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**Working Paper**

## Supporting the educational attainment and progress of children in state care: A preliminary review of international evidence

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# TRiSS Working Paper Series

No. 01-2017

## Supporting the Educational Attainment and Progress of Children in State Care: A Preliminary Review of International Evidence

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**May 2017**

**Abstract:** International research spanning a number of decades has highlighted the low educational attainment of children in care as compared to their peers in the majority population with many reasons reported as to why this is the case. Recent research in this area points to a number of key practice and policy responses that appear to support the educational progress of children in care. These practices include information sharing among key stakeholders, support from carers, teachers, and social workers, and recognition of the active role that children and young people play in their education.

**Keywords:** Education; children in care; attainment

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***Supporting the Educational Attainment and Progress of Children in State Care: A  
Preliminary Review of International Evidence***

**Written by Eavan Brady**

**May 2017**

### **About the Author**

Assistant Prof. Eavan Brady is currently completing a PhD exploring the educational pathways of adults aged 25-35 who were in care as children in Ireland. She has a keen interest in issues related to the educational experiences and progress of children and young people in care and care-experienced adults.

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### **Support for this Paper**

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## Overview

1. International research spanning a number of decades has highlighted the low educational attainment of children in care as compared to their peers in the majority population with many reasons reported as to why this is the case.
2. Recent research in this area points to a number of key practice and policy responses that appear to support the educational progress of children in care.
3. These practices include information sharing among key stakeholders, support from carers, teachers, and social workers, and recognition of the active role that children and young people play in their education.

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this preliminary review of the literature is to inform future discussions regarding the educational progress and needs of children and young people in care in Ireland. The context in which children come into State care in Ireland (e.g. foster care, residential care) will be provided along with a brief overview of international evidence regarding the education of children in care. A number of selected key research studies examining policy and practice found to be helpful to the education of children in care are then summarised with key themes and messages from the research also provided.

At the end of February 2017, there were 6,309 children in care in Ireland according to Tusla – the Child and Family Agency (Tusla, 2017). Of these, 93% were in foster care (this includes both family and relative foster care) with the remainder in residential care and other care placements including, detention centres, mother and baby units, and supported lodgings (Tusla, 2016). Children are placed in care for a range of reasons which may include being exposed to abuse (physical, emotional, sexual) and/or neglect, the death of a parent, or a parent having a serious long-term illness (physical or mental) or addiction which leaves them unable to care for their child (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, n.d.). Unsurprisingly, many children have harmful life-experiences before coming into care, on top of the disruption and uncertainty that comes with being taken into care. Importantly however, Darmody and colleagues (2013: 15) note that “as with all children, those in care do not constitute a homogenous group and have individual aspirations and needs.”

## 2. Research on Education and Children in Care

Very little research has explored the education of children in care in Ireland (Darmody et al., 2013). However, international research spanning a number of decades has pointed to the low educational attainment of children in care as compared to their peers in the majority population (e.g. O’Sullivan & Westerman, 2007; Sebba et al., 2015; Stone, 2007; Trout et al., 2008). Many explanations have been reported in the literature as to why this is; these include pre-care experiences, the process of entering care itself, and life in care – all of which may impact on both the educational participation and the educational attainment of children in care (Berridge, 2007). Furthermore, existing research suggests that children in

care have increased levels of special education needs, nearly three times as high as their majority population peers (Trout et al., 2008; Sebba et al., 2015).

While a minority of children with care experience do achieve high levels of educational attainment e.g. pursuing university education (Cotton et al., 2014; Jackson & Ajayi, 2007), this is far from the norm. This is in spite of the fact that international literature has identified poor educational outcomes as the primary determinant of the future life chances of care leavers (Berlin et al., 2011) and education itself as a potential key influence on the life course trajectories of many children in care (Jackson & Cameron, 2011).

