and young people and this may have inhibited discussion about future careers or education. Instead of talking about careers or plans for future education, some participants focused upon imagining their future family life, including pets they might own or houses they might live in. For example, this young person clearly identifies the importance of family, and stability, for him in the future:

"What I want is just someone to be with forever when I'm older...Someone who will look after me. And I also want a family. I just want to have a family. My wife and my kids" (Male, age 14)

Significant adults played an important role in either helping or hindering the realisation of ambition. Some LACYP said that they had received strong and appropriate support which had made a positive difference to them:

"She [foster carer] put a lot of belief in me and she always told me that I could do it [go to university]"
(Female, age 21)



However, others reflected on low expectations expressed by carers, teachers and social workers and a sense that their educational potential was not taken seriously or supported:

“Various foster carers and various people to do with the care system were like ‘oh people in care don’t go into higher education’ kind of thing”
(Female, age 24)

In terms of making aspirations a reality, the support of significant adults was important, as were clear routes for LACYP to progress their interests and ambitions. These factors, as well as being rewarded for achievements, were all identified as key enablers.

Key findings: experiences

A key theme that came from our interviews and focus groups with children and young people was a feeling of being either the same, or different, to children who are not in care.

Many of the younger children, especially those in primary school, gave accounts of their educational experiences that we might expect from any group of children in any school. For example, a ten year old girl described school as “*great, super, supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*” whereas an eight year old boy thought school was “*work, work and work. School is a bit boring*”. In general, the younger children described their education in terms of break-time games, best friends, favourite subjects, liking nice teachers and disliking strict teachers. The language of social workers, LAC reviews and being in care was largely absent in these accounts.

However, older children and young people displayed an increased awareness of their status as ‘Looked After Children’ and the negative connotations or stigma that came with this status. Many felt singled out, different or exposed because of their treatment by professionals such as social workers and teachers:

“As soon as I went into care, then went back to school and my teachers majority of them treated me completely different, because I was in care they moved me down sets, they put me in special help, they gave me – put me in support groups”
(Female, 16+ group)

Another theme was LACYP missing out on education. Placement and school moves resulting in delays to starting at a new school, appointments and meetings occurring in school time were all identified by participants as making educational achievement difficult:

“I moved from Wales to England and it was like during that transition of like for a year I was out of

education so I was playing a catch-up game, always, like right the way up through school until I left, I was always trying to catch up” (Male, 16+ group)

The importance of friends and peers was clear in many of the accounts of LACYP. They often featured positively, providing support, stability and a sense of belonging and feeling ‘normal’. However where LACYP had problems making or sustaining friendships, or they had experienced bullying, this compounded a sense of isolation and being different:

“You’re always trying to like make new friends... you’re always falling out, like you could fall out with them then because you haven’t got the same bonds, you’ve just got to make them again”
(Female, 16+ group)

As with aspirations, a final theme was that individuals, and individual actions, could make a huge difference in making LACYP feel supported and thereby contribute to them achieving educational success. LACYP often discussed support, not in terms of a specific intervention or programme, but in the everyday, smaller actions of carers, teachers and social care professionals:

“So she had a look at it with me and she said well I can do this by hand, so she sat down with me and helped me do my homework... So that member of staff sat down with me and said we can do your homework here and there” (Female, 16+ group)

Overall, positive experiences of education were associated with feeling included and not singled out, receiving appropriate support from those who were willing and able to help with education and not missing out on education because of moves or meetings held in school time.

Where do we go now?

The final research report concluded with 17 recommendations. In January 2016, the Welsh Government published the strategy ‘Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales’. This strategy was informed by the research study and many of the key recommendations were incorporated. The Welsh Government strategy is available online at:

<http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/deprivation/educational-attainment-of-looked-after-children/?lang=en>.

The findings of the research are also being disseminated at a number of events for practitioners, foster carers, educationalists and other key stakeholders across 2016. Please contact CASCADE for further information cascade@cardiff.ac.uk.

References

Wales Audit Office. 2012. *The educational attainment of looked after children and young people: 22 August 2012*. Cardiff: Wales Audit Office. Available at http://www.audit.wales/system/files/publications/The_educational_attainment_of_looked_after_children_and_young_people_English_2012.pdf

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Notes

The full research report, Mannay, D., Staples, E., Hallett, S., Roberts, L., Rees, A., Evans, R. and Andrews, D. 2015. *Understanding the educational experiences and opinions, attainment, achievement and aspirations of looked after children in Wales*. Cardiff: Welsh Government, is available online at: <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/understanding-educational-experiences-opinions-attainment-achievement-aspirations-looked-after-children-wales/?lang=en>

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Alongside the report, outputs from the research include a series of short films, songs and posters, developed in partnership with Hummingbird Audio Landscaping, Cat & Mouse and Ministry of Life, all available on CASCADE's website: <http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/cascade/looked-after-children-and-education/>



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