Educational engagement and attainment at school is one of the most important factors related to adult health and well-being (Hammond & Feinstein, 2006) and education plays a central role in promoting social inclusion (Nicaise, 2012). Individuals who have spent time in care as children face a high risk of experiencing social exclusion as adults (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Cameron and colleagues (2011: 3) note that young men and women with public care backgrounds are ‘among the most economically and socially excluded groups in European nations’. Drawing on theories of human capital, education serves to equip individuals with knowledge and skills that may afford them opportunities to participate in the labour market (Sparks, 1999), supporting social mobility that may otherwise not arise. Education is therefore particularly important to the adult well-being of children and youth with care experience (Jackson & Höjer, 2013). In light of this, it appears particularly critical that efforts to address this low achievement be undertaken, reported, and evaluated in order to help children and youth in care to catch up with their peers and improve their overall life chances (Forsman, 2015).

### **3. Summaries of Key Research Studies exploring Policy and Practice that support Education of Children in Care**

The 21 articles summarised below represent some of the seminal research studies undertaken to explore policy and practice that supports the education of children in care in the last ten years (2007-August 2016)<sup>1</sup>. While there are undoubtedly other works that have

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<sup>1</sup> Articles for this literature review were identified using a four-step process:

contributed to knowledge in this area (e.g. Gilligan, 2007; Hollingworth, 2012; Stoddart, 2012), we are focusing on those that specifically meet the criteria outlined in *Footnote 1* below. The final 21 studies included in this review are grouped according to the following categories based on the key focus of the study:

1. Care leavers' perspectives on what works (5)
2. Evaluations of structured interventions (9)
3. Systematic reviews of existing research in this area (3)
4. Miscellaneous studies (4)

### **3.1 Care Leavers' Perspectives**

An early study into what *high-achieving* care leavers believe are the best ways to enhance the educational experiences of looked after children<sup>2</sup> (LAC) was undertaken by Pearl Martin and Sonia Jackson (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Thirty-eight *high achieving* (obtained 5+ O-level or GCSE passes at Grade C or higher) care leavers who spent at least a year in care took part in this study. Ten key areas were identified by participants as having the potential to

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1) The two most cited peer-reviewed journal articles/reports from 2007-2016 by nine leading researchers in the field of education and children in care (e.g. Sonia Jackson, Robert Flynn, Bo Vinnerljung) were identified – this included one exception - Martin & Jackson (2002), a key study in this area that has been cited by 166 authors. The nine authors were selected based on the authors' knowledge of key researchers in this area drawing on networks they are involved in including INTRAC (International Research Network on Transitions and Adulthood from care) and the LinkedIn Education of Children in Care Network and from contributions to a special issue of the *Children & Youth Services Review* 34(6) and an edited book - *Pathways through Education for Young People in Care: Ideas from Research and Practice*.

2) Significant peer-reviewed journal articles that cited these articles in the last **five years** were then identified;

3) This list of 31 publications was then refined to include only those publications which focused on:

- i. Hearing from care-experienced children and young people about what has helped them in their education
- ii. Discussing specific strategies and issues that support educational progress and experience of children in care.

This yielded 15 peer-reviewed journal articles;

4) The reference lists of these 15 publications were then examined for peer-reviewed journal articles that focused on the above key areas and were published between 2011-2016. This uncovered a further six publications (five peer-reviewed articles and one report).

The final 21 publications included in this literature review include 19 peer-reviewed journal articles and two reports - Darmody et al. (2013) and Sebba et al. (2015).

<sup>2</sup> 'Looked After Children' is the favoured policy term for children in care in England (Department for Education, 2015), Scotland (Scottish Government, 2015), and Northern Ireland (Department of Health, Social Services, and Public Safety, 2007). In Wales, the term 'Children Looked After' is preferred (Welsh Government, 2016). In Ireland, the term 'Children in Care' is used (Darmody et al., 2013).



enhance the educational experiences of children in care: 1) normalising children's day-to-day lives, 2) receiving positive encouragement and support from significant others, 3) ensuring that residential and foster carers understood the importance of education and the effort required to achieve, 4) having a good relationship with your social worker, 5) attending school regularly, 6) overcoming negative stereotypes of children in care, 7) having access to practical resources for doing homework/studying in care placements – particularly in residential settings, 8) being able to avail of additional help when necessary, 9) having help with finances and accommodation, and finally 10) having a special relationship with 'at least one person within or outside the care system, who made time to listen to them and make them feel valued' (Martin & Jackson, 2002: 128).

In 2007, Sonia Jackson undertook a further study with Sarah Ajayi—the “first UK study of young people in care who go to university” (Jackson & Ajayi, 2007: 62). The study tracked three successive cohorts of entrants to college/university throughout their university careers. Foster parents were central in supporting many participants to “stay the course” when times were tough for those who had had a good foster placement (Jackson & Ajayi, 2007: 68). Those students who had a close and continuous relationship with their foster carers were less likely to leave university prematurely than those participants living independently prior to commencing their university course. There were however, some participants who experienced difficulties in their foster care placements. For example, one participant requested a placement move as his carers showed very little concern for his education with others experiencing carers who – perhaps because of their own negative experiences – “ridiculed educational aspirations and actively undermined the young person's efforts to do well” (Jackson & Ajayi, 2007: 69). The authors conclude noting the complexity involved in supporting education and call for the development of *education foster carers* who would focus on supporting the educational endeavours of young people who come in to care around the age of 14 while also striving to develop supportive, warm, and affectionate relationships with young people.

In 2012, Sonia Jackson and Claire Cameron reported on the YIPPEE project. This project involved five European countries (Denmark, England, Hungary, Spain, and Sweden) and sought to “identify the reasons for the educational underperformance of young men and

women who have been in care and find ways to increase their successful participation in post-compulsory education” (Jackson & Cameron, 2012: 1108). One of the four phases of this research project involved in-depth face-to-face interviews with 170 young people who had been in care in each country. Notable findings related to practice and policy that supported the educational careers of participants included:

- 1) Foster care seemed to lead to better promotion of educational attainment
- 2) Young people who were most successful in formal education had engaged to a greater extent in leisure/culture activities providing opportunities for informal learning (e.g. via hobbies, volunteering, extracurricular activities)
- 3) Barriers/facilitators which enabled/prevented young people from “doing well at school” and continuing in education were:
  - a. Systemic factors – e.g. division between social services and education, their failure to work together
  - b. School-related factors – e.g. insufficient help to catch up on missed school work, not enough protection from bullying
  - c. Care-related factors – e.g. changes of care placements, low expectations from social workers, carers who gave little encouragement/support for educational achievement
  - d. Individual factors – e.g. lack of motivation, financial pressures, physical/mental health difficulties

A 2014 study by Hass and colleague in the US involved interviews with 19 young adults who had spent time in care and who completed post-secondary education or “at least a junior standing” in a four-year institution (Hass et al., 2014: 388). The authors focus on the role of *turning points* in contributing to the educational success of participants. Participants described a range of events as turning points, for example, changes in placement, connections with teachers, and joining the military. The authors developed an ecological model of turning points based on study findings which suggests that the following three elements interact to facilitate turning point-events in young peoples’ lives: 1) Social and instrumental support (e.g. from teachers, school personnel); 2) Environmental supports (opportunities to express competence/a safe haven e.g. “school or home environments that

provide a place of refuge from stresses in other parts of their lives”); and 3) Autonomy (e.g. identifying goals, making difficult decisions).

Finally, in the first study of its kind in Ireland, Darmody and colleagues (2013), sought to identify practical solutions to improving “educational access, participation and attainment among children in care in Ireland” (Darmody et al., 2013: 11). The authors noted that a stable care placement can enhance a child’s motivation and aspirations regarding their education. Furthermore, school was identified as providing a means of stability for some children in care. The author also conclude that interagency work among those involved in a child’s life (e.g. foster parents, teachers, social workers) who “place a high value on education is likely to have a positive impact on the educational experiences of children in care” (Darmody et al., 2013: 12).

### **3.2 Evaluations of Structured Interventions**

Two Canadian studies used randomised control trials to examine the effects of tutoring programmes on foster children based on the *Teach Your Children Well Method* ([www.maloneymethod.com/products/teach-your-children-well](http://www.maloneymethod.com/products/teach-your-children-well)). Flynn and colleagues (2012) examined the effectiveness of an individual direct-instruction tutoring programme *delivered by foster parents* on foster children’s reading and maths skills. Seventy-seven children participated with 42 in the experimental/tutoring group and 35 in the control/waiting list group. The tutoring intervention involved children receiving three hours of tutoring a week for 30 weeks. After the intervention was complete the children who had received the tutoring intervention had made statistically greater gains than those children placed in the control/waiting list group. The authors note that these findings are important because child welfare services may be able to capitalise on the potential for foster parents to act as a resources in improving educational outcomes of children in care. Harper and Schmidt (2016) examined the effects of *a group-based tutoring programme* on children living in foster care. Ninety-one children in grades one to eight and living in out-of-home care participated in the study which ran over a two-year period. Half of the children took part in a the direct instruction group tutoring programme while the other half were placed on a waiting list and acted as a control group for the study. The tutoring programme ran for 25 weeks in the first year and for 29 weeks in the second year. Sessions lasted for two hours

per week with 1-2 volunteer tutors running each group. Statistically significant increases in reading decoding, spelling, and maths skills were observed for children who received the tutoring intervention. An earlier study by Harper and Schmidt (2012) also identified statistically significant increases in reading decoding and spelling but not however, in maths or sentence comprehension.

Zinn and Courtney (2014) however, conducted an evaluation of a home-based tutoring intervention (ESTEP tutoring) and its effects on the academic performance and educational outcomes of 465 foster youth aged 14+. Two hundred and forty six young people were assigned to the tutoring intervention and 219 assigned to a control group. Undergraduate and postgraduate students carried out the intervention meeting with youth twice a week in their home and providing up to 50 hours of tutoring. Interestingly, no statistically significant impact was found on any of the measures used of academic ability or educational outcomes. In fact, for some of the youth, their educational deficits “became more profound over the course of the study” (Zinn & Courtney, 2014: 202). The authors use these findings as an opportunity to highlight some key issues to bear in mind when implementing tutoring programmes with foster youth. While one of the strengths of in-home tutoring is that it may serve to “leverage the support of children’s caregivers”, this presumes that “there is a pre-existing, supportive relationship between children and caregivers and that children are at a developmental stage during which caregiver support constitutes an effective motivator”, assumptions which may not ring true for many adolescents in foster care (Zinn & Courtney, 2014: 203). They further note that implementing in-home tutoring programmes for foster youth may also be dependent on the needs of foster youth which may include learning disabilities, mental health difficulties, and behaviour issues. All of these may in fact confound the task of tutoring. The authors suggest that tutors without expertise in areas such as mental health and special education may be under-equipped to support these youth noting that a more appropriate model might be one staffed by special education teachers.

Two Swedish studies have sought to establish the effects of a two-year intensive project aimed at improving the school achievements of foster children. Tideman and colleagues (2011) examined the experiences of 25 foster children (aged 7-11) the majority of whom were in long-term foster care (i.e. more than two years in their present foster family)

participating in the project. At the beginning of the project, children were assessed by a psychologist and a special education teacher in order to ascertain their baseline cognitive ability. The psychologist and special education teacher also administered a range of tests to assess reading, spelling, numeracy, psychological well-being and behaviour, and child-teacher relations. Based on the results of these tests, tailored individualised educational and psychological support plans were developed and implemented for each child over a period of 24 months. Support plans included specific educational goals to be reached in a given time period, specific support needs for each child, and what responsibility each person had in the process (i.e. children, teachers, and foster carers). The psychologist and special education teacher met regularly with the head of the school, the relevant teacher, child, and foster carer in order to analyse how things were currently, set new goals, and plans for reaching those goals. At the end of the 24-month period, children were tested again using the same measures. After two years, the children's average scores on IQ-tests, reading, and spelling tests had improved significantly. The authors note that standardised tests appear to "provide a sound base for tailoring individualised support for foster children in school" (Tideman et al., 2011: 53). They also suggest that the "poor educational performance of foster children may be improved through systematic work by foster care agencies and schools" (Tideman et al., 2011: 53). Tordön and colleagues (2014) replicated this intervention with 24 children (12 boys and 12 girls). Study results "indicate a significant growth in intellectual capacity, self-concept and literacy and numeracy skills" (Tordön et al., 2014: 43). The authors assert that this replication study provides further evidence that an intervention based on a psychological and educational assessment leading to an individualised plan has the capacity to improve poor results in school for children in foster care.

Findings of a Swedish study of the experiences of 15 foster carers who carried out paired-reading – a structured literacy intervention – with their foster children suggest that foster carers can be engaged in "literacy training" for children in care and that paired reading can lead to improved relationships between children and carers (Forsman, 2015). Important factors relating to the foster carers' experience of the paired reading intervention included, integrating the reading training into everyday life, having a flexible approach when delivering the programme, and carers having a positive attitude linked to seeing education

as important. The reading intervention provided carers with “a tool to get actively involved in their child’s reading process” (Forsman, 2015: 7). Osborne and colleagues (2010) also report on an English study of a ‘paired literacy’ intervention, which directly involved foster carers in supporting their foster child’s literacy skills. Over 16 weeks, 35 children and their foster carers took part in the project, which involved paired reading at least three times a week for a minimum of 20 minutes each time. School staff were in touch with carers weekly and completed weekly monitoring sheets. On average, the reading age of participating children improved by 12 months in the 16 week period. Feedback from carers indicated that the impact of this intervention may go beyond that of reading and also lead to improvements in confidence and motivation. The authors note that the paired reading work also facilitated links between foster carers, teachers, and social workers and offers a “useful way of raising the profile of educational achievement of looked after children” (p.23).

Finally, Weinberg and colleagues (2014) report the findings of a mixed methods case study testing three key “propositions related to the educational outcomes of 32 foster youth whose education was supported by four education liaisons”. Education liaisons (EL) seek to improve the education outcomes for children and youth in foster care. They are used to bridge the gap that can exist between agencies (e.g. schools, child protection services) and to provide continual support and advocacy to foster youth. While there were no statistically significant change in measures of school stability, school achievement, or school engagement, low rates of school moves and high rates of attendance at mainstream schools were observed. Interviews that were carried out with a range of individuals who were in a position to provide information on the project and the work of the EL indicated that among other things, the EL “built relationships with the youth, provided positive support, and troubleshoot educational barriers” (Weinberg et al., 2014: 45).

### ***3.3 Reviews of Existing Research in the Area***

Ferguson and Wolkow (2012) highlights existing evidence regarding the low educational attainment of children in care and the many barriers that have been identified in existing literature e.g. lack of interagency coordination, school mobility. The authors then go on to discuss recommendations for improving the educational outcomes of children in care while

providing specific examples of initiatives underway in Ontario, Canada. General recommendations include:

- 1) Cooperation and coordination between the various agencies and individuals in charge of the educational needs of children in care
- 2) Improved school records and information sharing procedures
- 3) More comprehensive training for all those in charge of foster children and youth
- 4) Greater stability of children's educational placements
- 5) Increased education supports for youth
- 6) More extensive educational planning and monitoring

Forsman and Vinnerljung (2012) report the results of a review of eleven studies related to evaluated interventions which aim to improve the school achievements of foster children. Five of the eleven studies discussed were based on tutoring interventions (tutoring by foster carers, university students, and teacher volunteers), two focused on the distribution of learning material, while the remaining four included a behaviour modification programme, two individualised learning support programmes, and one programme involving educational liaison intervention – some of these studies are also discussed in this literature review (e.g. Tideman et al., 2011). Of the eleven interventions, nine reported positive results. Most studies seemed to improve literacy however, attempts to improve numeracy skills produced mixed results. A range of interventions led to positive results e.g. tutoring projects and structured individualised support. The authors note that while the problem of low educational attainment among children in care has been identified as a problem for a number of decades, there is still a scarcity of interventions research in the area. They conclude commenting that most of the interventions that were included in this review do seem to have made some difference sending “a hopeful message to practice and to policy makers” (Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012: 1089).

Finally, Liabo and colleagues (2013) report on their systematic review of interventions targeted at looked after children (aged 10-15) in mainstream schools which aimed to support the educational attainment/school attendance of these children. Studies included in the review ranged from a community project (mentoring, carer involvement, vocational support), residential educational programme, tutoring programmes, strategic interventions

(virtual school heads), and programmes designed to encourage reading. While none of the studies that were reviewed were seen to be “robust enough to provide evidence on effectiveness” (Liabo et al., 2013: 341), some of the individual studies did warrant further exploration. Tutoring, creative-writing support and programmes offering free books were also popular. It is worth noting that evaluations of book gifting programmes such as the Letterbox Club (Griffiths, 2012) using pre-test/post-test measures have indicated benefits to children participating in such programmes. However, a recent randomised controlled trial (Mooney et al., 2016) of the Letterbox Club found no evidence that the Letterbox Club had any effect on the outcomes being measured (i.e. reading skills and attitudes to reading in school).

### **3.4 Miscellaneous Studies**

Brewin and Statham (2011) report the findings of a qualitative study examining the key factors that support Looked After Children (LAC) transitioning from primary to secondary school. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 14 LAC in Year 6 prior to transitioning and later in Year 7 after they had transitioned. Their teachers and carers were also interviewed. Findings suggest that many factors may support LAC transitioning from primary to secondary school but that these factors will likely vary “according to the needs of individual children and contexts in which they live, learn and develop” (Brewin & Statham, 2011: 376). The authors highlight four principles based on the findings of this study and existing research which they suggest will enhance transition experiences for LAC when provided *in addition* to high quality transition support: 1) An emphasis on planning and information sharing among key stakeholders including carers; 2) Support for LAC should be holistic; 3) Children’s differences should be minimised, and 4) Support should be individualised.

Peter Pecora (2012) reviewed the findings of three studies exploring the educational outcomes of former foster youth in the US. After describing the methods and analyses of each study, Pecora concludes by identifying a number of key recommendations for policy and programming that may serve to improve educational attainment among foster care alumni: 1) Focus on permanency for children in care; 2) Improve both the identification and treatment of mental health problems that could potentially act as barriers to success in the



classroom; 3) Minimise the number of placement changes experienced by children in care; 4) Encourage youth in the US to attain a High School diploma and not just a GED; and 5) Improve life skills preparation for children in care and while providing concrete resources to youth as they leave care.

Judy Sebba and colleagues (2015) at the Reese Centre for Fostering and Education conducted the first study of its kind in England exploring the relationship between educational outcomes, care histories, and individual characteristics by linking care and educational data. For the purposes of this review we will focus on what the authors found helped LAC in terms of their educational career:

1. LAC whose final placement was in foster or kinship care did better at GCSEs than those in residential care/other types of placement. This may however, reflect the length of the final placement with longer placements tending to lead to better outcomes
2. Type of school LAC attend is one of the strongest predictors of outcomes. Nearly 40% of the LAC went to nonmainstream schools (e.g. special schools) by Year 10/11 and their educational attainments were considerably lower than the 60% who went to mainstream schools
3. Teachers and school staff were identified by young people as the main determinants of educational progress
4. Successful children had often been supported regarding their education from a young age by their birth families
5. Having someone whom the young people felt genuinely cared about them was hugely important to young people
6. Young people regularly commented that their educational progress was ultimately down to them, while adults/professionals could help to influence their progress.

Finally, Skilbred and colleagues report the findings of a small-scale qualitative study that was undertaken in Norway to “obtain a deeper understanding of the conditions in the foster home that promote the foster children’s school performance” (Skilbred et al., 2016: 2). Sixteen former foster youth (now aged 25-31) who were currently studying at university or had completed a university degree were interviewed. Thirteen foster parents were also

interviewed – 10 of these foster carers had cared for the young adults participating in the study. Interviews sought to “obtain a deeper understanding of the conditions in the foster home that promote the foster children’s school performance” (Skilbred et al., 2016: 2)

Findings indicate that the following key elements were central to foster youths’ success:

1. Foster youth were treated as though they were the carers own children
2. Carers had a genuine interest in their foster children
3. Foster children were defended and fought for
4. Contact was continued between carers and children after they moved out.
5. Foster parent values and attitudes benefitted the children e.g. the importance of doing your best, finishing what you started, and going to school every day
6. Routine and structure were particularly important for succeeding at school – e.g. a predictable daily schedule, family meals, homework routines and support

A key conclusion the authors come to is that “the quality of foster homes is one of the most important prerequisites for foster children’s success at school” (Skilbred et al., 2016: 12).

#### **4. Key Themes from Selected Research Studies**

Eight key themes emerged from this review of the literature. See Table 1 for details on which themes were identified in each article reviewed.

##### *1. Information Sharing*

The importance of information sharing emerged as a central theme in supporting children and youth in care in their educational pursuits. Sharing information among key stakeholders took a number of forms in the literature ranging from encouraging overt information sharing across relevant agencies and stakeholders (carers, teachers, social workers) (Brewin & Statham, 2011; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Jackson & Cameron, 2012) to information sharing in the context of implementing personalised educational support plans (Tideman et al., 2011; Tordön et al., 2014).

##### *2. Interagency Cooperation and Coordination*

Linked to information sharing, the importance of interagency cooperation and coordination to supporting the education of children in care was highlighted in a number of studies (Darmody et al., 2013; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Tideman et al., 2011; Tordön et al., 2014; Weinberg et al., 2014). Interagency cooperation and coordination was credited with having the capacity to act as a facilitator for young people with care backgrounds doing well at school (Jackson & Cameron, 2012).

##### *3. Individualised Support*

Two studies focused on specific interventions based on individualised educational support (Tideman et al., 2011; Tordön et al., 2014) with Tordön and colleagues (2014) commenting that an intervention based on a psychological and educational assessment leading to an individualised plan has the capacity to improve poor results in school for children in foster care. Approaching the issue from a slightly different perspective, Brewin and Statham (2011) note that individualised support while going through a transition (e.g. from primary to secondary school) has the capacity to enhance transition experiences for children in care.

#### *4. Tutoring Programmes*

Mixed results emerged from the literature reviewed in this study. While four studies highlighted positive results regarding the effects of tutoring (Flynn et al., 2012; Liabo et al., 2013; Harper & Schmidt, 2012; 2016), Zinn and Courtney (2014) did not find statistically significant results in their study of a tutoring programme. Importantly, Zinn and Courtney (2014) take these result as an opportunity to highlight some critical issues to consider when planning tutoring with youth in foster care in light of potential challenges that may arise. For example, given the possible needs of foster youth (e.g. mental health issues, special educational needs), tutors without expertise in these areas may be under-equipped to support these youth. They note that a more appropriate model might be one staffed by special education teachers (Zinn & Courtney, 2014).

#### *5. The Key Role of Carers*

The critical role that foster carers can play in supporting and enhancing the educational progress and attainment of the children in their care emerged in a number of studies, and in a number of guises. Findings of three studies that explored the views of care leavers noted the role of foster carers. In particular, foster carers were central to many young people 'staying the course' in higher education when times were tough (Jackson & Ajayi, 2007). Foster carers' expectations, encouragement, and support were identified in the YIPPEE project as a potential facilitator to educational achievement (Jackson & Cameron, 2012) while *high achieving* care leavers commented on the importance of foster carers understanding the importance of education as well as the effort that is required to achieve in education (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Forsman (2015) and Osborne and colleagues (2010) noted the role of foster carers in supporting literacy efforts of children in their care while Skilbred and colleagues (2016) noted that "the quality of foster homes is one of the most important prerequisites for foster children's success at school" (Skilbred et al., 2016: 12).

#### *6. Support from Teachers, Social Workers, and Key Adults*

Receiving support from professionals and significant adults in children and youth's lives was a key theme in a number of the articles that were reviewed. Sebba and colleagues (2015) found that young people felt that teachers and school staff were the main determinants of educational progress. Participants in Martin and Jackson's (2002: 128) study noted that

having a good relationship with your social worker and having a special relationship with “at least one person within or outside the care system, who made time to listen to them and make them feel valued” helped to enhance the educational experiences of children in care. Finally, Hass and colleagues (2014) identified social and instrumental support from teachers and school personnel as one of three core factors which interact to facilitate turning point events in young people’s lives which contribute to educational success.

### *7. Stability in Educational & Care Placements*

Two studies identified stability as central to supporting the education of children and youth in care. Pecora (2012) noted that a focus on permanency for children in care, along with efforts to minimise the number of placements children in care experience is critical to this endeavour. Ferguson and Wolkow (2012) argue specifically for greater stability of children’s educational placements. Arguably, the two are interlinked as care placement moves may potentially lead to educational placement moves. Darmody and colleagues (2013) also highlighted the critical role of stable education and care placements for the educational attainment of children in care.

### *8. Child’s Autonomy & Role in their Educational Progress*

The role that children and young people themselves play in supporting and enhancing their educational progress and attainment was highlighted in a number of studies. Children and youths’ autonomy in terms of identifying goals and making difficult decisions (Hass et al., 2014) as well as specific individual factors, such as self-motivation, that may act as barriers/facilitators to educational attainment (Jackson & Cameron, 2012) were identified as important to the education of children and youth in care. Finally, young people also observed that their educational progress was down to them while adults in their lives may influence this progress (Sebba et al., 2015).

Table 1: Key Themes emerging from Literature Review

Authors & Year	Information sharing	Interagency cooperation & coordination	Individualised support	Tutoring Programmes	Role of Carers	Support from teachers, social workers, key adults	Stability in educational & care placements	Child's autonomy and own role in their educational progress
Martin & Jackson (2002)					X	X		
Jackson & Ajayi (2007)					X			
Jackson & Cameron (2012)		X			X			X
Hass et al. (2014)						X		X
Darmody et al. (2013)		X					X	
Flynn et al. (2012)				X				
Harper & Schmidt (2016)				X				
Harper & Schmidt (2012)				X				
Zinn & Courtney (2014)				X*				
Forsman (2015)					X			
Osborne et al. (2010)	X	X		X		X		
Weinberg et al. (2014)	X	X						
Tideman et al. (2011)	X	X	X					
Tordön et al. (2014)	X	X	X					
Ferguson & Wolkow (2012)	X	X	X				X	

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<b>Forsman &amp; Vinnerljung (2012)</b>				X				
<b>Liabo et al. (2013)</b>				X				
<b>Brewin &amp; Statham (2011)</b>	X		X					
<b>Pecora (2012)</b>							X	
<b>Sebba et al. (2015)</b>						X		X
<b>Skilbred et al. (2016)</b>					X			

\*Zinn and Courtney's (2014) study did not indicate that those who participated in the tutoring programme had better results than those in the control group. However, the authors highlight a number of important considerations for running tutoring programmes with this group, which are of note in the context of this literature review.

## 5. Key Messages from the Literature

1. Interagency communication, cooperation and coordination are key to supporting the education of children and young people in care
2. Relationships and the quality of these relationships can play a central role in the education of children and youth in care. Carers, teachers, social workers, and other significant adults can have a considerable influence on the educational experiences and progress of children and youth in care.
3. Structured/individualised support and placement/educational stability are key to ensuring that children and youth receive the support they need along with gaining a sense of having a secure base from which they can focus on their education
4. Children and youth themselves have a strong role to play in their educational journey. Confidence, autonomy, and self-belief should be nurtured and promoted among children and youth in care.

## 6. Conclusion

This document has provided insights into a number of international practice and policy responses aimed at supporting the educational attainment and progress of children and young people in care. It is hoped that this preliminary review will provide the basis for future discussion and planning with regard to the support needs of this group. When considering this issue it is important to remember that children and young people in care have increased levels of special education needs, nearly three times as high as their majority population peers (Trout et al., 2008; Sebba et al., 2015). We must also remember however, that this is a heterogeneous and diverse group of children and young people with individual talents, interests, and aspirations which we must recognise, nurture, and support.



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